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SPECIALTY SECTION
This article was submitted to
Media Governance and the Public
Sphere,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

RECEIVED 22 July 2022
ACCEPTED 05 August 2022
PUBLISHED 24 August 2022

CITATION
Newsom VA, Lengel L, Birzescu A and
Vukasovich C (2022) Editorial: Strategic
narratives in political and crisis
communication: Responses to
COVID-19.
Front. Commun. 7:1000359.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.1000359

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Editorial: Strategic narratives in political and crisis communication: Responses to COVID-19

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KEYWORDS

agenda setting, COVID-19, health inequities, misinformation and disinformation, pandemic response, polarization, political and government communication, public health literacy

Editorial on the Research Topic

[Strategic narratives in political and crisis communication: Responses to COVID-19](#)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global health emergency of unprecedented proportions, generating need for clearly articulated, continuously updated, widely available information. Much communication about the pandemic, however, has proven to be problematic, unevenly disseminated and, due to political and economic concerns, often inaccurate. Many strategic political narratives have been at odds with messaging recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other leading public health authorities, creating a conflict of interest with direct impacts on public message consumption and public health literacy. Thus, effective health communication strategies are critical, particularly at the various times when the virus spread was reaching its peak. Increased implementation of effective health communication strategies by media, and public health, governmental, and other organizations is vital.

The substantial, global, and ongoing loss of life has required a need for political response and action through clear, detailed messaging to global constituencies. Employment, economic stability, supply-chain sustainability, and systemic biases and oppressions have joined public health as core messaging aspects of the pandemic era. The rhetoric surrounding the pandemic and its multiple variables has thus been unevenly produced, disseminated, and consumed.

Political and economic concerns have impacted the messaging goals of global authorities. Political messaging and rhetoric have been influenced by existing strategic narratives promoted by national, state, and provincial government leaders, political agencies, and influential interest groups. In many cases, these narratives are in direct opposition with those of the scientific community, leading to ongoing tensions that not only impact on public messaging, but the acceptance or rejection of scientific and medical expertise.

Prior to the pandemic era there existed a lack of interdisciplinary research and focus on the communication practices influencing the construction and maintenance of these strategic narratives, and a paucity of research on the impact of global crises on existing narratives and strategic constructs. Our special topic provides a core set of analyses to fill this gap. Further, the authors explore the interaction between political and economic narratives and narratives rooted in health communication policies and procedures, and on conflicting measures and rhetorics used from within different political and ideological epistemologies.

“*Strategic narratives in political and crisis communication: Responses to COVID-19*” is a ground-breaking collection that we conceptualized in February 2020, and for which we began soliciting materials on March 15, 2020, during the very first week of the pandemic. At the time there were only a handful of publications from the epidemiological, clinical, and virological fields about the emerging massive health crisis and, of course, none analyzing the economic, political and cultural crises to follow after the first weeks of the pandemic.

Building on [Burke’s \(1969\)](#) concept of narrative structure, [Roselle et al. \(2014\)](#) describe strategic narratives as a means of illustrating how actors, setting, conflict, and resolution are used to appeal to international, national, and issues-focused constituencies in each of these levels. Strategic narratives are stories crafted to generate specific audience reaction ([Archetti, 2017](#)). These narratives focus on particular audiences and audience characteristics and are structured based on the notion that stories are more persuasive than arguments ([Fisher, 1984](#)). [Roselle et al. \(2014\)](#) identify three levels of strategic narratives that function as soft power: International System Narratives, National Narratives, and Issue Narratives. International system narratives “describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works” (p. 76) on an international level. National or agency-based narratives are designed to tell the story of a nation or state agency, highlighting values and goals viewed as intrinsic to a nationalistic/centric worldview. Such narratives are generated both by the nation or agency in question, and by other nations and agencies promoting oppositional ideals.

Issue narratives are designed to promote policies and illustrate how those policies should be implemented. [Roselle et al. \(2014\)](#) explain:

An issue narrative of a specific conflict can be connected to a national narrative that characterizes a certain nation involved as traditionally intransigent or cooperative. Alternatively, it could be connected to a system narrative concerning broad power struggles and rivalry between great powers, regions or alliances. In this way, expectations of likely behavior and outcomes can be generated, expectations that may feed into decision-making and the expression of support for certain courses of action. (p. 79–80)

Issues narratives often function at the inter-agency level, particularly in relation to global messaging efforts. They also interact with international system narratives and national narratives. Issue narratives are also used by activists and propagandists to promote ideological objectives both within and counter to national and international narratives ([Jenkins, 2015](#)).

Pandemic narratives function at all three levels: they are international system narratives that are reified at the national and issue levels. They are designed to build audience support for and adherence to the recommended mitigation measures designed by public health authorities. Contributing authors [Dagnall et al.](#) argue that ideal “strong, coherent official strategic health narratives should provide pertinent advice, clear rules, and convey correct vital information” (para. 7). However, for these messages to be effective, they must also be consumed. This is a challenge when competing narratives are present. [Dagnall et al.](#) explain, “it is crucial that those delivering and those receiving the message come together under the umbrella of shared group membership” (para. 8) and that “for our public leaders to be trusted and effective” (para. 8) the message must be perceived as coming from an authority that audiences perceive as belonging to their culture, perspective, and shared narrative history.

Our aim was, and continues to be, to build a community of esteemed researchers, analysts, peer reviewers, and readers to engage in an ongoing dialogue on the most profound phenomenon the contemporary world has seen and continues to experience. In particular, we seek to encourage exploration and critique of the communicative, sociological, and public health concerns at the center of pandemic mitigation efforts and outreach. Our aim is also to continue this dialogue as new developments emerge in the pandemic and to envision new ideas and research directions in the near and distant future.

Contributing authors to *Strategic Narratives in Political and Crisis Communication* come from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom. These internationally recognized researchers are affiliated with some of the most prestigious institutions in the world including, but not limited to, the

World Health Organization, the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University, the Directorate General for Food and Health of the European Commission in Brussels, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Laxenburg, Austria, the Department of Public Health Analysis and Data Management of the Public Health Agency of Sweden, Imperial College London, University of Cambridge, Stanford University, and Harvard Medical School.

In addition, the special topic is a robust and unique collection of research articles, policy briefs, mini review articles, community case studies, opinion articles, and perspective articles. In line with the values espoused by *Frontiers.org*, our collection thus encourages intersectional and interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation. Additionally, this collection of diverse works illustrates a need for intellectual collaboration at the intersections of multiple academic and practical research programs in relation to public health communication. The interdisciplinary approaches included in this collection offer what contributing researcher (Marta Lukacovic), in her study, “Wars” on COVID-19 in Slovakia, Russia, and the United States: Securitized Framing and Reframing of Political and Media Communication Around the Pandemic, identifies as “comprehensive tools” to aid in understanding the COVID-19 pandemic as “a complex maze of phenomena” (para. 2). Such interdisciplinarity is required to interrogate one of the complex constellations of problems in contemporary history.

Further, *Strategic Narratives in Political and Crisis Communication* highlights an emerging discipline-based and interdisciplinary intersectionality necessary to analyzing and constructing effective messaging responsive to developing and ongoing systemic inequities, political polarizations, religious, ideological, and philosophical barriers, and fiscal disruptors. It is imperative that voices from within and across our multiple disciplinary and region-based spans are collectively shared, addressed, and interconnected in order to establish effective messaging strategies. This interconnectivity is also key to establishing and improving strategically-placed advocacy narratives within larger global messaging frameworks.

Our result is one of the most interdisciplinary collections of studies regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and related crises. The range of interdisciplinary areas of expertise emerge from public health to political science to economics to ethnic studies. Researchers in this collection investigate political influence in relation to pandemic messaging, analyses of messaging techniques, and how different behavioral patterns, as well as access and freedom to engage in such behavioral patterns have influenced pandemic exposure and transmission rates. Other researchers in the collection critique surveillance systems, securitization, policy making, institutional actions, organizational level responses to the public health crisis, health systems reforms, epidemiologic risk assessments, and the efficacy of lockdown measures against the spread of the disease.

The collection also includes studies, opinions, and warnings regarding the pluralities of health concerns exacerbated by the pandemic, conflicts between public health standards and social justice efforts, impacts on the medical community, and the problems of misinformation and polarization in audience response.

The articles in “*Strategic narratives in political and crisis communication: Responses to COVID-19*” are grouped into three categories; (1) Public Health Policy as Strategic Narrative, (2) War Metaphors: Crisis Risk and Security, and (3) Compassion for Lived Experience in the Face of Polarizations and Structural Inequities.

Public health policy as strategic narrative

Given the vast attention to and interest in the pandemic and the need for thorough analysis of the risk perceptions and communication about SARS-CoV-2, this collection of work analyses the political and politicized discourses surrounding COVID-19. The misperceptions of risk have, in some cases, led to increased fatalities and pathogenic exposure. The choices made by heads of state and other political leaders, public health agencies, media pundits and others are rooted in existing strategic narratives, i.e., in a type of metanarrative aimed at driving public opinion and garnering support for political institutions, actions, policy, and specialized political interests.

Articles in this collection address key foci surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and associated crises. For instance, Favi et al., considers the governmental responses to COVID-19, particularly how these responses have been criticized by healthcare professionals, media organizations, and broader publics, as well as how they have been addressed acrimoniously in political debate. The authors argue “messaging variables and constituent response, lack of transparency on scientific advice and political choices associated with misinformation regarding the magnitude of the pandemic and the actual resources of the national healthcare provider, deserve scientific attention” (para. 20). Further, Favi et al. note, “the way the pandemic-related messaging is conceptualized, packaged, and presented to the citizens, and the actual possibility of the people to understand and cope with scientific and technical information” (para. 24).

A number of articles and discussions in this collection focus on the need to fully understand the pandemic in order to, for instance, implement effective public health policies and protocols for the effectivity of lockdown procedures (Kharroubi and Saleh), establish more comprehensive management measures of pandemic infectious disease control and patient care (Zhou Y. et al.), develop innovative disease screening strategies (Mirjalali et al.), and address the mitigation of healthcare system collapse (Monllor et al.). Authors also analyze the culture-bound, ideological

construction of political discourse surrounding pandemic response (Allgayer and Kanemoto). These contributions to our collection all reflect how such diverse aspects of pandemic knowledge impact the construction of international systems, national, and issue-based strategic narratives.

Media discourses and information dissemination are also the focus of several studies in this collection. For instance, Frissen et al. interrogate how media audiences differ in public health perceptions and behaviors, and how media shape “socio-economic and socio-psychological perceptions toward the health crisis” (para. 27). Rassouli et al. analyze information transparency and political-economic and cultural aspects of the pandemic. Zhou W. et al. critique the accuracy and timeliness of knowledge dissemination about disease spread, and the lack of knowledge dissemination to marginalized groups.

Studies also focus on the generation of institutional responses to the pandemic. For instance, Biswakarma et al. analyze organizational level responses to COVID-19. Lee investigates national and international knowledge transmission and public-private sector collaboration to generate effective infectious disease responses.

Finally, Barber and Mostajo-Radji explore “the power of non-traditional forms of public health intervention” (para. 10). Ussai et al. address death and dignity during COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of not only safe, but also dignified and culturally sensitive burial procedures of deceased persons with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. Ussai et al. argue, “the dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be always respected and protected. Among all the threats, COVID-19...revealed the fragility of human beings under enforced isolation and, for the first time, the painful deprivation of families to accompany their loved ones to the last farewell” (para. 21). These personal narratives become absorbed into issue-based strategic narratives and become elements that simultaneously reinforce and contrast with national and international systems narratives.

War metaphors: Crisis, risk, security

Strategic narratives drive political messaging and propaganda, both by state agencies and by ideological actors. Such narratives are often applied in the context of war and security threats to legitimize military or paramilitary action; in the pandemic era this has expanded into threats about both the virus itself, and virus response measures. Discussions of the impact of COVID-19 have included references to government action that bear the characteristics of war-time discourse and rabble-rousing. In many cases, politicians have also laid claim to wartime labels in order to justify their policy directives. These claims echo historical patterns associated with national and global crises, ranging from pandemics to economic collapse.

Many of the discussions of COVID-19 public health management center around risk assessment strategies, from

institutional responses to the perceived risk of the pandemic, to local, regional, and national risk management strategies. Biosurveillance, or the mechanisms by which state agencies monitor and counter biological threats, is understood within the public health community as a necessary tool to provide early warnings, “monitoring and evaluation of the impact of an intervention” (World Health Organization, n.d., para. 4) and provide agenda-setting guidance. A number of the studies, perspectives, and opinion pieces in our collection center on how biosurveillance has been balanced with other political and public health priorities throughout the crisis.

Notably, the use of “War Metaphors” and military rhetorics is a common practice in dealing with biological and other security threats. Seixas, for instance, investigates how these rhetorical constructs functioned within early pandemic response measures. In another of the articles in our collection, Lukacovic argues, “COVID-19 exemplifies a far reaching and multidimensional type of global emergency, where communication plays an important role. The spectrum of communication-related concerns ranges from a type of deliberate strategic messaging by governmental authorities to an ‘infodemic’ of misinformation that spreads online” (para. 1). In another study, Lankford et al. investigate how the collection of pandemic intelligence exists as a form of “biodefense” strategies implemented by intelligence agencies and can be impacted by political gamesmanship.

Several researchers in our collection highlight how biodefense strategies are then adapted into disease control policies and processes. Fan et al. and Paroni et al., for example, outline how national health agencies sought to collect risk management data and apply that to controlling the spread of the pandemic in China and Italy, respectively. Researchers also investigate how state and public health agencies sought to balance the immediate biosurveillance recommendations about the biological threat of the pandemic with other health and political risks. Ranieri and Porat et al. each investigate how public health agencies sought to balance physical and mental health factors, respectively, with lockdown and other recommended pandemic response measures. Similarly, Cen et al. and Benzion et al. investigate risk management decision-making related to reopening schools in China and the US, respectively. All of these works focus on how risk-management decisions must maintain a balance between political necessity and public health within strategic narrative construction.

Compassion for lived experience in the face of polarisations and structural inequities

Building on the notion of biosurveillance discussed in the last section, a number of the offerings in our collection contrast this public health mechanism with Foucault’s (1976) critiques of biopower. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare a variety

of global structural and systemic inequities, many of which further highlighted ongoing global social and anti-hegemonic movements. The relationship between biopower, hegemonic agency, and surveillance in relation to pandemic response narratives grounds the analyses presented by a number of our authors.

There is ample evidence that marginalized and vulnerable communities have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and associated economic and other crises (Lengel and Newsom, 2022). Building on emerging research and reports from policy making bodies and healthcare organizations, this collection gives further evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities and vulnerabilities. For example, in her article, “Covid-19 as a Social Crisis and Justice Challenge for Cities,” Haase investigates multiple overlapping debates that impact cities as they seek to prioritize public health measures without disrupting needed social support and economic structures as a “social justice” challenge (para. 18). Similarly, Ganesh et al. ask “whose lives do we threaten along with ‘the curve?’” in their investigation of the impacts of lockdown measures.

The impact of COVID-19 on individuals and their personal experiences is core to several of the pieces in this collection. For example, Wen et al. examine the impact of the pandemic on Nurses, a much needed investigation of affect and first responders. Articles in the collection also address the impact of the stress of COVID-19 on mental health. For instance, Mheidly et al. analyze how telecommunication during the pandemic quarantine and lockdown implementation exacerbated other stressors leading to exhaustion and burnout. Disenfranchised individuals are also investigated, as in Montenegro’s discussion of incarcerated students impacted by the pandemic.

Finally, the works analyze how messages focused on public health issues are impaired by competing global narratives. Pereira et al. investigate Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of COVID-19 and how social media became a primary mechanism for the development and spread of counternarratives. Drinkwater et al. examine how conspiracy theories flourished during the pandemic because of a lack of consistent, transparent, messaging across political divides. Malinverni and Brigagao investigate how scientific denialism has influenced the consumption of public health information in Brazil. Similarly, Januraga and Harjana consider how the impacts of misinformation, disinformation, and political and ideological biases could be mitigated by better public access to public health data in India. Significantly, our collective authors argue that such transparency could help improve some of the structural inequities that influenced resistance to public health measures. For example, Dagnall et al. explain how government agencies have “placed a disproportionate weight on the scientific assessments of infection modelers” and have not adequately presented a transparent, digestible argument for public consumption (para. 23).

The future of strategic narratives in political and crisis communication

The pandemic remains an unprecedented worldwide health emergency; and competing global rhetorics and narratives of the virus complicate and exacerbate response and alleviation. The pandemic is not over, and even as we move toward an eventual endemic state, we must continually maintain and expand mitigation efforts. Vaccination rates have somewhat stagnated, new and more virulent variants continue to expand the health concerns, and so-called long COVID poses ongoing challenges. As we continue to address the unrelenting impacts of the pandemic, we must investigate the intersections of culture and public health, such as preservation of dignity for those who were claimed by the pandemic (Ussai et al.), the mobilizing power of strategic narratives about COVID-19 (Eckenberg et al.) and the further marginalization of ethnic minorities and other disempowered groups through information gaps about COVID-19 (Zhou W. et al.). We must also continue to determine how and what strategic narratives can help to improve the reception of mitigation efforts, and how those can best be designed to address the structural inequities that underpin much of the resistance efforts.

We must also consider the intersectional and multiplicities of the pandemic as the struggle is compounded by the war in Ukraine and violent conflict around the globe, ongoing supply-chain issues, economic instabilities, and political upheaval that all present competing strategic narratives. Pandemic messaging is activism that must be embodied, and thereby reactive to embodied realities (Lengel and Newsom, 2022). Thus, as our authors recommend, and as others engaging in the collective academic research process describe, we must seek to construct clear, direct strategic public health messages that meet two ideals: (1) They must reflect the lived experiences of the full range of audiences being addressed (see Bodenheimer and Leidenberger, 2020; Davis and Lohm, 2020; Ogden, 2020; Chang, 2021; Dagnall et al.; Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021), and (2) they must decolonise and dismantle the hegemonic cores of the language within which messages are constructed and the processes by which those messages are disseminated (see Kuhn et al., 2020; Elers et al., 2021; Kapoor; Carter Olson et al., 2022). In both of these ideals, we must ensure that strategic pandemic messaging centers in compassion.

This collection serves as a form of information activism intended to meet these calls. It is designed to enhance clarity of messaging and make the information open and free to all. While our audience is, by nature, predominantly academic, we are the voices that can serve our multiple publics by disseminating the knowledge produced within this important interdisciplinary collection of studies on this tremendously important subject area of the COVID-19 pandemic and related crises.

Author contributions

VN, LL, AB, and CV jointly drafted and approved the final manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships

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