

Crisis Communication Amid COVID-19: Germany's scientific approach

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Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis is believed to be one of the greatest challenges the world has faced in its entire history. This health crisis has been testing crisis communication skills of political leaders and their advisors. Saving lives in such a large-scale crisis is in many respects about how promptly, thoroughly, and effectively the government responds to the threat. The Rhetorical arena theory affirms that different actors promote different outlooks on how to deal with a crisis, so amid such a health crisis it seems to be in government's interest to both secure its dominance in creating a general discourse and broadcast information that does not go against scientific reasoning. The German case has shown how crisis communication can be effective thanks to collective effort of the government and the science community. This paper mainly focuses on outlining the role of science communication in the framework of Germany's initial response to Covid-19, which might have been the reason for a significant leap in the Chancellor's approval ratings, as well as German's lowest contamination and mortality rates in Europe overall.

Key words: communication, crisis, crisis communication, Covid-19, science community, science communication, Germany.

Main body

“Crisis exists when the media are knocking at your door and you would rather they were not” (Heath, Millar, 2013). The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that keeps affecting greatly each country has become a clear evidence of how important it is for a government to handle properly any public challenge, especially such a large-scale crisis as the pandemic. The case has also proved that governments should

follow a range of certain rules suggested by the crisis communication theory, as they determine to some extent the perception of a government itself and its reputation, let alone social and economic situation in the country for the years to come.

Crisis has two dimensions: technical, or managerial, and communication (Heath, Millar, 2013). The first dimension implies concrete measures undertaken to combat the threat, while the second one provides answer to the following questions: what message needs to be transmitted to stakeholders and how to do it in the most effective way?

Crisis communication is an essential phase in the whole process of crisis management, which can be generally defined as the exchange of information that occurs within and between authorities, organizations, media and interested individuals, and groups, before, during and after a crisis (Crisis Communication Handbook, 2003). More specifically, crisis communication implies a series of communication events that mainly focus on promoting a certain discourse that would reduce the amount of negative effects of a threat and at least preserve a good image of an organization faced by a challenge. When it comes to a government, crisis communication is aimed at diminishing the level of public uncertainty, raising awareness of a crisis and especially its potential outcomes among citizens and imposing patterns of behavior that would contribute to combatting the threat. The way government responses to a crisis affects its main assets, including credibility and public trust.

One of the core rules of crisis communication is that it demands quick and explicit responses that would set the record straight and consequently prevent the population from panicking. It is of particular importance to respond rapidly under such conditions like during a health crisis when the situation is changing very quickly and every second counts. If government does not provide the answers and explications that society is looking for, panic inevitably sets in. In other words, the absence of official communication on behalf of authorities will necessarily lead to

general confusion, rumors and speculations in mass media and on the net, which will then pose real challenges for government bodies not only in meeting the challenge that the threat poses, but also in preserving its own image.

According to a rather new crisis communication theory developed by Scandinavian scientists called rhetorical arena theory (RAT), several communication channels, or subarenas, are engaged in creating a discourse within crisis communication. These arenas may not apparently comply with one another's content and may be guided by different logics. Every actor representing one of these subarenas has its own perception of a crisis, its nature, the extent of the threat and might offer different approaches to managing it. Everyone is a decisionmaker and a whistleblower during a crisis, especially in the digital era, when anyone can disseminate and share information, both true and false. Authorities must, therefore, be well informed of different actors, perceptions and knowledge of different processes and situations.

In terms of government crisis communication during the pandemic, one can divide the whole national communication arena into 4 main public subarenas, including official governmental channels that, in their turn, include national level and local ones, mass media, social media and scientific community as an independent actor that promotes its agenda via various channels.

To succeed in promoting its agenda and imposing certain patterns of behavior to combat the virus, government should take a proactive stand and benefit from each communication channel at its disposal. The main problems that it faces are 1) relatively wide-spread misbelief in the urgency of the threat (every country has witnessed movements of citizens who argued that the threat of the pandemic is exaggerated and stood against lockdowns and other basic restrictions such as wearing masks and gloves, and fought vaccines, e.g. "anti-maskers" in the United States or the virus waanzin movement in the Netherlands and elsewhere); 2) public anxiety due to increasing state of uncertainty, and 3) disinformation. Government must, therefore, overcome any public speculation and deal with the crisis effectively regardless of confusion in mass media, imposing its own agenda and, in

doing so, creating clear and comprehensible frameworks of treating the crisis and conduct under existing circumstances.

Students in crisis communication have now started to examine how Covid-19 was and still is being tackled in different countries that have been hit hard by the virus. What looks certain is that among all European countries it is Germany that has the most successfully responded to the threat, with the lowest contamination and mortality rates in Europe, in contrast with its closest neighbor, similar in size and comparable in terms of wealth, France. As of November 22 when she marked her fifteenth year in power, the German chancellor Angela Merkel has seen her approval rate boost to 74% which is even higher when in 2005, when she was first elected chancellor. This leap in the chancellor's popularity can be explained by her brilliant crisis management during the pandemic, which makes closer examination of the German case all the more relevant.

Besides quick and accurate response of the state in terms of crisis management overall – the system of widespread testing and tracking just like in South Korea, combined with pre-crisis measures taken in early 2020 – Angela Merkel's government has provided us with an example of well-designed crisis communication strategy that helped to prevent the situation from totally getting out of control.

First and foremost, we can point out certain accordance between the official approach of German authorities with the agenda of the national science community. As stated above, the Rhetorical arena theory affirms that different actors promote different perceptions on how to deal with a crisis, so amid health crisis it is in government's interest to both secure its dominance in the process of creating a general discourse and broadcast information that does not go against scientific reasoning. In Germany, the goal has been mostly achieved, largely thanks to the educational background of the chancellor who promoted herself a scientific approach to dealing with the virus.

The scientific approach is perceived among both German citizens and experts as the key factor that helped to build confidence in public policy on managing the crisis (Chazan, 2020). The public regularly heard from chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as from German Minister of Health Jens Spahn who was initially appointed the primary spokesperson, which is a typical and basic move in crisis communication world over, but it is important to note that neither Angela Merkel nor Jens Spahn were the only informants on the situation.

Another non-state “reliable source of orientation for managing the crisis” appeared in Germany – Professor Dr. Christian Drosten from Charité Berlin. It is Dr. Drosten who is believed to be the national voice of the pandemic, with his podcast on the NDR radio station in which he provides information on the nature of the virus, masks, vaccines and other basic details that anyone needs to be aware of. Millions of people listened daily to his scientific podcast. Drosten also became an advisor to politicians, getting the moniker “coronavirus-explainer-in-chief” (Kupferschmidt, 2020), so the decision-making process was and still is supported by expert advice.

In her first in 15 years of being in power address to the nation on March 18, Angela Merkel highlighted – ”everything I tell you about this comes from the Federal Government’s ongoing consultations with the experts from the Robert Koch Institute and other scientists and virologists”, and encouraged the Germans to “act warm-heartedly and rationally”.

This is an important observation to make, taking into consideration the fact that in some countries, including Russia, the opinion of leading virologists was not always taken into account – for example, when authorities required mandatory wearing of gloves in public spaces while some prominent healthcare specialists claimed its counterproductivity. Another example is the United States, where President Trump consistently underplayed the messaging of experts regarding social distancing and wearing of face masks. The delegitimization of experts created space for

alternative and often ill-founded explanations, which, in turn, fueled polarization in society (Boin, Lodge, Luesink, 2020).

Secondly, we can also recall the way the communication between the German government and research centers and laboratories was organized from the very outset. In particular, it started exactly when the first case of contamination was confirmed in Germany's largest state Bavaria in mid-January. Right after that the Robert Koch Institute, one of the leading German federal establishments for applied research and public health, called for launching full-scale testing across the country. The government communicated thereafter to each laboratory the model to carry out tests (Campion, 2020). As a result of recognizing the threat so promptly and taking into consideration the voice of the scientific circles, Germany was virtually the first European country to initiate the fight against the virus across the whole country. Moreover, it was German scientists who presented the first global test for detection of Covid-19, and on January 17, the World Health Organization formalized it.

Thirdly, we should also focus on the image of the chief spokesperson in this crisis communication. As stated above, the function of the main communicator was initially delegated to the German Minister of Health. Yet, as the situation worsened, Angela Merkel took on the main task, leaving her ministers and federal minister-presidents in charge of other practical issues, which was clearly the right decision to make.

She never addressed to the virus as “an enemy that Germany must wage war with”, in contrast with her colleagues, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Trump (Roland, 2020). Merkel preferred a more pragmatic and level-headed approach instead, benefitting from her own scientific background and personal traits.

In her response to the crisis as a whole and when translating her messages to the public, Merkel combined a caring tone of a “Mutti”, as the Germans call her, with an analytical tone of a physician that she is by training. She regularly discusses technical issues in her press briefings and conferences, including how vital correct

behavior amid absence of medical treatments and vaccines is, or the introduction of short-term allowances for affected workers, etc. Merkel has also frequently addressed the public in audio and video podcasts, even when she herself was in quarantine at her home in Berlin, underlining with her own example the significance of the threat and the importance of abiding by implemented restrictions.

When it came to addressing this type of issues, Angela Merkel explained in simple scientific terms why it was necessary to impose strict measures. In particular, she resorted to a mathematical indicator called the basic reproduction number (R_0) that represents the contagiousness of a virus. The video of the chancellor explaining that the national healthcare system would be crushed by July if the reproduction number rose to 1.2 went viral and raised awareness, as well as confidence in lockdowns, among German citizens. This scientific approach to communication was welcomed by the public, resulting in turning the chancellor into the most preferable politician not only in Germany, but also around the globe – from the point of view of her approval rating. Angela Merkel's approval rating is currently higher than her rating just before the pandemic.

She also presented her most simple and appealing traits – openness, firmness, determination, and sincerity. Merkel was one of the few political leaders who regardless of the threat chose to behave like an ordinary citizen when she went shopping, still “observing the required social distancing” (Roland, 2020). The chancellor appealed to the human side of the crisis and personal dimensions of this threat, relying on the trust of the Germans, creating a strong emotional connection and trying at the same time to guide the people by scientific reasoning.

According to Merkel, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis is one of the greatest challenges in her political experience. Yet, she seems to be managing it very well thanks to her style of crisis leadership and the close relation between authorities and science community.

Conclusion

Crisis communication can be characterized by a multi-vocal approach in the framework of the Rhetorical arena theory. Government as the main actor who is responsible for tackling nation-wide issues must not let any contradictions and misunderstandings dominate the general discourse amid crises by promoting its agenda through all channels at its disposal. Moreover, it should cooperate with other influential actors that may contribute to raising awareness of an issue and broadening its support base within public.

When it comes to health crises characterized by a high level of uncertainty, it seems logical that government may benefit from cooperation with science community that, in its turn, tries to impose its own, usually well-reasoned scientifically, perception of a crisis.

Looking back at the crisis communication amid the Covid-19 crisis in Germany, we can state that the scientific approach to crisis communication during the pandemic has proven to be a key to legitimizing strict measures imposed by the government and stabilizing the situation. We can now reaffirm that the implemented restrictions had broad support from the public, with the state governments and the chancellor herself receiving high grades for their actions. Germany is a vivid example of the ability of science to make contribution to politics and society through crisis communication.

Science communication as an essential element of crisis communication coupled with the style of Angela Merkel's leadership during the crisis did not let undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of German's response to Covid-19. Most Germans endorsed the way their governors chose to respond to the threat, answering the call to respect the restrictions and displaying solidarity. In the aftermath, Merkel and her government enjoyed widespread support from the population, which proves that they had chosen the right crisis communication strategy.

Finally, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the possibility for authorities to have a fruitful relation with experts in the decision-making process, as well as raised a range of questions concerning the role of science community in managing political

and social issues in the time of a crisis, that could subsequently be examined much closer.

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