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Communicating Effectively with the Public During a Crisis

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

In crisis situations, effective communication between the public and the many different organisations involved in the response is vital. Communication has to operate well in short timescales, in evolving contexts, and in multiple directions. A key enabler of this is trust. As part of a body of research funded by JRSS Charitable Trust, researchers at Alliance Manchester Business School and the National Consortium for Societal Resilience [UK+] have carried out a literature review to explore how public trust in democratic institutions can be enhanced through crisis communications. The review encompasses national and international examples of research and projects that illuminate how crisis communications can evolve to enhance that trust, and identifies areas where communications sometimes falter. The review considers a variety of contextual issues such as leadership, behaviour, and marginalisation.

This paper summarises the findings of the review. We found many papers that present their own pathway to crisis communications, but we do not focus overly on these as we feel they miss the importance of context. It is not easy to copy others' formulae for good communications because, as we will show, it is the context which is paramount and unique. Communications are so context-specific (of communicator, receiver, and time) that presenting a straightforward formula for effective communications would suggest that the formula will work. Instead, this review discusses how context sets the scene for effective crisis communications.

KEY FINDINGS

From a review of over 100 articles and papers in this literature review, it has been possible to distil a set of key learning points. These findings are a valuable resource for anyone involved in crisis communications.

- Even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, considerable research had identified the **importance of leadership** in building the public's trust in democratic institutions. That early body of work provides insight into the behavioural and psychological aspects of gaining and maintaining the trust which is critical for effective crisis communications.

- The role of social media in crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be understated. Used in many ways, with varying degrees of success, we can safely assume that **social media is an integral part of future crisis communications**. During Covid-19 this was especially true for health-related organisations and local and national government. There are examples in the literature of local government attempting to co-produce public messaging alongside the public. Social media accelerated the transfer of essential information between many partners, including healthcare providers, to better help the most vulnerable groups in society. This benefit came with side-effects; whilst encouraging trust in democratic structures and providing crisis communication at speed, social media also heightened public expectations of democratic institutions and emphasised the importance of trust in government leadership. A downside of social media was that it provided a voice to people and organisation spreading 'fake' news that frequently alarmed the public and undermined that trust.

- **Social marketing techniques operating through democratic structures can reassure the public** by providing crisis communications that are clear, truthful, not patronising and that motivate the public to gain trust in the communication.

- Research and practitioner evidence draws attention to the **importance of communicating with marginalised groups**. These so-called 'hardly-reached groups' (i.e., groups that are marginalised, minority and less-connected) cannot be reliably reached through traditional/mass communications methods. Compounding that issue is the fact that hardly-reached groups can be disproportionately affected by a crisis (e.g., with regard to health outcomes and mortality rates). Depending on their lived experience and cultural norms, they may have low levels of trust in democratic structures, with the result that some crisis management mechanisms are ineffective or even damaging to outcomes in those groups. For example, some groups' mistrust of the Covid-19 vaccine or suspicion of government health-related apps led to lower vaccine take-up and infection control. This points to the pressing importance of addressing diversity and inclusion in order to build trusted relationships and a positive attitude towards democratic institutions. **Community leaders have a significant role here**.

- **Community projects played an important role in enabling co-production throughout the Covid-19 pandemic**. This allowed different parties, e.g., local groups, volunteers, businesses, the voluntary sector, and the public sector, to work together to support those in need. Co-production worked simultaneously to develop trusted relationships between the public, businesses, and democratic institutions.

- **Science-informed policy-making can improve trust between democratic structures and the public**. The literature provides evidence that public trust diminishes when governments dilute scientific findings (e.g., when they ignore the science and justify a policy on other grounds - especially when those grounds are later found to be misleading).

METHODS

The findings in this paper are the result of a rapid literature review which sought to quickly gain a sense of what important lessons existed in the literature surrounding communications with the public during a crisis. The aim was to synthesise the literature – not to conduct a systematic analysis of it. Thus, we identified a broad range of issues and models used for crisis communication that included how to gain trust with the public, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as literature on behavioural issues, leadership, and policymaking.

Appropriate literature for inclusion in this review was identified via internet searches using Google Scholar. International practitioner examples were identified from government sources. Resource constraints required an organic literature search – chasing down chains of research that were relevant to the central research question of: **how can public trust in democratic institutions be enhanced through crisis communications?**

From this search, over 100 articles were selected covering a wide range of topics relevant to the research question. Topics include: crisis communication from democratic institutions; crisis leadership; trust of hardly-reached groups in democratic institutions; co-production and partnership working between the public and government; social media; models for communication strategy, including social marketing; and community leaders.

We selected those articles that provided the most insight to answering the research question, especially those that explained the effectiveness of their approach or described conditions where communications faltered. We selected articles that were published between January 1999 to August 2022 and were written in English. Papers covered qualitative and quantitative methods as well as practitioner case studies.

Some important lessons were identified in the crisis communications literature, and these are summarised below, under the following themes:

1. **Increasing public trust in democratic institutions and policy-making.**
2. **Leadership behaviours and their effect on gaining public trust throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.**
3. **Societal diversity and the structural barriers to gaining trust in democratic institutions.**
4. **Social marketing and other models of encouraging a change in behaviour through crisis communications.**
5. **Social media as a strategic tool for gaining public trust in democratic institutions.**
6. **Principles of a crisis communications strategy.**
7. **Some examples of enhancing trust in democracy.**

1 | Increasing public trust in democratic institutions and policy-making

What do we mean by 'crisis communications' and what role does trust play?

Emergency management specialists define crisis broadly as 'a phase of disorder in the development of a person, an organisation, a community, an ecosystem, a business sector, or a polity' *(Boin et al., 2017)*. Lerbinger *(1997)* provides examples of crises as:

> Disaster.
> Technological crisis.
> Confrontation.
> Malevolence.
> Organizational misdeeds.
> Workplace violence.
> Rumours.
> Terrorist attacks.

Recently, however, crises have been thought of as shocks (e.g., sudden events such as a flood) and stresses (e.g., long, drawn-out events such as climate change). Shocks usually occur suddenly and demand quick reaction *(Wolf and Merji, 2013: 49)* so require rapid communication as the crisis develops *(Coombs, 1999)*. Stresses, on the other hand, require ongoing communication to maintain prominence of the issue on the agenda. The notion of shocks and stresses has gained much ground as an organising frame, which is helpful when imagining the different sorts of communication that may be required by each.

In this context of crises, there are many definitions of democracy and democratic institutions. A good starting point, as Dalton *et al (2007)* suggest, is Robert Dahl's view of democracy as being the institutions and processes of representative government. To this Biesta *(2006)* includes the characteristics of democratic institutions and defines these structures as being "based on a particular appreciation of plurality and the processes of collective judgement and decision-making".

Crisis communication is broadly defined as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" *(Coombs, 2010: 20)*. Management of communication (e.g., what to say, when, and how) and the politics of communication (e.g., nature of building trust, by whom), are identified as two tensions for crisis communicators. These tensions co-exist and can compete with one another *(Olsson, 2014)*. They are driven by distinct priorities and by encouraging different strategies *(Frandsen and Johansen, 2009)*. According to Olsson *(2014)* crisis communication research has primarily taken a mechanistic

and tactical approach. Thus, prior to Covid-19, the literature highlighted the descriptive features of a particular crisis communication strategy focussed on communicating risk, rather than on building trust *(Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Cancel et al. 1997; Kim and Sung, 2014)*.

There are many challenges in crisis communication, not least the heterogeneity of the public *(Oliveira, 2013)*. This means government institutions need to build and maintain trust through communication with diverse groups in society. Cairney and Wellstead *(2021)* draw attention to three elements of policy-making that need addressing to improve trust in democratic structures:

> Policy-maker trust in experts (helping them understand the policy problem on which they wish to communicate).

> Policy-maker trust in citizens and the public (trusting them to follow the government advice or instruction being communicated).

> Public trust in government (both as communicators and in the policy being communicated).

These three elements are even more challenging when we consider the cultural needs of diverse groups in societies. We know that the public is not a heterogeneous group *(Oliveira, 2013)* so crisis communication to a single mass is a blunt tool, which is best used to disseminate mass messages expecting a mass response. Crises are known to affect different people differently, so blunt tools are not always helpful. They cannot be relied on as a mechanism to tailor conversations with different parts of society or to build specific bridges or trust with different groups. Of course, communication strategies that are clear in terms of their language help, but they also need to be clear on how they want to influence individuals' ways of thinking about the crisis *(Banks, 2000)*. Different interpretations of the crisis can lead to completely different points of view depending on how the message is delivered *(Heath and Millar, 2004)*.

Different interpretations can come through diversity of background, and disaster scholarship focuses on how diverse populations understand risk, vulnerability, preparedness, and coping strategies. For example, particular attention is paid to, among others:

> Migrants *(Tompkins et al., 2009; Uekusa and Matthewman, 2017)*.

> Migrant women *(Pardee, 2014; Pongponrat and Ishii, 2018; Uekusa and Lee, 2018)*.

> Ethnic and racial minorities *(Elliott and Pais, 2006; Peguero, 2006; Eisenman et al., 2009; Cherry and Allred, 2012; Messias et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2012; Bolin and Kurtz, 2018)*.

> Linguistic minorities *(Arlikatti et al, 2014)*.

> Foreign students *(Robles and Ichinose, 2017)*.

> Refugees *(Koike, 2011)*.

In some cases, the (in)visibility of marginalised groups (such as undocumented migrants) can lead to a range of challenges for crisis responders seeking to provide assistance *(Délano, 2014; Méndez et al., 2020)*. An additional challenge to trust-building, arises from the changing characteristics of increasingly transnational and globalised communities *(Falkheimer, 2008; Maldonado et al., 2016a, 2016b)*.

Yet there is a paradox: created when the focus is on the risk associated with these marginalised groups, as opposed to putting the focus on their trust, the language of disaster research is misleading. Although disaster scholarship and crisis management are characterised as being less focused on trust and more focussed on risk, the very nature of vulnerabilities, disaster preparedness and enabling the people who cross boundaries with coping strategies, are features and actions which inherently embody elements of trust in the process. This suggests that crisis practitioners should focus more on enhancing trust, around which an understanding of crisis can be woven.

2 | Leadership, behaviours, and their effect on gaining public trust during Covid-19

How did leadership and other crisis communication behaviours contribute to public trust during Covid-19?

It is unsurprising that the success or failure of risk communication is strongly mediated by the level of public trust that exists *(Glass and Schoch-Spana, 2002; Earle, 2004; Rogers et al., 2007; Pearce et al., 2013)*. Kasperson and Palmlund *(2005)* assert that, as the public becomes increasingly aware of the issues that may result in a crisis, there is a decreasing sense of trust in public or state officials and in technical or scientific experts. It is unsurprising then, that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organisation listed the lack of trust in government influencing vaccination hesitancy as one of the top ten global health threats *(WHO, 2019)*.

Research on crisis governance has put forward the need for robust crisis communication strategies to deliver speedy and trustworthy communication and information that consistently updates any changes in advice to meet the public's information needs during different phases of a crisis *(Zhong et al. 2021)*. Covid-19 showed that there is no single, 'one size fits all' pattern to crisis communication, especially if the aim is to encourage behaviour change and gain trust through those communications. What works well in one country, locality, or audience might not work in other contexts. Jennings *et al (2021)* point to the lack of trust that was echoed across social media during Covid-19 and how social media reached across public divides to breed vaccine hesitancy and raise doubts in people's minds.

Research suggests that successful communication relies on the ability to confront harsh realities and build or maintain appropriate levels of trust by staying true to the facts and scientific evidence. During Covid-19 however, governments in some countries exploited (or even manipulated) scientific findings to suit a political agenda *(Aven and Bouder, 2020)*. Trust was eroded as politicians introduced policies which they did not themselves adhere to – leading to public concern when the politicians' behaviours were misaligned to the policy *(Aven, 2020)*. Undermining of public confidence can be swift. For example, Melki *et al (2021)* point to the role of social media as a platform during Covid-19 on which fake news could be spread with the intent of alarming the public and causing panic about a 'hidden agenda' behind state intervention. Social media has encouraged the public to become increasingly more aware of issues but Tsoy *et al (2021)* suggest that it has also caused the public to have a declining sense of trust in public officials, technical and scientific experts - largely because of the alternative messages which are so readily available.

Studies analysing the differences in crisis communication between countries at the national level during Covid-19 highlight the role of the personality of the respective leader, communicator, or person in charge of communication flows and the type of governmental

regime *(Wodak, 2021)*. Also playing a vital role are contextual factors such as individual countries' histories, their collective memories and traumas, and national traditions of governmental rhetoric. Leaders adopted different modes of crisis communication to persuade people to abide by various measures to counteract the spread of the virus, and thus to reduce fears and uncertainties. For example, the leadership in crisis communication during New Zealand's response to Covid-19 was identified as the best in the world when it came to building trust in democratic structures. Beattie and Priestly *(2021)* attribute this to Prime Minister Jacinda Arderns' daily press meetings with the Health Director General, Ashley Bloomfied. Their analysis of those briefings suggests three key requirements for effective crisis communication:

> Honest, open, and straightforward communication.
> Distinctive and motivational language.
> Expressions of care.

What unites all of the approaches that were found to be successful are:

> Good coordination.
> Developed messaging based on verified information.
> Well-trained and prepared spokespeople.
> Monitoring, evaluation, and response.

To be successful, crisis communicators and leaders should have the ability and confidence to confront harsh realities, whilst staying true to the facts and scientific evidence. This was made more challenging during Covid-19 by the pace of change and complexity which were heightened significantly as frequent changes occurred in the epidemiology, in public health and in the social measures taken. Increasing frustration (for many reasons) and uncertainty (due to the pace of change) together with the economic impacts of the response measures undermined the public trust, lowering the foundation for longer-term crisis communication *(WHO, 2020)*. Examples of how to improve trust and public communication during a crisis such as Covid-19, include a distinct behavioural style from leaders embracing the following factors:

> Rapidly establishing an online communication presence to maximise reach *(Chon and Kim, 2022)*.
> Being recognised as a source of reliable information to immediately enable affected individuals to be aware of what is happening. Leaders providing that profile to the public will help gain trust in government *(Wang et al. 2020)*.
> A complex and dynamic approach requires an adaptive crisis communication system, with a proactive social media strategy *(Zhang et al., 2022)*.
> Prioritising factors like sufficiency, timeliness, congruence, consistency, and coordination among public health agencies and federal stakeholders. All of these

play a critical role and need to be explained in language that everyone involved can understand *(Wang et al. 2020)* – and this was shown to be important in Covid-19 social media campaigns *(Kwok et al. 2021)*.

- Clear and jargon-free official social media accounts, with timely and accessible information from authorities and medical experts, may offset the latent negative impact caused by other forms of media messages *(Chao et al., 2020)*.
- Positive information, such as praising frontline health care workers, and clear news about the development of the epidemic and the government's handling of the crisis, can enhance the interactive engagement of the public *(Chen et al., 2020)*.

Dutta, *et al*, *(2022)* propose a model to show that citizens can also improve trust in each other. Based on evidence from 396 citizens in Taiwan, findings indicate that citizens have trust in:

- Social media.
- Personal innovativeness.
- Communicator attitudes.
- Perceived benefit.
- How peers positively influence each other in terms of their readiness.

Leadership input is essential to make this model work. The study showed that the relationship between citizens' trust in the government and their readiness to follow Covid-19 preventive measures is not statistically significant.

Trust in government leadership also depends on the political landscape. Nielsen and Lindvall *(2021)* collected data from three surveys to explain trust in democracy is Sweden and Denmark during Covid-19. Findings show:

- On average, Danish participants trusted their government and their health authority more during the Covid-19 pandemic than Swedish participants.
- Differences between the two countries grew over time and highlighted how Sweden's distinctive policies and performance did not take into account the issue of trust as much as Denmark's; a pattern that was evident in both the Swedish government and the Swedish health authority.
- Sweden's political baseline at the start of the pandemic influenced the difference in trust between Sweden and Denmark. Sweden started with a left-right ideology which led to a greater significance in the Swedish case from the onset of the pandemic. The outcome of the political differences meant that there was more ideological polarisation in political trust in Sweden compared to Denmark.

3 | Societal diversity and the structural barriers to gaining trust in democratic institutions

What are the structural barriers that prevent diverse groups from building trust in democratic institutions?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, democratic institutions report a patchy experience of gaining trust from marginalised and hardly-reached groups through crisis communication. Practitioners and researchers point out there is a long and persistent challenge in gaining trust from marginalised groups *(Falkheimer and Heide, 2010)*. Ballantyne *et al (2000)* explain that different characteristics such as ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status may indicate that people are differently receptive to trusting crisis communication messages and those that deliver them. Together with structural inequalities, this may partly explain why Sasson *(2021)* found differences between mortality rates of older people from ethnic minority groups compared to their white counterparts during Covid-19. Much of the research has, however, been less attentive to the issue of marginalisation, diversity, and contextual variables; of course, with notable exceptions (e.g., the work of Marlowe *et al* with regard to refugees *(2022)*).

The inclusion of contextual variables and diversity in crisis communication has itself been patchy, with some scholars increasingly recognising the need to understand diversity in the years prior to Covid-19 *(Cancel et al., 1997; Coombs, 2018)*. Some crisis communication has aimed to include a more culturally and contextually sensitive understanding of diversity and building trust *(Avery et al. 2010)*. Akinbi *et al (2021)* found that some democratic countries (including France, Germany, Italy, UK, and the US) used surveys, specifically designed to be more inclusive, to collect data on the public's views on the Covid-19 response. These surveys showed a high response rate and strong agreement to install contact-tracing apps. However other research which focussed on ethnic minorities identified the opposite *(Razai et al 2021)*, which illustrates the patchiness previously mentioned. The lack of public trust in democratic institutions was a major concern for marginalised groups in these countries, exacerbating fear and an unwillingness to use contact-tracing apps which were believed to be tools for government surveillance *(Roper, 2020)*.

Saban *et al (2021)* identified the effect of health inequalities in some marginalised groups including lower levels of vaccine take-up, which, is believed to have contributed to high levels of morbidity and mortalities during the pandemic. Szilagyi *et al (2021)* describe how a lack of trust in democratic institutions impacted the take-up of vaccines for minority ethnic and hardly-reached groups. Hussain *et al (2022)* reaffirmed this point adding that minority ethnic groups have disproportionately experienced more infection, severe disease, and death compared to the white population during the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings from the study suggest "community engagement and tailored communication may help. Strategies to address structural disadvantage need to be inclusive, comprehensive, and behaviourally

informed and foster confidence in healthcare systems and governments. Community leaders and healthcare practitioners may prove to be the most important agents in creating an environment of trust within ethnic minority groups" *(Hussain et al, 2022, p3414)*.

Previous research has documented the challenges and adaptations made by government, policymakers, and practitioners in providing services to ever-changing diverse needs *(Boccagni, 2015; Morrice, 2021)*, particularly in urban areas. Challenges arise for democratic institutions in communicating with, and gaining trust from, small numbers of migrants arriving from many different places, at different times *(Phillimore, 2015)*. Difficulties associated with crisis communication with 'superdiverse' populations are growing rapidly alongside the movement of people across borders and present new challenges to crisis communicators. The term 'superdiversity' *(Vertovec, 2008)* refers to changes in world migration patterns. It describes a shift from large groups of migrants arriving from a few countries to the arrival of multiple small groups of migrants originating from many more countries (*Nishida, 2005)*. Issuing documents in multiple languages has been one way that democratic institutions have sought to reach more people. However, simple translations from a native language may not suffice, as the nature of the argument may need to be fundamentally different in order to resonate with cultures and experiences.

From research into situations of public at risk from a tsunami, Paton *et al (2008)* suggested that public trust in the delivery from civic institutions was low, and lives would be lost if the message received did not address their concerns or was not delivered by sources they trusted. Paton *et al (2008)* study suggests that that, to effectively build the public's trust in democratic institutions, crisis communications should consider:

- Who delivers the message.
- How it is received.
- How different groups of the public may need different types of preparedness messages.

Events take different forms and shapes in the minds of the people involved, and cultural values can modify their way of thinking *(Banks, 2000)*. Therefore perceptions (for example, of events) can be even more important than the event itself, since those perceptions can lead to completely different points of view and reactions *(Heath and Millar 2004)*. Interpretational differences lead to a range of challenges for democratic institutions having to manage diverse perceptions alongside their responsibility to provide assistance during a disaster *(2012; Délano and Nienass, 2014; Méndez et al, 2020)*.

4 | Social marketing and other models of encouraging a change in behaviour through crisis communications

What role can social marketing play in changing behaviours during a crisis?

The contribution of social marketing to crisis communication management is well known. Social marketing crisis communication can be defined as "purposive and agile adaptation of communication strategies in ways that consistently reflect changes in public communication demands during different phases of a crisis" *(Zhong et al. 2021)*. Social marketing techniques are used to encourage the public to share responsibility and take socially responsible action. For example, social marketing on how to prepare for a crisis helps save lives through creating behaviour change *(Sorensen and Mileti, 1991)*.

Social marketing that encouraged behaviour change was evident on the many social media platforms for crisis communications used during Covid-19, placing additional responsibility on citizens to comply with new guidance. This expectation of behaviour change had the reciprocal effect of increasing the public's expectations of government – for example, demanding more information on the meaning of changes, on how to comply, or on the consequences of non-compliance. These demands required governments to be more innovative and sensitive in their communication practices *(Zhong et al., 2021)*. Yet in many democratic countries, the public's thirst for information on what behaviour change was required was not met, resulting in a lowering of public trust in democratic governments *(Aven and Bouder, 2020)*. The gap between the public's expectations of crisis communication and the clarity of guidance provided from democratic structures, exacerbated existing low levels of trust *(Hitlin and Shutava, 2022)*. Khemani *(2020)* suggests that the lack of trust demonstrated during Covid-19 should be addressed, but one of the complexities of this task is the availability of, and unvalidated trust in social media. Any member of the public can fill an information void, for example using social media platforms to provide information that is potentially incorrect.

Beyond social marketing, a number of models for understanding crises can be helpful in providing insight on crisis communication. These include:

> **Negative Threat Appeal** *(McGuire, 1986; Tanner et al, 2007)*: Tanner *et al (2007)* assessed crisis communication on the internet which engaged in negative threat appeal to change behaviour i.e., it outlined the threat (e.g., probability, expected severity) and the impact of preparedness (e.g., the effectiveness and capability if prepared). Of the 119 USA websites for public health emergency, only 44 had information that could influence citizens to change their behaviour to take some action. Tanner *et al (2009)* suggested there was a need for evacuation information, helpline telephone numbers, checklists for preparedness supplies, websites with information about preparedness for the disaster and instructions about what to do.

- **Person Relative to Event Model** *(Mulilis and Duval, 1995; Duval and Mulilis, 1999)*: This model takes a psychological approach to individual preparation for large-scale occurrences that threaten the well-being of individuals. It is designed to evaluate the impact on behaviour of a particular type of persuasive communication (for example, fear-arousing or negative threat appeals) and how that can impact trust. Evaluation of the model showed that when individuals had low responsibility relative to the level of threat or crisis then, unfortunately, crisis communication had no impact on participants' behaviour.
- **Protective Action Decision Model** (PADM) *(Paton et al, 2008)*: This model has been designed and used to analyse the behaviour in a crisis and crisis communication decision-making. It integrates environmental cues, social context, intelligence sources, information channels, message content, and recipient characteristics to show how the public are influenced to make decision on how they take protective action.
- **Theory of Planned Behaviour**: This theory was recommended by Patwary *et al (2021)* to help counter the lack of trust in democratic institutions and how to influence changes in people's behaviour via crisis communications that outlined the desired behaviour. This involves consistently showcasing safety information through social media that is clear, concise, and truthful.

Despite the potential pitfalls, social marketing is widely used and Lee *(2020)* describes a number of such campaigns during Covid-19.

5 | Social media as a strategic tool for gaining public trust in democratic institutions

How can social media be embraced as a tool for gaining public trust?

Trust in organisations needs to be built before a crisis happens. Being visible online before a crisis is an important way of ensuring the communicator can be recognised as a source of reliable information. It also enables affected individuals to be aware of the services that democratic institutions are offering by building familiarity through online discussions. Developing trustworthy and consistent profiles with high levels of public recognition, will also work to gain the public's confidence. Official social media accounts, with timely and clear information from authorities and medical experts, may offset the latent negative impact caused by other forms of media *(Chao et al., 2020)*. Positive information such as praising frontline health care workers and giving clear news about the development of the crisis and the government's handling of the crisis can enhance the interactive engagement of the public *(Chen et al., 2021)*. During Covid-19 social media was identified as an effective means for the public to gain trust in democratic states through their crisis communication *(Mansoor, 2021)*. Also, minority media and digital minority media have been recognised as being important multicultural crisis communication tools that could work alongside the state's mainstream communications, to help deliver messaging to diverse groups who have lower levels of trust in the democratic structures *(Banks, 2000)*. Growing heterogeneity and diversity across populations is considered to have significant influence in how crisis communication is delivered and how trust is maintained *(Oliveira, 2013)*.

This reiterates the importance of democratic structures requiring an adaptive and dynamic systems for crisis communication *(Zhang et al., 2022)* and a proactive social media strategy through which truthful messages can be delivered to the public *(Chon and Kim, 2022)*. People want to receive crisis communications via multiple channels, but each should give consideration to information sufficiency, timeliness, and consistency, and should be coordinated (e.g., by public health agencies and federal stakeholders) *(Wang et al. 2020)*.

The scale of growth in state-led social media to inform the public during Covid-19 was startling. Sometimes this worked as part of co-production efforts with local government *(NPC, 2022)* and accelerated the momentum to build trust between that state and different sections of the public.

In the last two decades there has been a growing body of literature on the role of social media in crisis communication *(Reuter et al. 2018, Veil et al. 2011)*. This literature promotes enabling a two-way communication with the public which encouraged citizens' active participation in dialogue. Wide availability of social media platforms increases citizens' expectations for this sort of government engagement in more dynamic crisis communication practices *(Zhong et al. 2021)*. One example of good practice is from Japan, where government empowered the

public to become active agents and re-senders of crisis-related information *(Kietzmann et al., 2011)*. Prior to Covid-19, studies highlighted the importance of e-government systems in gaining trust in government. In understanding crisis communication some studies draw from the intercultural communication experience of 'crisis sojourners' who respond to a "crisis event outside of their own home cultural context" *(Pyle, 2017)*. This experience helps them acquire the media communication skills needed to gain more trust in democracy. Song and Lee *(2016)* also raise the importance of citizens gaining trust with the state through social media. Their US evidence demonstrated social media as a route for government transparency that enhances citizens' trust.

The literature highlights the ever-increasing role of 'secondary' crisis communication, a term pertaining to crisis information communicated among and by the public; stressing that crisis communication at every stage should be 'bi-directional' or 'a two-way process.' While crises like the Covid-19 pandemic have vastly contributed to extensive use of digital technologies across different sections of society, the use of online social media for crisis communication purposes in general remains underutilised *(Chon and Kim, 2022)*. Developing a strong and flexible crisis communication strategy that is consistent across different levels of decision-making is perhaps one of the biggest challenges of modern crisis communication.

6 | Principles of a crisis communications strategy

What learning does the literature offer to inform an effective crisis communications strategy?

Whilst individual papers and studies formulated their findings differently, the lists of good communication principles were broadly aligned. For example, Hyland-Wood *et al*. *(2021: 7)* suggest the following key practical learning points from Covid-19 crisis communications:

- Engage in clear communication.
- Strive for maximum credibility.
- Communicate with empathy.
- Communicate with openness, frankness, and honesty.
- Recognise that uncertainty is inevitable.
- Account for different levels of health literacy and numeracy.
- Empower people to act.
- Appeal to social norms.
- Consider diverse community needs.
- Be proactive in combating misinformation.

Beattie and Priestley *(2021)* suggest crisis communications, from the perspective both of communicating bodies and of the local population, are shaped predominantly by factors like:

- Communicating with openness, frankness, and honesty.
- Building trust, empowering, and motivating people to act.
- Recognising peoples' diverse needs and expressing care.

The research outlined some key principles to aid communication style and increase trust during crisis situations:

- Transparency: explanation of process or policy; justification of rules; provision of information or statistics.
- Complexity, risk, or uncertainty: providing details about the virus (or other risk); acknowledging the complexity of science; acknowledging expertise and presenting evidence; and acknowledging risk and uncertainty.
- Use of analogy or metaphor: for example, military and sports metaphors using distinct and motivational language.
- Distinct vocabulary.

- Encouragement of behaviour change.
- Demonstration of empathy and inclusiveness: sharing stories; thanking essential workers; expressions of empathy and understanding.

Ferrante *(2010)* speaks directly to crisis communicators wanting to avoid pitfalls that lead to loss of public trust. The pragmatic advice is to avoid:

- **Using abstractions**: Communicators should not assume a common understanding. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and highly technical language.
- **Attacking the audience**: Respond to issues, not people. Be careful to end debates by responding clearly and accurately.
- **Sending negative non-verbal messages**: A communicator who loses their temper is in trouble, but tense facial expressions and certain hand movements also can signal negativity and hostility toward the audience. Practicing in front of a mirror or colleague can help a communicator see what their may be saying non-verbally.
- **Blaming anyone**: Assigning blame to another party is never helpful. It confuses the audience and forces them to take sides. Similarly, if an organisation has some responsibility for the situation, accepting it matter-of-factly and honestly can help build trust and credibility.
- **Providing guarantees**: Instead of guarantees, the communicator should offer likelihoods and emphasise the progress being made.
- **Trying to be funny**: This is usually only effective if directing the laugh at oneself. Attempting to inject humour into a serious situation trivialises it.
- **Rambling**: Aim to limit presentations to 15 minutes, while reserving plenty of time for questions. The latter can serve to effectively enhance and clarify additional message points.
- **Using negative words and phrases**: Negative messages override an audience's ability to respond and move away from high levels of emotionality. It is best to avoid them if possible.
- **Thinking you are "off the record"**: A crisis communication, particularly via the media, is rarely confidential.
- **Promising anything**: This tactic will likely be regretted if delivery is not certain. Making strong assurances is a better tactic.
- **Forgetting the visuals**: Most people understand messages delivered in more than one format. Slides, handouts, and other visuals can enhance what is being said and helps the audience process complicated information after the formal presentation ends.

- **Overusing statistics**: Statistics should be used to enhance and support comments only.
- **Forgetting to define the message goals in advance**: Being unprepared in front of a large group of people who may already be distrustful is a sure-fire path to disaster.
- **Forgetting the role of the public**: This is a partnership. It is crucial to build trust and credibility by engaging in a dialogue.

7 | Some examples of enhancing trust in democracy

This review has emphasised the importance of societal context and that beginning communications during a crisis is too late. Trust in democratic structures should be pre-built, and crisis communications can benefit from that trust and existing strong trusting relationships with the public. Below we offer some examples of different initiatives that have been successful in developing trust with local communities, and whose experience will benefit crisis communications. These are examples which show the importance of laying the foundations for trust in crisis, suggesting that crisis communications can benefit from the community cohesion and trust in official structures that such initiatives seek to enhance.

Citizen participation through a multi-stakeholder forum (Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic)

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) brings together governments, citizens, civil society organisations, academia, and the private sector to promote transparent, responsible, inclusive governance that ensures democracy and accountability. OGP carries out this vision by recognising the critical role of local government in being closer to the people they serve. OGP seeks to support open government leaders at the local level in adopting innovative open government reforms. This example shows how Santa Domingo develops a multi-stakeholder forum to consider projects carried out directly with the citizens. Examples include:

> Co-creation of a public policy for re-forestation and environmental care in the province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas and a digital system for environmental control and delivery of environmental species.

> A program for the modernisation of farming and for farmers' and their participation in the design, compilation and publication of production data and agricultural prices in open formats.

> Development of a participatory process and platform for monitoring and controlling the state of the province's road infrastructure.

Each of these projects are supervised and integrate mechanisms that facilitate transparency, citizen participation and collaboration. These examples are demonstrating to government and the public the nature of co-production that enhances trust, openness, and lines of communication; all of which will have positive 'spill-over' benefits to other areas of policy such as crises.

More information: http://www.gptsachila.gob.ec

Engaging children to give them a voice in democracy (Lyon, France)

The City of Lyon is applying an integrated participation approach to recognise children as fully-fledged actors within the city. It is no longer a question of the city doing things for children, but rather of doing things with children, to create a more inclusive city and for children to experience democracy as transformative. This approach innovates by systematising the city's participation in processes and, more broadly, in its public policies. This project develops a children's culture of participation within city departments, promoting a city that is child-friendly. The philosophy is that a city for children is also a city for everyone, improving the quality of life for all. This ambition has led the city to develop children's participation by offering different spaces for dialogue to reach more children, offering different ways of participating and encouraging the power to act. Seven hundred children have been consulted by 23 structures within the educational project; 128 children have been elected to the children's borough council; in 27 schools in four boroughs, 600 primary school children have participated and 600 children have taken part in workshops for over a year. Children's participation activity includes:

- Working with children on developments and policies that affect them including: the greening of their schoolyards; calming the streets surrounding 39 schools; 15 pedestrian designs carried out (questionnaires, models); artistic drawings for the children's streets; co-construction and frescoes on the ground or on the walls of the schools; evaluations of food in their canteens and menu proposals.
- Developing education for citizenship, commitment, and emancipation. This involves encouraging commitment and implementation of: children's borough councils hosting a children's municipal council, and children's input on the model of community organising in schools
- Giving children a voice in the construction of public policies by developing specific participation tools for them (such as drawings, sensitive notebooks for children on the redevelopment of a garden) and building a toolbox for children's public participation.

More information: www.lyon.fr/enfance-et-education/leducation/le-projet-educatif-de-lyon-2021-2026

Faith-based co-production working with local government (Germany, Africa, Asia, and Latin America)

Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe is part of the German Protestant Church, one of the biggest social support institutions in Germany. It works across three regional offices (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) to co-ordinate regional aid programmes that work in communities on crisis-hit areas and deliver local humanitarian operations. It helps local communities to develop their own preparedness and response to crises and engages through existing community structures to develop projects that engage with community leaders and marginalised groups. They prioritise the most vulnerable people in the community and ensure that they, and their interests, are at the heart of humanitarian activities. Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe is an organisation that seeks to close the gap between what local governments can reasonably do in their own resource-constrained environment by providing additional capacity, capability and resources on preparedness, response, and recovery.

More information: www.diakonie-katastrophenhilfe.de

Community psychologists working with young vulnerable people through Covid-19 (London, UK)

MAC-UK is a charity involving community psychologists who have been working in communities with vulnerable young people during Covid-19. The charity wants to transform the delivery of mental health services for excluded young people who offend or are at risk of offending.

One psychologically-informed approach used by the charity's psychologists is INTEGRATE, which aims to create equal, trusting relationships. Using the principles of co-production, they work to empower young people to lead, engaging in proactive outreach to ensure that services meet young people's needs, and create positive contexts for them. They aim to work with those who are excluded by going to where they are and offering a service which is designed to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the young person. They work on the streets in communities, not within the constraints of offices. By going to young people, speaking their language, and building relationships with those most in need, they are aiming to build trust and open channels for communication. This takes time and a particular style of approach to reach those who are marginalised. The intention is to embed MAC workers in community activities that are structured by the young people, so they have control and a say on how they experience the support. Examples of their work include: investigating the 'underground economy' where many excluded young people earn money and considering how to encourage social change in communities.

The MAC-UK website says: "Our expert clinical teams, made up of practitioners and young people with lived experience, get alongside existing services and deliver interactive, long-term training, rooted in live practice. We hang out, train, buddy, reflect, coach, encourage, listen, report, supervise, test and learn, in order that the service can engage and respond to young people's psychological and environmental needs."

More information: mac-uk.org

CONCLUSIONS

The theme of the public gaining trust in democratic institutions within crisis management crosses different research disciplines (management, organisational theory, political science, sociology, psychology, and human resource management). It involves policy makers, practitioners, civil society, and the lived experience of the public. Different perspectives and histories of groups within society influence the differences in the public view of trust in crisis communication. Current research related to Covid-19, and previous research, combine to provide essential knowledge for successful crisis response and recovery to inform us how trust can be enhanced in democratic institutions. The inclusion of conventional crisis communication research which has been critiqued here as a mechanistic and tactical approach *(Olsson, 2014)* is still important.

The growing concerns about the increasingly diverse use of social media pre-empt Covid-19 *(Kietzmann et al., 2011)*, particularly regarding the ways in which digital technologies empower the public to become senders, or even broadcasters, of crisis-related information. Covid-19 witnessed the growing focus on social media communication strategies as a vital element in crisis response for a number of reasons. Primarily, the changing character of public communication and rapid growth of digital technologies have resulted in increased attention on the usage of social media platforms during extreme events *(Hao and Wang, 2020)*. A growing body of literature is focused on the paradoxical role of social media in crisis communication *(Reuter et al. 2018, Veil et al. 2011)*; through promoting two-way (interactive) communication and citizens' active participation, but also compromising both of these due to the power of social media to deliver fake news. Building trust in democratic structures and their crisis communications can be encouraged through, amongst other things: leadership roles; taking a strategic approach to communications before, during, and after a crisis; partnership working with trusted groups that are locally present; engaging with civil society to develop relationships before a crisis on related matters; and following good practice crisis communications.

It was not the aim of this review to present a single model of the best way to conduct crisis communications – because we believe that does not exist. We aimed to describe context and the factors that should be considered when communicating about and during crises. As we have shown, different communities will have different levels of trust in democratic institutions and raising trust may be the starting place for effective crisis communications. In such instances effective communications would not be about translating a leaflet into other languages, for example – it would be about understanding the lived experiences of different recipients, engaging with those communities to enhance their (and our) understanding with the aim of enhancing trust, and then developing a persuasive argument to bring about the desired behaviour change in a way that is sensitive to their culture, needs and concerns.

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