



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Meng, J and Tench, R (2022) Strategic Communication and the Global Pandemic: Leading through Unprecedented Times. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16 (3). pp. 357-363. ISSN 1553-118X DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2075750>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/8862/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0

This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*: Juan Meng & Ralph Tench (2022) Strategic Communication and the Global Pandemic: Leading through Unprecedented Times, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16:3, 357-363, DOI: 10.1080/1553118X.2022.2075750. It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

**Strategic Communication and the Global Pandemic:
Leading through Unprecedented Times**

by

Juan Meng, University of Georgia, USA

Ralph Tench, Leeds Beckett University, UK

Introduction

This special issue has one primary purpose – to stimulate serious scholarly research on strategic communication and its management and execution during more challenging times such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. At a time of great uncertainty when individuals and societies around the world are crying out for solutions to cope with the tremendous ambiguity caused by the pandemic, questions are being asked at different phases related to the variations of communication and strategy from the perspective of strategic communication: What kinds of challenges and opportunities are associated with strategic communication in leading radical and disruptive change caused by this current pandemic and what implications can greater understanding have for future global issues? What is the model of strategic communication that animates the practical capability and confidence in effective management of pandemics and/or other acute risk issues or societal traumas? If there is such a model, does it effectively inform corporate governance, organizational responsiveness, societal engagement, managerial flexibility, and change leadership during and beyond the pandemic from an international perspective? Do the global insights and innovative approaches that have been applied to protect the collective health of modern societies enrich our understanding of the cultural and political boundaries while responding to various needs in an interconnected information world? What

advice can strategic communication scholars give readers in empowering them to establish the rapidly emerging “new normal” by integrating insights and resources from the interdisciplinary perspective?

This special issue of *IJSC*, titled *Strategic Communication and the Global Pandemic*, strives to address these questions. Our view, as editors of this special issue, is that the current state of scholarly research on strategic communication provides a holistic foundation that allows us to explore these questions in the unique context of a global pandemic. Despite strategic communication being “substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity” (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder, 2018, p. 493), more research is needed to further develop our understanding of the body of knowledge when change is inevitable.

Background and rationale for the special issue

There is no doubt that the onset of COVID-19 and its rapidly evolving phases and variations have significantly changed the way we live in the last two years. The prevalence of dis/misinformation as related to the understanding, prevention, and safety guides to the overall problem associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020) has brought along with it a time for reflection on our values, priorities, bonds and purposes. The ongoing and long-lasting impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic such as pandemic-induced restrictions, magnified disparities in resources and information, sharpened learning curves in online communication and technology, exacerbated challenges such as shifting to hybrid work environments, and new but unclear expectations on communication has made the theoretical underpinnings of strategic communication to be particularly important in practice.

While numerous studies related to change leadership have consistently found that effective and timely communication and leadership are crucial to the successful management and

acceptance of any dramatic change (Kool & Van Dierendonck, 2012), past studies of risk communication have largely built on experiences of environmental and natural disasters (Eisenman et al. 2007; Glik, 2007). In these challenging and turbulent times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, more serious research is needed to minimize the gap between purpose and functions in practice that aim to apply strategic communication to goal accomplishment.

The long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges and opportunities (Malecki et al., 2020) it presents in a post-COVID strategic communication social, political, and economic landscape need scholarly attention and investigation. This includes the impact and implications of information overload, trust, transparency, and dis/misinformation in the public arena during health crises (Rossman et al., 2018; Hills, 2019). It also includes the successful implementation of organizational responsiveness, managerial flexibility, and change leadership, as well as the applications of a wide variety of leadership competencies, styles, and initiatives in leading successful change transitions (Magsaysay & Hechanova, 2017). Thus, this special issue will be an extended contribution to work that is taking place across the world in strategic communication about the challenges and opportunities the COVID-19 pandemic brings for the discipline. A decade of research in strategic communication has provided ample evidence that strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of all kinds of organizations, as well as social movements and known individuals in the public sphere (Zerfass et al., 2018). By focusing on the topic of COVID-19, this special issue makes a unique and timely contribution to investigate the role of strategic communication in change management for all kinds of entities during the global pandemic drawn from an international perspective.

Contribution of the special issue

The idea of proposing this special issue was inspired while we were collaborating with an international team of researchers and scholars on the COM-COVID network research project initiated by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) to monitor the institutional communication and the responses of the public in investigated countries (Tench, Meng, & Moreno, 2022). Although the working processes and dynamics of COVID-19 communication varied country by country, we were positively reminded by this global pandemic how interconnected our world is. The importance of the international perspective shall lead the efforts of inventing our way toward new directions in strategic communication research and practice. As we carefully experiment our path to bring ourselves back to our “new normal,” the positive psychological capacities and capital (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004) build a strong theoretical foundation to refresh and rethink the functions of strategic communication in supporting the development of individuals, teams, organizations, communities, governments, and societies during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over 50 initial submissions were received in response to the special issue call, of which, a subset were invited for submission to this special issue and evaluated through *IJSC*'s standard blind peer-review process. Due to the large number of high quality manuscripts submitted, we were faced with many difficult decisions in selecting the final set of nine articles for inclusion. Our ultimate goal in this special issue is to provide a variety of perspectives on different dimensions of strategic communication and the global pandemic, and thereby to convey its multiple approaches, meanings, units of analysis, complexity, and most importantly, its international root.

The special issue is organized into three sections covering many dimensions of strategic communication as related to the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, from how the messages

have been developed and constructed through governmental communication, traditional mass media and social media, to the contingencies that leaders and influencers at various levels need to address in this global novel crisis, to the practical, organizational and societal challenges leaders face, and to how effective public health responses and communication shall be developed. By including authors who represent different research expertise in our discipline, the various sections also correspond to important questions asked earlier that we believe need to be addressed.

The first section, *What to Expect from Government: Strategic Communication in Challenging Times*, includes three contributing articles, which attempt to address this central question: What is the role of governmental communication in a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic? Governmental communication has been at the eye of the storm since the initial phase of the pandemic. Underlying most criticisms of the governmental communication is a common and fundamental assumption: that the significance of governmental communication in protecting individuals, organizations, communities and societies is best assessed by its direct impact on intervention, prevention and stability of the pandemic.

The paper contributed by Dongqing Xu, Jo-Yun Li, and Yeunjae Lee provides an assessment of the role of governmental transparent communication in shaping individuals' cynicism, self-efficacy beliefs and their compliance with containment measures during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. By integrating the impact of media exposure and the influence of political ideology on public perceptions and reactions, they focus on the transparency of governmental communication from a strategic communication perspective. By adopting the perception-based measurement in assessing transparency, they also incorporate individual-level measurement from health behavior change theories to address public cynicism,

public trust, and self-efficacy. After analyzing the responses from a national online survey in the United States at the early stages of the pandemic (i.e., early April 2020 after CDC announced the social distancing guidelines and nationwide stay-at-home order), they conclude that external factors such as media exposure and internal preferences such as political ideology may indeed explain a greater fraction of the variance in assessing the transparency in governmental communication. However, the influence of individuals' perceived transparency in governmental communication in absolute terms is critical in reducing public cynicism while facilitating improved self-efficacy to follow institutional recommendations. Their research model provides a solid explanation of the role of governmental transparent communication when facing a public health emergency and crisis.

The next contribution by Marco Mazzoni, Sofia Verza, Roberto Mincigrucci, Susanna Pagiotti, and Anna Stanziano offers another critical examination of governmental communication on COVID-19 and its related social control policies, but from a different cultural setting, Italy, and a different angle, the Italian press. According to the authors, Italy has been the “patient nation one” among Western countries to undertake severe and strict quarantine measures after a massive increase in positive cases. From that perspective, the authors apply the agenda setting theory to the COVID-19 crisis and its related governmental communication. By analyzing the media coverage of the Italian government's strategic communication during two phases of the pandemic (i.e., the first wave of the virus in early 2020 and the second wave of the pandemic in late 2020), they conclude that the efficiency of strategic governmental communication does not only depend on the policies, messages, and activities implemented by the government. More importantly, the media are the key drivers of strategic communication in interpreting and

delivering the content to the Italian citizens through a process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization.

The third contribution in this section, *Strategic Communication and Political Ideologies in South America*, advances our understanding of the COVID-19 crisis management by setting the research in the cases of the populist governments of Argentina and Brazil. As a research team, Alejandro Álvarez-Nobell, Andrea Oliveira, Andréia Athaydes, and Belén Barroso explore the role that the strategic management of communication has played during the COVID-19 pandemic in controlling the spread of the disease in two contrasting political and ideological contexts. The study evaluates the public communication strategies carried out by the Argentinian and Brazilian governments during the COVID-19 crisis to understand the perceptions of their respective populations. As two countries of study, the paper considers different factors that may have influenced the strategic perspective of the governments' communication to contain the spread of COVID-19. According to their analysis, the environment, risk, commitment, operations and resource factors were the most relevant when the Argentinian government devised their communication strategy. Conversely, resources and competition were key for the Brazilian government. Throughout the pandemic, conflict with the press and other political agents seemed to be part of Bolsonaro's political strategy to maintain his electoral base. The empirical results of this study explain influence of modes and sources of information on the public's information search processes and the resulting perceptive frameworks that are built.

The second section of this special issue, titled *The Organization, the Leader, the Influencer: Getting Strategic Communication Right* features three contributions with different emphases. In the first article, *How Purpose-Driven Organizations Influenced Corporate Actions and Employee Trust during the Global COVID-19 Pandemic*, Yufan Sunny Qin, Marcia DiStaso,

Alexis Fitzsimmons, Eve Heffron, and Rita Linjuan Men argue that the COVID-19 global pandemic drove many companies to re-evaluate their approach to business and, as a result, some focused their efforts on “leading with purpose.” The authors argue that purpose is an organization’s fundamental goal that goes beyond profit maximization. If purpose is an all-encompassing principle that guides everything the organization does and determines its strategies, effective strategic communication shall be an essential element of purpose as it can empower employees to align their personal goals with organizational values and thus more closely identify with their organization. However, the authors find the impact of communicating purpose on employee outcomes remains unexplored in strategic communication research. To address this critical research gap, their research examines why and how communicating purpose could be an effective tactic in strategic communication. Specifically, their study introduces the concept of purpose and examines how purpose directed organizations’ actions in response to COVID-19. They conclude that strategic communication about purpose plays a critical role in building employees’ organizational identification and trust during times of change.

The next contribution, *CEO as “Chief Crisis Leader” under COVID-19* is led by Jiangmeng Liu, Bora Yook, and Cheng Hong. Different from the first paper in this section, their research seeks to explore how top organizational leaders should respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. As another example of interdisciplinary research, they incorporate theoretical frameworks of organizational resilience, social support, and values-centered communication to advance the theoretical development of strategic communication in the context of the global pandemic. They also use an innovative research method and analytic approach, structural topic modeling along with the inductive qualitative analysis, to analyze 192 CEO open letters from 152 multinational corporations from *Fortune’s World’s Most Admired Companies*. A series of

topics and themes are identified as part of CEOs' strategic communication, including sensegiving and efficacy enhancement when addressing organizational resilience, providing social support (both emotional and instrumental support) as a way to enhance the mutual understanding between CEOs and key stakeholders, and emphasizing on the care ethics when promoting social solidarity. Perhaps more importantly, their research identifies gender differences when applying leadership styles in mitigating COVID-19 pandemic communication.

The third contribution in this section takes us to Finland to understand how the Prime Minister's Office in Finland initiated a strategic communication campaign and empowered social media influencers on Instagram to communicate public health policies and instructions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By adopting the two-step flow of communication model and social influence theory, Essi Pöyry, Hanna Reinikainen, and Vilma Luoma-aho collect and analyze 96 Instagram posts, 108 Instagram stories and 1,097 comments. They uncover the role of social media influencers in debriefing public health policies in the context of brand communication associated with those influencers' interests and expertise. The results further highlight the importance of adaptive communication that are essential to respond to the great uncertainty caused by the global pandemic. Social media influencers actively adapt the public health messages to their own style and demonstrate their own examples in terms of how to behave during the pandemic by following the general guidelines.

Although the three contributions have very different research settings and emphasis, we hope they will convince the readers that change management and adaptive leadership are not trendy topics that need urgent attention just because we are in the middle of a global pandemic, but because they do indeed have an important influence on leaders' strategic communication at various levels and in different contexts.

The third section of this special issue, *Facilitating Public Health Response Plans through Strategic Communication*, is composed of three contributions that center on another important entity in the conversations of strategic communication when it is about public health. In *The Effects of Dangerous World Beliefs on COVID-19 Preventive Behaviors in Singapore*, Su Lin Yeo, Desiree Yee Ling Phua, and Ying-yi Hong focus their investigation on the moderating role of public health communication by examining the effectiveness of the Singapore government's crisis communication messages on disease preventive behaviors at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It employed a mixed method research approach by first carrying out a content analysis of 7,128 news headlines on COVID-19 to confirm the presupposition that the media may be communicating messages that the world order is being threatened. Informed by the findings that 90% of news reports were framed to suggest a dangerous world, the researchers further surveyed 453 respondents in the main study, and tested if people's beliefs in a dangerous world (BDW) were linked to their disease preventive behaviors (DPB), and whether such a link was modulated by how effective they perceived the government's pandemic communication. Results revealed that the perceived effectiveness of the government's pandemic communication trumped the effects of beliefs in a dangerous world such that the link between BDW and DPB was significant only when the perceived effectiveness was low. Further analysis of the effects of specific communication dimensions on disease preventive behaviors suggests that public health communication needs to be strategically calibrated to offer personally relevant messages that are informative and objective.

It is hard to argue against the proposition that effective strategic communication must to some extent be contingent on the engagement of the conversations. However, there might be some deliberate and purposeful strategies going toward the other direction. This is the main

argument made by our second contribution in this section, “*We Do Not Have Any Further Info to Add, Unfortunately*”—*Strategic Disengagement on Public Health Facebook Pages*. By using the Scandinavian public health authorities’ communication on their Facebook pages as a case, Truls Strand Offerdal, Sine Nørholm Just, Oyvind Ihlen, and Joel Rasmussen examine whether there is a need for an organization to strategically choose to disengage in the social conversation due to lack of resources or when a conversation has stalled. The authors provide a critical perspective to view the concept of “social engagement” in strategic communication. Their contribution proposes a new way of viewing strategic communication through intentional communication, namely “strategic disengagement,” which is “rhetorical acts designed to a) recognize and interact with concrete utterances of stakeholders, while b) limiting the scope and duration of the exchange” (p. xxx). Rooted in the literature of strategic communication, they investigated the phenomenon of disengagement in public health communication empirically.

Glen Nowak and Michael A. Cacciatore’s contribution, *COVID-19 Vaccination and Public Health Communication Strategies: An In-Depth Look at How Demographics, Political Ideology, and News/Information Source Preference Matter*, brings our attention to strategic communication built around vaccination-related efforts. When high national compliance is needed to slow down the infection rate and eventually control infectious disease pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, strategic communication efforts related to COVID-19 vaccination and other preventive health recommendations shall never be underemphasized. By using a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, the authors investigated individuals’ COVID-19 vaccination intention, risk-benefit perceptions, interest and attention to COVID-19 information, and their trust and use of common COVID-19 information sources. The results confirm several

key demographic variables (i.e., sex, age, race/ethnicity, and education), political ideology and source preference influence individuals' vaccination acceptance, hesitancy, and resistance.

Taken together, the papers collected in the special issue present a broad range of perspectives on strategic communication and the global pandemic. We hope the organization of this special issue into three sections that each centers on some of the key themes and key players in coping with the challenges and uncertainty associated with the global pandemic provides a useful lens on organizing this rapidly evolving tension. By providing a range of strategic communication writing grounded in different academic disciplines and cultural and political contexts, we believe this volume offers an international perspective for scholars and educators to understand the complexity of the topic itself. We also hope this special issue helps create a new chapter that will further enrich the research, practice and teaching of strategic communication.

Acknowledgements

Many people directly or indirectly contributed to the success of this special issue. First, we would like to thank all contributors/authors who have dedicated their time to writing papers for this issue as well as the wider group of international colleagues who are also writing and researching in this important field who responded to the initial call. For a successful production, we would like to thank Usha Thangaraj and her production team at Taylor and Francis for their amazing work in putting this issue forward. Special thanks go to the editorial review board of the special issue as they dedicated their time to reviewing and providing constructive feedback and comments to help the authors revise and improve their research and writings. Just like the breadth and the depth of the research articles presented in this special issue, we are very fortunate to have a diverse group of acclaimed scholars around the world to offer their expertise in shaping the special issue.

Specifically, we would like to thank the following reviewers for their valuable contributions to the development of the special issue: Yi-Ru Regina Chen (*Hong Kong Baptist University, China*), Audra Diers-Lawson (*Leeds Beckett University, UK*), Jesper Falkheimer (*Lund University, Sweden*), Chun-Ju Flora Hung-Baesecke (*University of Technology Sydney, Australia*), Vilma Luoma-aho (*University of Jyväskylä, Finland*), Marlene S. Neill (*Baylor University, USA*), Cindy Sing Bik Ngai (*Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China*), Po-Lin Pan (*Arkansas State University, USA*), Katie R. Place (*Quinnipiac University, USA*), Bryan H. Reber (*University of Georgia, USA*), Stefania Romenti (*IULM University, Italy*), Ana Tkalac Verčić (*University of Zagreb, Croatia*), Sophia Charlotte Volk (*University of Zurich, Switzerland*), Yuan Wang (*City University of Hong Kong, China*), and Jie Xu (*Villanova University, USA*).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we would like to thank Dr. Ansgar Zerfass and Dr. Kelly Page Werder for offering the opportunity to edit this special issue. Their unwavering support and leadership motivate us to achieve the next higher level in research rigor and continually foster the intellectual conversations around strategic communication both within and beyond the topic of COVID-19 pandemic.

References

- Eisenman, D. P., Cordasco, K. M., Asch, S., Golden, J. F., & Glik, D. (2007). Disaster planning and risk communication with vulnerable communities: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina. *American Journal of Public Health, 97*(Supplement_1), S109-S115.
<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2005.084335>
- Glik D.C. (2007) Risk communication for public health emergencies. *Annual Review of Public Health, 28*, 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.28.021406.144123>

- Hills, T. T. (2019). The dark side of information proliferation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 14*(3), 323-330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618803647>
- Kool, M., & van Dierendonck, D. (2012). Servant leadership and commitment to change, the mediating role of justice and optimism. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 25*(3), 422-433. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811211228139>
- Luthans, F., Luthans, K. W., & Luthans, B. C. (2004). Positive psychological capital: Human and social capital. *Business Horizons, 47*(1), 45-50.
- Magsaysay, J. F., & Hechanova, M. R. M. (2017). Building an implicit change leadership theory. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 38*(6), 834-848. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-05-2016-0114>
- Malecki, K., Keating, J. A., & Safdar, N. (2020). Crisis communication and public perception of COVID-19 risk in the era of social media. *Clinical Infectious Diseases, ciaa758*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa758>
- Rossmann, C., Meyer, L., & Schulz, P. J. (2018). The mediated amplification of a crisis: Communicating the A/H1N1 pandemic in press releases and press coverage in Europe. *Risk Analysis, 38*(2), 357-375. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12841>
- Tench, R., Meng, J., & Moreno, A. (Eds.). (2022, in press). *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic*. London: Routledge.
- Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication, 12*(4), 487-505, DOI: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485