At the intersection of two countries: A comparative critical analysis of COVID-19 communication in Australia and New Zealand

Petra Theunissen
Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Katharina Wolf
Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Abstract
This research provides critical, comparative insights into the public communication responses employed by Australia and New Zealand during the first twelve months following the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic. The two nations share a similar socio-political and cultural context, but despite being highlighted by the international media as early success stories, their public communication responses to the pandemic showed noteworthy differences. Borrowing from cultural studies, this paper applies the circuit of culture model and offers a snapshot in time that reinforces the importance of socio-cultural awareness when communicating intricate and challenging information. It supports the idea that a range of effective solutions to complex communication challenges are possible and may result in a similar outcome, including strengthened identities and national pride during uncertain times.

Keywords
Australia, New Zealand, COVID-19, circuit of culture, public communication, regulation, production, consumption

Corresponding author:
Petra Theunissen, School of Communication Studies, Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.
Email: petra.theunissen@aut.ac.nz
Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020b). At the time, there were 31,481 cases across 25 countries (World Health Organization, 2020a). Less than a year later, by 8 February 2021, the number of cases had grown to 105,394,301 confirmed cases and 2,302,302 confirmed deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). In many cases efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic were akin to sticking one’s finger in the dyke. Some countries appeared to fare better than others during the early stages of the pandemic. Two of these were Australia and New Zealand. Although frequently referred to alongside each other in international media reports, their public communication responses were different in many ways.

On March 19, 2020, both countries closed their international borders, but while New Zealand opted for an ‘elimination’ strategy, entering a country-wide full lockdown on March 23, Australia followed a ‘flatten the curve’ approach.

New Zealand’s strategy was perceived to be riskier than Australia’s. Critics described the strategy as ‘pushing the New Zealand economy down a cliff’ (Ensor, 2020). The Australian Government’s Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr Nick Coatsworth, referred to elimination strategies as ‘a false hope’, thereby justifying his own country’s ‘aggressive suppression’ approach (Coatsworth, 2020).

Certainly, the initial economic effect was unfavourable for New Zealand. Reflecting a lack of trust and growing community uncertainty, New Zealand’s consumer confidence dropped from 104.2 points (Q1) to 95.1 in the third quarter of 2020 (Trading Economics, 2020b). Meanwhile in Australia, consumer confidence increased from 105 points in the first quarter to 112 points in the third quarter (Trading Economics, 2020a). However, by January 2021, consumer confidence in both nations was on par (Trading Economics, 2020b).

A 2021-analysis of countries with the most effective pandemic response by The Lowy Institute, ranked New Zealand first and Australia eighth, behind – among others – Cyprus, Rwanda, and Vietnam (Dziedzic, 2021). Although New Zealand and Australia eventually dropped in these rankings, the initial successes and differences in ranking led one to wonder: How did the two countries’ public communication approaches differ?

Using Australia and New Zealand as comparative cases and employing the circuit of culture, this paper critically investigates the two nations’ public communication responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to uncover how the respective governments mobilised and re-assured their constituents. The study approaches communication from a cultural studies perspective, which perceives communication as being influenced by culture (Griffin, 2012), and thus, communication is explored as a “situated practice” (Carbaugh, 2015a: 131) in Australia and New Zealand during the first twelve months of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The circuit of culture identifies five key moments in the communication process, namely representation, production, consumption, identity, and regulation. To contextualise the communication responses, this paper begins by providing a brief overview of each country’s regulatory and socio-cultural environment as well as a brief explanation of the methodological approach and the circuit of culture before
drawing conclusions about the production and consumption of communication responses within their respective regulatory contexts.

**Two neighbouring countries**

**Australia**

Known as a Federal Commonwealth, Australia comprises six states and ten territories spanning across 7,692,024 square kilometres (Australian Government, n.d.a) and has a population that is approaching 26 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). It is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, with 89% of its population living in a small number of urban areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021c).

In mid-2020, Australia was home to more than 7.6 million immigrants, and almost 30% of its population was born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a), representing nearly every single country from around the world, but most commonly England, India, and China. Many of these ethnic groups have their own communication styles, preferences, flow, and channels, which are crucial for disseminating pandemic-related information.

Under section 51 of the Australian Constitution, international border security is a core responsibility of the federal government, although parliaments at state level exercise full legislative powers on a range of matters, such as health and education (Parliament of Australia, n.d.). This means that the federal government is responsible for key decisions in relation to the closure of international borders, evacuation flights for stranded Australians, quarantine, and the sourcing of vaccines, while states and territories defined – and consequently declared – ‘states of emergency’ as they saw fit. These emergencies covered key pandemic measures, such as quarantine arrangements, lockdowns, and stipulations in relation to venue capacities, mask wearing and other precautionary measures. Contentiously, whilst the Australian Constitution seeks to guarantee freedom of movement across the country (Parliament of Australia, n.d.), states and territories were able to argue ‘defensive precaution’ to protect the health and wellbeing of their residents via internal border closures. For example, Western Australia closed itself off from the rest of the country for almost two years, effectively becoming ‘an island within an island’ (Laschon, 2020).

The first twelve months following the closure of Australia’s international border demonstrated that these domestic border arrangements – and hence movement restrictions and quarantine requirements – could change within hours of a positive COVID-19 test result in the community. Adding a further level of confusion, early in the pandemic, states and territories assumed responsibility for quarantine programmes (Tingle, 2021), despite having only limited control over the number of incoming international travellers (restricted primarily to returning residents). The issue of quarantine was not the only one that caused friction between states and the federal government (Crowe and Galloway, 2021) in the moments of message production and regulation as different entities sought to position their pandemic response measures and associated communication as the most appropriate ones. States with a more relaxed approach to
managing COVID-19 outbreaks were critical of those trying to eradicate the virus – and vice versa (Christmass, 2021). Similarly, individual members of the federal parliament were openly critical of some of the state-based approaches to managing the pandemic (Le May, 2021), and in one case even supported a formal legal challenge to Western Australia’s hard border arrangement (Borrello et al., 2020).

Tensions between different power players, in particular the different states and the federal government, including public criticism and a noticeable level of hostility by some state premiers, resulted in a degree of uncertainty and ‘archipelagos’ within an island, as ideologies overshadowed public communication needs. However, in some cases these intra-country conflicts also led to a localised sense of pride and strengthened identity.

New Zealand

Across the Tasman Sea, and situated 1600 kilometres off Australia’s coast, New Zealand is spread across two islands (the North Island and South Island), comprising 268,000 square kilometres in total (The Commonwealth, 2021) with the capital city, Wellington, and the largest city, Auckland, both located on the North Island.

Like Australia, New Zealand is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations with its constitutional framework based on the British system, but unlike Australia, all the executive and regulatory power, including decisions relating to COVID-19, such as international border closures, lockdowns, and other health measures, lie with the Cabinet under the Prime Minister’s leadership, thereby centralising all decisions in the capital city Wellington.

New Zealand’s population is notably smaller than that of its Australian neighbour, having only recently bypassed five million (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). The size of the population led to the ubiquitous use of the phrase ‘team of five million’ by the government and media during the early stages of the global pandemic (cf. Roy, 2020), suggesting the need for a collective response to the public health emergency.

Although its population identifies as mainly European with English as the most common spoken language, the nation is ethnically diverse (Statistics New Zealand, 2020b) and recognises English, te reo Māori, and New Zealand Sign Language as official languages. Like Australia, close to a third of New Zealand’s population was born overseas, representing all the regions in the world (Statistics New Zealand, 2020b). But unlike Australia, a quarter of New Zealand’s population (more than 1.5 million) is centred in Auckland, the country’s most ethnically diverse region with 41.6% of Aucklanders having been born overseas, compared to 27.4% of New Zealand’s general population (Statistics New Zealand, 2020a). Noticeably, only 53.5% of Aucklanders identify as European while the rest identify as Māori (11.5%), Asian (28.2%) and Pacific Peoples (15.5%). As in Australia, this diversity required pandemic response messages to be made available in multiple languages, formats and through multiple channels to ensure effective consumption and desired interpretation of messages.
Methodology

This study follows an ethnographic-style approach from a critical, social constructivist perspective (Dutta, 2014), using the lived experiences of the authors to gain insight into the production, regulation, and consumption of the two countries’ pandemic response messages. Ethnography is a valid and useful form for analysing communication events as they unfold (Carbaugh, 2015b). It recognises that social life is a ‘series of interlocking events’ (Silverman, 2020: 251) and that research can be contradictory and incomplete (Buscatto, 2021).

Employing an ethnographic-style approach acknowledges that researchers do not only bring their own worldview to the study but are situated ‘at the intersections of particular socio-cultural milieu, culture and history’ (Dutta, 2014: 5) – in this case the COVID-19 pandemic and the two countries’ communication responses to the public health threat. This structural positioning and first-hand experience allowed for a deeper understanding of events as they unfolded (Dutta, 2014).

Observed from the outside, Australia’s and New Zealand’s pandemic responses might appear very much aligned, but close-up, emic insights provide unique, in-depth insights into the two countries’ communication approaches that cannot be gleaned from media reports or international benchmarking alone. These insights are particularly important within a historical socio-cultural context since meanings of events are continuously (re)negotiated.

In many cases, ethnographers do not observe actions and interactions directly but work with cultural artefacts, such as written texts or recordings (Silverman, 2020), or in this case, news media reports, websites, social media posts and press conferences in addition to lived experiences. As participants in, and observers of, their respective countries’ public communication responses, the authors were active consumers of messages whilst observing the production and regulation of messages within their own and neighbouring country. This allowed them to view the events through the eyes of those being studied, contextualise the data, and provide detailed descriptions of events (cf. Silverman, 2020).

Ethnography, by its very nature, is subjective (Buscatto, 2021). This subjectivity was minimised by practising reflexivity (Buscatto, 2021): Ongoing ‘memoing’ and regular weekly meetings between the researchers throughout the period under investigation to discuss, debate, compare, and reflect on the countries’ approaches – both as insiders (being part of the community) and as outsiders (observing from across the Tasman Sea) (Silverman, 2020). Such reflexivity is typical of collaborative ethnography whereby new insights are created jointly (Gobo and Cellini, 2021). It illustrated that even relatively close-up, emic, and etic interpretations of COVID-19 responses can vary considerably.

In line with Silverman’s (2020) suggestion to limit ethnographic data by linking the research problem to a specific model, this study draws on the circuit of culture. Data is further delineated by approaching the two countries as comparative cases, which seeks to ‘gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each case’ (Patton, 2002: 447). Such an approach allows researchers to examine a limited set of
cases in detail, using the logic of analytics, meaning that cases are carefully selected and analysed to explore a subject in detail (Neuman, 2011). Here, the authors aim to demonstrate differences and similarities between two countries’ public communication responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic through data gathered over a twelve-month period from the day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, namely 11 March 2020 to 13 March 2021. Such a comparative approach is helpful when attempting to identify factors that are constant (Neuman, 2011). Qualitative data was drawn from websites, social media posts, live streams, Facebook and Twitter posts and commentary as well as on- and offline news reports.

**Circuit of culture**

The circuit of culture has its origin in cultural studies, an interdisciplinary approach that is deeply connected to communication, humanities, and social sciences, exploring how people are (dis)empowered in daily life (Grossberg, 2015). It recognises that every aspect of our lives is interconnected, operating what Grossberg (2015: 130) described as ‘the space between two assumptions: on the one hand, that the structure of lived social reality is inevitable, fixed, and determined, and on the other hand, that social relations have no reality or stability whatsoever’. Thus, our way of life is constantly (re)negotiated as was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The circuit of culture model has been widely applied within the context of communication, and specifically public relations (cf. Al-Kandari and Gaither, 2011; Benecke et al., 2017; García, 2021; Han and Zhang, 2009; Scherer and Jackson, 2008; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2011; Terry, 2005; Tombleson and Wolf, 2017). It recognises culture, identity, and the fluid nature of meaning-creation within the field of communication (Grossberg, 2015).

Developed by the Open University’s cultural studies team (Du Gay et al., 1997; Hall, 1997), the circuit of culture was adopted by Curtin and Gaither (2007) as a lens for international public relations to consider critical cultural approaches. The circuit of culture extends Hall’s (1973) traditional encoding-decoding model of communication to five moments that shape, and continuously re-shape, the communication of values and the creation of meaning: Representation, production, consumption, identity, and regulation. It recognises that culture is a ‘process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and endlessly reproduced and renegotiated in society’ (Hall, 1980; Curtin and Gaither, 2007: 35; Williams, 1961). Culture is therefore not static, suggesting that COVID-19 related issues and responses are likely to be influenced by local representations, regulation, identity, message production and consumption. It also suggests that the communication culture created because of COVID-19 will continue to be (re)negotiated and (re)shaped as new information emerges. Such an understanding challenges the notion that COVID-19 communication responses can be generalised, or that ‘one size fits all’, resulting in a much sought after ‘blueprint’ communication solution. It highlights that the production, consumption, and regulation of messages by, for example, Australian and New Zealand communities may potentially differ significantly from other parts of the world and may look very different in the future.
**Representation** can be seen as the discursive process in which cultural meaning is generated and given shape. Meaning is socially constructed through symbolic systems (language, images, and signs) or discourse (Curtin and Gaither, 2007). This suggests that, even at a national or local level, multiple truths may exist at any given point in time. Within democracies such as Australia and New Zealand, where multiple voices from different cultures are competing to be heard, each of these voices can construct meanings in their own way; hence the importance of recognising cultural and ethnic differences within country borders.

From within these discursive practices and multiple relations, *identities* emerge. These identities are not static but are continuously (re)shaped by the surrounding world and are often defined by ‘what we are not’ (Curtin and Gaither, 2007: 168). While New Zealand, for instance, emerged as a collective identity of being ‘a team of five million’, Australia’s identity as a nation became increasingly fragmented during the first twelve months of the global pandemic, as residents more closely identified with their state or territory, diverging from the idea of being ‘Australian’ or part of a national solution. Residents appeared to rally behind governments that managed to ‘rid’ their communities of COVID-19 the best.

**Production** is the process by which meanings are encoded into ‘products’. These products can be seen in the form of communication strategies and tactics (García, 2021), such as media conferences, websites, infographics, and providing information in multiple languages—all of which are influenced by the cultural environment and perceived audience needs.

**Consumption** captures the moment during which consumers renegotiate the meanings generated during production, drawing on products and ideas anchored in their everyday lives. Not only is production not fully realised until the moment of consumption, but through engaging with the products, audiences may create new, and unintended, meanings. For example, health authorities may seek to communicate a level of personal autonomy by making mask wearing discretionary, which in turn may be interpreted as a lack of urgency.

Within the context of the circuit of culture, **regulation** is understood as much broader than the type of control executed by governments and administered through law. Here, regulation captures the ongoing ‘power struggle between various entities attempting to define the social, moral, and cultural norms of a given society’ (Curtin and Gaither, 2007: 52). For example, within the context of COVID-19, economic reasoning has challenged health-based decision making. We have also seen mask wearing becoming heavily politicised as various voices competed for dominance (Kahane, 2021). In New Zealand, the government came under fire for leaving out Māori voices in their response plan and not responding to Māori needs (Johnsen, 2020; Parahi, 2020), whilst in Australia multicultural communities felt side-lined (Wild, 2020) or indeed frequently singled out (Kurmelov, 2020).

**Production, consumption, and regulation of COVID-19 messages**

Australia’s and New Zealand’s communication responses were complex, multifaceted, and continuously (re)produced as new scientific information emerged. Respective
governments used a range of approaches to communicate public health messages. Discussing and analysing each of these approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we will focus on four key approaches that stood out for their notable similarities and differences: (1) The alert systems, (2) the use of media briefings, (3) digital versus traditional media, and (4) tracer apps. These approaches were analysed with a focus on three key moments of the circuit of culture: Production, consumption, and regulation.

**Alert systems**

On 8 May 2020, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a ‘Roadmap to Recovery’, outlining three steps (or stages) to the reopening of the country (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, 2021), which remained in place over the first twelve months. These stages were not communicated consistently throughout the country, suggesting inconsistent production. Individual jurisdictions used different classifications and different levels of lockdown measures. For instance, the state of Victoria clearly outlined various levels of restrictions, explicitly communicating what, for example, a level 4 lockdown entailed (Murray-Atfield and Dunstan, 2020). In contrast, the state of Western Australia only had lockdown ‘measures’ and a five-level ‘recovery plan’, which was eventually expanded to six steps (Government of Western Australia, 2021), including implicit restrictions and limitations for venues. Meanwhile, the federal government maintained its 3-step framework for a COVIDSafe Australia (Australian Government Department of Health, n.d.).

Remarkably, not only the use of language (‘lockdown measures’ vs. ‘roadmap to reopening’), but also the visualisation of the plans and use of colour varied across jurisdictions, even between departments. Such visual differences and inconsistencies opened the way for multiple interpretations (consumption) of messages.

Furthermore, states’ varying tolerance of COVID-19 risk resulted in intra- and interstate border arrangements, quarantine requirements and travel restrictions that were under continuous review and could change within hours of a positive COVID-19 test result in the community, frequently leaving people stranded (Bennett, 2021). Disconcertingly, approaches varied across states and jurisdictions, resulting in confusion. For example, in early February 2021, Western Australia only had lockdown ‘measures’ and a five-level ‘recovery plan’, which was eventually expanded to six steps (Government of Western Australia, 2021), including implicit restrictions and limitations for venues. Meanwhile, the federal government maintained its 3-step framework for a COVIDSafe Australia (Australian Government Department of Health, n.d.).

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cases in New South Wales, with new ones being confirmed daily. Given that online news reporting and social media commentary extends beyond geographical borders, inconsistent messaging exacerbated confusion, limiting intended message consumption.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce, the Business Council of Australia and other – especially tourism related – lobby groups provided a different perspective to the dominant health-focused narrative, openly criticising lockdown decisions, prolonged movement restrictions, venue capacity limits (Michie, 2021) and their impact on the economic well-being of the country. Similar to other countries around the world, lockdown measures were met with protests (Visontay, 2020), adding more voices by openly challenging (seeking to regulate) the government’s messaging.

These inconsistencies, challenges to the federal and state decisions, and frequently altered restrictions increased Australians’ uncertainty (Wahlquist and Remeikis, 2020). More than a year on, hundreds of remote Aboriginal communities remained closed off to tourists and travellers to protect those considered among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2021).

In New Zealand, a nationwide, four-level alert system was announced on 21 March 2020 (Strongman, n.d.), two days before the nation went into a full level 4 lockdown. The message was simple: Level 1 – Prepare (the disease is contained), Level 2 – Reduce (the disease is contained but there is a growing risk of community transmission), Level 3 – Restrict (there is a heightened risk that the disease is not contained) and Level 4 – Eliminate (there is a risk that the disease is not contained). The announcement was made during a live, televised address to the nation, which, as Sachdeva (2020) observed, was an unprecedented move for New Zealand. Sachdeva (2020) wrote that the idea of an ‘address to the nation’ evoked ‘Churchillian rhetoric, or Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats’, implying that although it was an antiquated form of communication, it was carefully considered and produced, befitting the seriousness of the situation. It ensured that the nation paid attention. It was as if the country had declared war – a war against a virus – and needed to rally public support. The message was clear-cut and widely interpreted as ‘We’re in this together; we must unite against COVID-19’.

As the pandemic progressed and new scientific information emerged, the levels were refined and adjusted during the moment of production. At times, this meant the language was modified to reflect new restrictions. For example, in August 2020 when Auckland emerged from a level 3 lockdown in response to a localised COVID-19 outbreak, news media and the Prime Minister referred to level 2.5 instead of level 2 (cf. Newshub, 2020). This communicated that level 2 rules had become stricter for Aucklanders. For instance, while the rest of the country was at level 2, allowing gatherings of up to a 100 people, Auckland’s gatherings were limited to ten people. The only exceptions were funerals and tangihanga (a Māori ceremony to mourn the dead), which allowed up to fifty people to gather, thereby attempting to recognise cultural differences.

**Media briefings**

Another notable point of difference between the two nations was the sparse presence of federal media briefings or conferences in Australia, which were almost an after-thought,
compared to New Zealand’s daily, carefully produced, and televised media briefings that gained country-wide popularity.

Following his first official announcement of ‘Coronavirus Measures’ on 18 March 2020 (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020), Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison left COVID-19 communication to the various state and territory leaders and their respective health officials. Notably, during the first year of the pandemic there were no regular, dedicated pandemic updates by the Prime Minister, illustrating a lack of regard for the moment of production. Regular media stops by key government ministers occasionally included responses to COVID-19 related questions, which later focussed on the sourcing of vaccines and international arrival limits, but only if prompted by journalists. Indeed, communication messages from federal government ministers very much centred on a ‘business as usual’ narrative.

Locally, State Premiers, supported by their Chief Medical Officers (CMOs), COVID-19 taskforce coordinators, health experts, and respective Health Ministers, recognised the importance of message production, providing regular updates during localised outbreaks and announcing new measures. As a result, State Premiers’ visibility and popularity virtually exploded, seeing increases in social media followers of up to 2330% (De Poloni, 2020), effectively turning politicians into social media celebrities with approval ratings of up to 91% (Law and Ison, 2020). In the absence of national media updates, state-based politicians’ social media presence overtook that of the Prime Minister, demonstrating the desire for information by message consumers.

Arguably reflecting a loss of trust in mainstream media, Facebook livestreams became a key source for timely information. Regular ‘local’ updates resulted in the emergence of other micro celebrities, in particular sign language interpreters, who played a prominent and crucial role in local briefings and inadvertently developed their own fan community (Pilat, 2020).

Across the Tasman, joint daily media briefings at 1pm with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Director-General of Health, Dr Ashley Bloomfield, became an institution and ‘centrepiece’ of the country’s public health communication (De Bres and Dawson, 2021: 130) during the early stages of production and consumption. Indeed, the media briefing were so popular that they became ‘appointment viewing’ (De Bres and Dawson, 2021: 130) resulting in some people timing their supermarket trip to coincide with the press briefing to ensure a quiet, uninterrupted shopping experience.

Typical of New Zealand’s self-effacing, laconic, and dry humour (Harker, 2013), the briefings were at times serious (addressing COVID-19 related concerns and worries) and at other times light-hearted (awkwardly demonstrating the use of a mask hand-crafted by a family friend). By the end of the four-week level 4 lockdown, the briefings had reached a level of popularity that saw them receiving their own Internet Movie Database (IMDb) entry as a TV reality show called the ‘1 pm Daily Update’. The entry outlined the ‘storyline’ and ‘cast and crew’ (IMDb, 2020). Unlike Australia, however, where the sign-language interpreters had developed their own fanbase, in New Zealand they had become the unwilling subjects of memes, parody videos and negative online comments (Martin, 2020), demonstrating how messages can be consumed in unintended and different ways.
When the joint daily press briefings ceased in May 2020, it made media headlines (Cooke, 2020); they resumed in August 2020 during a localised COVID-19 outbreak, attracting similar consumption patterns.

Digital versus traditional media

Both countries relied heavily on social media platforms and broadcasters to update their audiences about COVID-19 and related measures, demonstrating similarities in the moment of production, but again, there were notable differences.

For the Australian states and territories there was a visible reliance on Facebook and the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), drawing extensively on the use of bright yellow, grey, and black in COVID-19 related messaging. These were supported by generic health messages via established channels by the Department of Health, with a strong focus on simplistic animations in hues of blue and green (Department of Health, n.d.). Other video messages relied on talking heads and health experts, who conveyed a level of authority and seriousness, but failed to tap into the popularity gained by state politicians who appeared to be more relatable and authentic. Notably, neither reflected the cultural diversity of Australia’s population, illustrating a disconnect between message producers and consumers.

Furthermore, Australia relied on existing government websites to include COVID-19 relevant messaging, such as its Australia.gov.au domain, which was originally created as an easily locatable ‘one stop shop’ for important public service information, linking audiences to key information and services across approximately 900 different government websites and resources. As a memorable domain, the website had been used for key government campaigns, but was slowly transformed into the federal government’s dedicated ‘Coronavirus response site’. In the early months of the pandemic, the federal government relied on a ‘business as usual’ approach counting on the health.gov.au domain to deliver pandemic related information, thereby signalling that the pandemic was first and foremost positioned as a ‘health issue’ to be treated separately from economic considerations.

During the second half of 2020, the federal government launched the ‘Our Come Back’ website (Australian Government, n.d.b), supported by a $15 million advertising campaign to reassure key stakeholders of Australia’s fiscal stability and sound economic management (Murphy, 2020). Strikingly, this site was not prominently linked to, or featured on, the Australia.gov.au domain, suggesting a different (perhaps business and investment) target audience.

To connect with its diverse audiences, Australia sought to translate pandemic related information into key languages represented in the country. However, the government was slow to engage with community leaders, appearing to rely on computer-generated translations of key messages and information sheets, which were widely criticised for their quality, frequently ending up being – literally – lost in translation (Dalzell, 2020), again illustrating a disconnect between the moment of production and consumption.

In New Zealand, the national government also relied on digital and social media, which included their ‘Unite against Covid’ Facebook page, daily Twitter updates, and their dedicated Ministry of Health campaign website https://covid19.govt.nz/. It relied
less on any specific broadcaster, although the daily media briefings were broadcast live through TVNZ.

Branding across all platforms was uniform with distinct yellow and white angular stripes offset by black, representing a barricade, increasing memorability, and communicating urgency. For a fleeting period after the initial March-April 2020 lockdown, the branding was changed from ‘Unite against Covid’ to ‘Recover from Covid’, but this did not last long as it became clear that COVID-19 could re-emerge at any stage. Markedly, the New Zealand government was committed to two-way engagement with the public, indicated by the fact that COVID-19 related questions posted on the ‘Unite against Covid’ Facebook page, including questions about level restrictions, mask wearing requirements and testing stations, received immediate, accurate and polite responses.

The official campaign website contained all information New Zealanders would need, such as an overview of the different alert systems, travel information, business information and details for ‘everyday life’ during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scrolling down the landing page brought the reader to information provided in a range of languages, including te reo Māori, sign language, large print, easy to read versions, and several languages reflecting New Zealand’s diverse population. Unlike their Australian counterpart, the translations never came under fire in the media, suggesting they were consumed as intended.

**App use**

Another important strategic response to the pandemic was the introduction of tracer apps to enable contact tracers to quickly locate and isolate outbreaks of COVID-19.

In April 2020, the Australian Department of Health commissioned the government’s Digital Transformation Agency to design the COVIDSafe app, which was hailed as the ‘ticket for a return to normality’ (SBS News, 2020). Its introduction emphasised the anticipated embeddedness in Australian culture by linking the use of the app to ‘wearing sunscreen when going outside’. However, a month later, the voluntary contact tracing app had reportedly only identified a single case (Taylor, 2020).

Reliant on ‘Bluetooth handshakes’ the app encountered several technical issues early on and was plagued by security concerns (Farrell, 2020), demonstrating a typical moment of regulation. Rather than wait for and work with the federal government, the states – once again – moved ahead independently by designing and mandating their own tracking apps, such as ‘Check In’ in Queensland and Tasmania, ‘SafeWA’ in Western Australia, and ‘Service’ in Victoria and New South Wales. Notably, rather than depend on a virtual handshake, these apps were all manual check-in tools that relied on location-based QR codes and hence user compliance. Curiously, use of the apps was initially optional, although alternatively, contact information was required to be provided manually at respective venues through physical sign-ins.

In practice, compliance varied during the moment of consumption, which was blamed on a perceived lack of urgency due to limited or no community cases (Shine, 2021). Unlike New Zealand’s CovidTracer app, these tools did not facilitate manual entries if
users should forget to scan at a particular location. More importantly, none of these apps were designed to speak to each other, or to be used interchangeably, which meant that state and territory specific apps required downloading when travelling. Twelve months into the pandemic, the $6.7 million COVIDSafe app still existed, but was rarely spoken about, having traced a total of 17 contacts by March 2021, all of which were in the state of New South Wales (Kelly, 2021).

New Zealand government’s Covid Tracer app was launched on 19 May 2020 (RNZ, 2020). The app faced its share of criticism. For example, Phennington (2020) wrote that developers took much longer than expected to develop the app and that it was ‘insufficient for businesses’, highlighting the contestation of meaning (regulation).

Initially expected to allow for cross-Tasman use in Australia, the app was eventually only useable within New Zealand. Like with the Australian app, users were required to create a personal account, which involved a name, email address and phone number. This basic information was provided to the Ministry of Health. Adding a home address and national health identifier (NHI) were optional but would also be stored by the Ministry. The app was designed to protect the privacy of users (Ministry of Health, 2021a), and therefore questions about privacy that plagued the Australian COVIDSafe app never featured in New Zealand, highlighting a key production difference between the countries.

Users were asked to scan QR codes on display at businesses and public buildings to keep track of where they had been. The data remained on their phones and would automatically be deleted after 60 days unless the user was asked to share the data by official contact tracers. While scanning was not mandated by law, the display of QR codes by businesses and institutions was enforced in August 2020 following a COVID-19 outbreak in Auckland. An infringement could cost the business $1000 in court fines (Todd, 2020), thereby signalling the importance of these official QR codes and the government’s desire to enforce its public health measures.

Since its launch, the app underwent several updates. One of these enabled Bluetooth tracing that anonymously tracked if users had been in contact with another user who had tested positive for COVID-19 (Ministry of Health, 2021b). The introduction of this Bluetooth tracing ability misled a good number of users to believe that they no longer needed to scan the QR codes, illustrating a disconnect between the production of new information and its consumption. This forced the government to issue a reminder that both the scanning of QR codes and Bluetooth tracing were required (Kenny, 2021).

About teams, archipelagos, and hermit kingdoms

On the surface – or rather from a distance – Australia and New Zealand appear to have a lot in common. Indeed, international media reporting during the first months of the global pandemic has positioned both countries as alike. Both were singled out as success stories during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic; both have self-contained borders, making it ostensibly easier to close themselves off from the rest of the world in a bid to stem the tide of COVID-19. However, both countries are also culturally diverse with strong international connections. Adding to that, they are democratic and egalitarian
by nature with their populations valuing freedom of speech, personal autonomy, and privacy.

Yet identifiable patterns of communication emerged, pointing towards subtle differences. For instance, the analysis suggested that New Zealand’s initial communication approach embraced two-way communication, whilst Australia’s communication model – especially at a federal level – relied on one-way message dissemination. New Zealand’s ‘team of 5 million’ approach suggested a level of community and solidarity, whilst Australia’s key focus appeared to be on ‘saving face’, message control and the economy.

In both cases, communication responses to the global pandemic resulted in increasingly inward-looking identities, emphasising national wellbeing and lifestyle ahead of global connectedness. In Australia, the lack of federal leadership and absence of a nationwide communication strategy led to an increasingly fragmented identity linked to individual states and territories, as opposed to a shared, national identity. In contrast, New Zealand underscored the notions of community and collectivism, reflected in the messaging that emphasised the ‘team of five million’. This did not mean, however, that New Zealand was unified in its consumption of COVID-19 related messages. Indeed, regulation demonstrated by diverse voices and criticism from various ethnic, cultural, and professional groups challenged the meaning that was encoded at a national level. Still, the centralisation of messages ensured a level of consistency in the production of messages resulting in more consistent consumption that was not reflected in Australia.

Communicators should pay extra attention to the production of messages and recognise that audiences may not decode or consume messages as originally intended. In New Zealand this was demonstrated by the explicit inclusion of information in various languages across multiple platforms – a feat that did not seem to be fully achieved in Australia even though both countries identify as multicultural (or, in the case of New Zealand, multicultural with bicultural roots). Indeed, in Australia, communities from different cultural backgrounds felt frequently overlooked or unfairly targeted in media narratives and by lockdown measures (Simons, 2021).

The circuit of culture clearly demonstrated that rivalry in Australia between federal and state level decision makers as well as other key voices, such as industry bodies and advocacy groups, resulted in an over-emphasised disconnect between the moments of production and consumption. Localised communication responses may have resulted in a strengthened identity but resulted in less coherence at a national level, ultimately leading to an increasingly fragmented national identity during the early months of the pandemic.

The comparative insights demonstrate that the idea of a ‘model communication response’ to the COVID-19 pandemic is inherently flawed. Regulatory, socio-economic, and cultural differences challenge the notion – and indeed the value – of a blueprint solution to public health crises. The insights emphasise that the consumption and regulation of messages are heavily influenced by socio-political, sociographic, and economic factors, making it difficult, if not impossible, to implement one nation’s response in another without meaningful modifications. Even between two countries as closely connected as Australia and New Zealand, messages were produced and consumed differently.
The analysis points towards the value of listening, engagement, and a co-creational approach over instrumental message-dissemination within democratic societies. It highlights the complexity of designing and implementing communication messages, emphasising the need to be responsive to the respective contexts – particularly where there is a high level of uncertainty.

While the study demonstrates differences between the production and consumption of messages, regulation emerged as the most compelling one of the five moments in the circuit of culture. Regulation pre-imposes limitations due to constitutional, geographical, and structural requirements. It highlights multiple, often conflicting priorities and voices that affect production and consumption. Whilst New Zealand’s size and centralised political system enabled the development and consequent promotion of a ‘team of 5 million’, Australia’s dispersed decision-making model added complexity that resulted in misunderstandings and increased competition between voices seeking to establish themselves as the most compelling ones. The resulting jostling for power led to duplication, mixed messages and an ‘us versus them’ culture, as opposed to the nurturing of a coherent ‘team’ approach. Contrary to New Zealand, Australia effectively turned itself into clusters of communication ‘archipelagos’, strengthening a localised sense of belonging to the detriment of a unified national identity.

Conclusion

Based solely on economic and health outcomes, both countries’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have resulted in similar, satisfactory results at the end of the first twelve months. However, applying the circuit of culture provides emic insights into communication responses that these outcomes do not. Importantly, the analysis highlights the absence of a single best practice in managing pandemic-related communication responses. Whilst communicators can certainly learn from others’ approaches, they need to take cognisance of cultural contexts and the regulatory environment (the totality of voices that aim to influence decision-making) when producing messages. Best practice approaches cannot simply be transplanted from one context to another, expecting the same (or similar) outcome(s) or consumption of messages.

Based on the findings of the circuit of culture, New Zealand’s communication response was different to Australia’s, although the outcome appeared to be similar. Certainly, at the time, New Zealand appeared to emerge with a strengthened national identity. This, while Australia’s sense of belonging appeared to become more fragmented and aligned at a state and territory level.

The question remains if the success in keeping COVID-19 at bay during the first twelve months of the global pandemic was largely due to strategic communication choices or the result of geographical advantage, such as the ability to ‘wall’ themselves off from the rest of the world by closing international borders and effectively becoming ‘hermit kingdoms’. For countries with more porous borders, the outcome would have arguably been very different.

As the global community moved to return to a life ‘with’ COVID-19, a question mark hung over whether Australia and New Zealand’s initial responses prepared them for a
re-entry into the global community. Early successes resulted in a lack of urgency to roll out vaccination programmes, leaving the door open for COVID-19 to make its way into the community. At the time of writing, both countries were battling nation-wide outbreaks of the Delta and Omicron variants of COVID-19; the dyke had burst.

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ORCID iDs

Petra Theunissen https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5650-533X
Katharina Wolf https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6740-4478

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