No Need to Know It All: Implications of COVID-19 for Corporate Communication Research

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Research on corporate communications – the strategic use of public language to influence stakeholders – has flourished in recent years, but the COVID-19 pandemic highlights some shortcomings in corporate communication research. Three salient features differentiate pandemic communications from the typical communication setting studied by management scholars. First, the pandemic generated an extreme level of uncertainty, shared by both communicators and listeners. Second, the pandemic created information disorder, disrupting the normal manner of information processing and decision making. Third, the pandemic is characterized by a flood of information that overwhelms listeners. Our study explores these challenges and offers important insights that suggest the reevaluation of some existing assumptions and recommendations is in order.

\textbf{Shared Uncertainty}

Prior research has explored how firms can strategically choose the content of their communications to manage the information asymmetry between insiders and outsiders. Some studies have noted the benefits of withholding information, while others have demonstrated the advantages of obfuscation (e.g., Elsbach, 1994). An implicit assumption in these studies is that uncertainty is primarily a problem for listeners. Communicators are assumed to have superior knowledge, as well as an awareness of what listeners will interpret as good or bad. Thus, information asymmetry is beneficial to communicators.

The pandemic, however, is characterized by an extreme level of uncertainty, shared by both communicators and listeners. What is believed accurate today may well be
discredited tomorrow. Furthermore, when information becomes discredited, it tends to
in turn discredit the source. In this environment, the assumption that communicators
can strategically manage their messages to gain advantage from information asymmetry
becomes questionable. Thus, the pandemic highlights the need to shift our view of cor-
porate communications as a process of sensegiving by communicators and sensemaking
by listeners to a process of joint sensemaking. When uncertainty is shared, selectively
sharing information may engender mistrust and harm communicators’ credibility. In
contrast, using communication as an opportunity to openly and honestly share informa-
tion with listeners to jointly make sense of an uncertain situation may be a more viable
approach.

**Information Disorder**

Messages with nearly identical content can have substantially different effects depending
on the type of language used to construct them. Considering that firm communication
is accessible to multiple stakeholders, scholars have studied how firms can craft their
messages to manage the divergent interests of stakeholders (e.g., König et al., 2018). For
instance, several studies have demonstrated the strategic value of complex and ambigu-
ous language in helping communicators preserve flexibility in organizational settings
(e.g., Sillince and Mueller, 2007).

The extraordinary scale and unusual nature of the COVID-19 pandemic creates new
communication challenges by disrupting the existing, taken-for-granted order in listeners’
information environments. During the pandemic, disinformation (i.e., intentional shar-
ing of false or misleading content), misinformation (i.e., unintentional sharing of false or
misleading content), and malinformation (i.e., intentional reframing of information in
misleading ways) are ubiquitous (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Moreover, such infor-
mation disorder is created when both official and unofficial sources release information
that turns out to be erroneous, misleading, or contradictory. Established, implicit rules
that govern the credibility of information and sources collapse. At the same time, people
demand nonstop information from a variety of sources to keep abreast of a rapidly
evolving situation. The natural result is complexity and confusion. Furthermore, humans
tend to react to complexity with oversimplification. In situations of information disorder,
listeners gravitate toward simple and clear communication that is easy to process.

**Information Overload**

In addition to content (i.e., the message) and composition (i.e., the language used), schol-
ars have studied the delivery aspects of corporate communications (i.e., the presentation
of the message) (e.g., Guo et al., 2020). The conventional wisdom in this literature cau-
tions against the use of repeated delivery in corporate settings, because repetition does
not provide any novel information and often leads to negative reactions.

However, during the pandemic, when people are motivated to seek information from a
wide variety of sources to maintain the sense that they have some control, the flow of in-
formation can easily exceed the cognitive capacity to process it. Combining information
overload with the information disorder we noted above, a key challenge for communica-
tors is ensuring their messages are heard and retained by listeners – essentially, breaking
through all of the noise. Since repetition leads to familiarity and preference, delivering the same message repeatedly is perhaps the best way for communicators to influence their listeners in a chaotic environment. Thus, the pandemic calls for greater attention to the importance of repetition in communication.

Characteristics of Dr. Anthony Fauci’s Communications

Amid all of the hardships created by the pandemic, Dr. Anthony Fauci stands out for his exceptional communication skills. Despite his initial mistake of telling the public facemasks were of marginal benefit in preventing the spread of COVID-19, Dr. Fauci managed to maintain and enhance his credibility, becoming one of the most trusted and influential communicators about coronavirus. In fact, he was recently awarded the prestigious Dan David Prize in recognition of his communication skills and efforts. We analyzed 338 speeches by Dr. Fauci between February 2020 and January 2021, including the White House Coronavirus Task Force briefings and his interviews on various TV shows and livestreamed events. Our analysis uncovered three distinguishing features of his communications: precision, clarity, and repetition.

First, Dr. Fauci communicates precisely. He is transparent about what he knows and what he doesn’t know. In matters he knows, he gives exact and definite answers. In matters where he is uncertain, he admits his lack of knowledge. ‘We don’t have enough information now’ and ‘I can’t quantify it for you accurately now’ are some example statements. He often refuses to comment or draw conclusions on issues for which rigorous evidence is lacking. For instance, when asked about the promise of hydroxychloroquine as a prophylaxis against COVID-19, he said, ‘The evidence that you’re talking about is anecdotal. It was not done in a controlled clinical trial, so you really can’t make any definitive statement about it’. Hence, we noted that Dr. Fauci used a relatively large number of negative words. In fact, about 1.2 per cent of the words he used are negative, which is an average of 14 negative words per talk. That number is three standard deviations above the mean number of negative words used by other speakers at the same briefings (0.7 per cent). We believe this is attributable to his precise acknowledgment and qualification of what is not known.

Second, Dr. Fauci communicates clearly, using direct language and breaking complex topics into understandable components. Our analysis revealed that Dr. Fauci used language that requires only 9 years of formal education to understand (equivalent to high school students). In contrast, others on the Coronavirus Task Force used language that requires 12 years of education to understand. For example, when talking about ‘aerosol transmission’, he transformed this technical term into a sentence of short and easy-to-understand words: ‘Aerosol means that it can stay in the air for a period of time because it’s in a droplet that’s very small and doesn’t go down’. Thus, the amount of cognitive effort required to understand Dr. Fauci’s speeches is low relative to his task force colleagues.

Last but not least, Dr. Fauci frequently repeats his messages. Phrases such as ‘I’ve said many times, and I’ll repeat it’ and ‘I think it’s worth reiterating’ occur over and over in his speeches. In fact, the word ‘repeat’ occurred a total of 21 times in his speeches in the White House briefings alone. For instance, on 16 March 2020 he introduced a two-pillar approach to containing the pandemic. He then repeated the two pillars of containment on 21 March, 31 March, 4 April, and so on. Additionally, to emphasize the importance

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of mitigation, he stated: ‘So if we really want to make sure that we don’t have these kinds of rebounds that we’re worried about, it’s mitigation, mitigation, and mitigation. That’s the answer’. Additionally, his answer to the immediate next question was as follows: ‘It’s the same thing. It’s mitigation, mitigation, mitigation’. In two sentences, using a total of 36 words, he mentioned mitigation six times.

**Future Research Directions**

Although the COVID-19 outbreak represents a rare and extreme event, executives do encounter situations characterized by widespread uncertainty and information disorder and overload, such as global slowdowns and industry downturns. Lessons learned from COVID-19 suggest four future directions for corporate communication research.

First, the pandemic highlights the need to revisit the implicit assumption in the corporate communication literature that only listeners face uncertainty. In fact, many corporate communication settings involve significant uncertainty on the part of the organization (the speaker). Specifically, future research might consider exploring the following questions: When uncertainty is shared, what factors influence communicators’ choice of communication content (i.e., what to say and not to say)? How do listeners evaluate the credibility of communicated messages? What are the benefits and costs of being forthcoming in communication? Can communicators regain credibility after a miscommunication, and if so, how? How do communicators manage their own credibility in dynamic and uncertain contexts?

Second, the pandemic underscores the importance of studying the competition between different messages and communicators. Prior research has largely taken the perspective of communicators by focusing on how to convey the right message to audiences. In uncertain times, stakeholders may take advantage of a wide variety of information sources. We encourage scholars to shift their perspectives from communicators to listeners by exploring the conditions that shape listeners’ choices between different information sources (e.g., corporate press releases, media reports, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other blogs and podcasts) and opinion leaders (e.g., executives, analysts, journalists, activist investors), and why they put faith in some messages (and some messengers) but not others. In particular, when the narratives offered by alternative sources diverge, future research could explore how listeners choose which messages to believe.

Third, the pandemic has highlighted an advantage of repetition in corporate communications that has often been neglected in prior research. As an increasing number of executives use social media (e.g., Twitter, Clubhouse) to communicate, future research could explore the extent to which executives use these alternative communication channels to repeat their message delivered through more traditional communication channels (e.g., earnings conference calls), or whether they send different messages through different channels. Accordingly, a promising avenue for future research would be to examine how different stakeholder groups react to consistency or inconsistency in corporate communications across different channels.

Last but not least, we believe the pandemic has revealed the importance of viewing corporate communications from a contingency perspective. Many of the findings from our study are contingent upon the settings we used to analyze the speakers. For example,
some researchers have documented the value of vague language when firms are experiencing uncertain periods, such as strategic change. Still others have documented the danger of vague language because it signals a firm’s vulnerability to its rivals (e.g., Guo et al., 2020). We encourage ongoing research to systematically study the specific conditions under which corporate communications influence stakeholders.

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