PSU Technical Communication Topics

Crisis Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

What is Crisis Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

New disease outbreaks are often characterized by emergent and changing information that in turn requires technical communicators to spend time and effort to translate complex, sometimes ambiguous, or contradictory information to the public. The recent COVID-19 outbreak offered a case study to identify different types of uncertainty and established an exigence in creating a more inclusive framework for crisis communication. [2] (https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v13i01.3207)

The outbreak revealed several barriers to effective risk communication and implicated the need for a paradigm shift in how governments and other institutions communicate with the public. At the forefront of this shift are risk communicators, or technical communicators who serve as advocates for and communicate risk to the public. These communicators, along with public health experts and politicians at the frontlines, must be prepared to translate critical health statistics and research across all audiences.

People interviewed by journalists after receiving coronavirus vaccines at the Tsukiji Vaccination Center on June 8, 2021 in Tokyo, Japan. [1] (https://institute.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/inline-images/4.%20GettyImages-1322425920.jpg)

Overview

Crisis communication is an important type of risk communication in which there are high levels of hazard and outrage amongst the public majority, leading to upset and worry that has the potential to escalate into denial, terror, or depression.

Key strategies include:

1. Avoiding over-reassurance
2. Sharing dilemmas
3. Being human and empathic
4. Providing things to do
5. Acknowledging uncertainty

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Crisis communication makes heavy use of mass media. In a crisis like the pandemic, everyone has a stake and is paying attention to what is posted. One challenge in this use of media is that public relations officials may not be good at crisis communication, and the stress of the crisis itself acts as another barrier to effective communication. [3] (https://www.psandman.com/col/4kind-1.htm)

Factors Affecting Risk Perception

Some people were concerned, others were not concerned at all. Scared of some things that present no risk or hazard to them at all, but aren't scared of things that are a danger to them. This disconnect between people's fear and the real objective threat something poses is a challenge to technical communication.

Different factors affect one's ability to analyze risk and make informed decisions, therefore it cannot be assumed that everyone will internalize messages the same way and communicators must proactively consider these differing perceptions and cognitive biases to craft effective and inclusive messages. [4] (https://doi.org/10.55177/tc131231)

Social:

- Communities with overcrowded housing and large families
- Children home from schools
- Inadequate or limited access to healthcare
- Inadequate access to preventative resources (i.e. soap, water, face masks, hand sanitizer, etc.)
- Cultural and social norms related to communal eating; religious/spiritual practices of communal prayer services
- Pre-existing chronic health conditions are significantly more susceptible

Political:

- Political and public pressures for immediate answers and explanations led to the spread of prematurely false information about the pandemic; the rush to solutions can influence the interpretation of technical information
- Positions among experts and national public health agencies regarding the interpretation of medical data and early-stage clinical vaccine trials aimed at the COVID-19 outbreak can be polarizing.

Economic:

- Effects have disproportionally fallen on vulnerable populations with socioeconomic disadvantages
- Several socio-contextual risk factors, eg, poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, lack of health-care access, insecure housing, racial segregation, health insurance [2] (https://doi.org/10.1002/ieam.4312)

Identifying Misinformation during the COVID-19 Infodemic

Misinformation stems from an uncertain or outraged public. Rumors and stigma are important

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popular news media networks. Interactions through media enable the dissemination of–and shape engagement around controversial content, leading to virtual echo chambers. [5] (https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2018/11/08/designing-outrage-programming-discord-a-critical-interface-analysis-of-facebook-as-a-campaign-technology/)

Types of content, values, and logic are rewarded over others. There are distinct affective, temporal, and political consequences to this in that it impacts how users interact with the world around them. Clearly, in times of crisis when dealing with such polarizing issues, people need background information to make informed decisions. The very design of social media platforms makes it easy not to make informed decisions. [5] (https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2018/11/08/designing-outrage-programming-discord-a-critical-interface-analysis-of-facebook-as-a-campaign-technology/)

Social media's various structural interfaces allow for a sort of temporal dissonance, or as one NBC journalist described it, "disaster fatigue" or "headline stress disorder". This is caused through the speeding up of information consumption in superficial and cursory ways by decontextualizing conversations, thus encouraging superficial engagement and decontextualized relationships and deepening polarization around issues like the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] (https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/what-headline-stress-disorder-do-you-have-it-ncna830141)

Motivations for creating, sharing, and amplifying rumors may vary from something as simple as trying to be helpful to the need to feel a sense of control in stressful times, wanting to position oneself as in the know, or being intentionally misleading. The ability to accrue likes and other reactions also impacts decisions made in posting content. This incites sensationalism, controversy, drama, feelings of anxiety, fear, and suspicion over a healthy level of curiosity, empathy, understanding, or kindness that is crucial to establishing a framework of crisis communication.

Countering Misinformation

Through community engagement, you can advance COVID-19 preparedness, planning, and response. A process of working collaboratively with groups of ppl affiliated by geographical proximity of special interests concerning issues affecting their well-being. Assisted by public health & community partners, may include workers in healthcare facilities, pharmacies, educational institutions, local businesses, organizations, and community members who may be at high risk. [7] (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3QY24T0x08)

In addition to community engagement, another key to inclusive and effective crisis communication is remembering that language matters. Technical communicators must be careful of the language used in the future outbreaks or crisis situations like COVID-19, as well as ensure they are observing and responding to the language they hear so that they are not exacerbating, but rather addressing, the stigma they observe. Researchers from Johns Hopkins Center for Communications suggest the following methods for technical communicators to combat misinformation:

1. Accelerating fact-based information
2. Promoting recovery stories through media, websites, hotlines and community events
3. Showcasing positive deviance individuals and communities of unaffected groups interacting with

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4. Creating opportunities for interaction to communicate factual information about the disease [7] (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3QY24T0x08)

Studies like Baniya and Chen show how taking a rhetorical analysis approach can be beneficial to understanding how to communicate to vulnerable populations. As Non-Western scholars, they found it important to avoid the traditional approach to searching for ethos, logos, and pathos. Given the political and ideological context of COVID-19, focusing on the non-Western perspectives of storytelling was essential to this study.

The infodemic of conspiracy theories and fake news influenced local policymaking about how to respond to the virus. It also worked to heighten discrimination and social stigma that linked the disease to the Asia diaspora and African communities in China. [8] (https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2021/10/27/experiencing-a-global-pandemic-the-power-of-public-storytelling-as-antenarrative-in-crisis-communication/%5D)

Non-westernized methods of crisis communication and management center around challenging government norms and regulations, emphasizing community-based collective actions, and prioritizing marginalized populations' needs. For their research, they selected population samples from the first few weeks and the first few months after the initial outbreak to capture specific features of the experiences of COVID-19, relief efforts, community building, and activism.

For the analysis of their data, they used a grounded theory approach to identify trends. This revealed 4 different key functions of these storytelling practices: critical storytelling and reflections, building collective knowledge, developing solidarity, and establishing coalitional spaces. [8] (https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2021/10/27/experiencing-a-global-pandemic-the-power-of-public-storytelling-as-antenarrative-in-crisis-communication/%5D)

See Also

Risk Communication

Accessibility

Audience Analysis

Cognitive Load Theory

Ethics

Rhetorical Theory

References

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