Flattening the Curve: The Role of Communications in Canada's Response to COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper explores Canada's communication approach to the population during the global pandemic of COVID-19. Canada's perceptive risk communication plan consists of quick response, transparency, and credible figures as representatives of information that are deemed the current principles of success. Then, the elements of Canada's risk communication plan are further analyzed using transformative dialogue. To lay the foundation for an exploration of risk communication strategies, the literature review inaugurates the necessary definitions for the topic and provides detailed information about the action Canada has taken in the 2020 pandemic thus far. The discussion evaluates and debates Canada's communicative strengths while acknowledging areas for improvement. Following the tactics explored, comparisons are made against the United States' pandemic response along with a review of practices to avoid in risk communication, such as blame. Finally, transformative dialogue theory is analyzed as a potential answer to the successful interactions between the Canadian government, authoritative figures, and the public. In its closing statements, the paper briefly describes further relevant learning opportunities. Overall, Canada's cooperative approach led to the success of its communications strategies felt today in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

Introduction

The break of a new decade brought roaring bushfires in Australia, a tragic Iranian plane crash, and the death of beloved public figure, Kobe Bryant. But while each of these events came with their respective global impact, none would compare to the highly contagious coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19, that would proceed to wreak havoc upon nations everywhere. As new developments were released and death tolls began to rise, the coronavirus soon entered the forefront of pressing global issues. However, with great exposure came great responsibility. The novel quality of the virus only magnified the threat of misinformation about it, and as both the virus' scale and the public's concern grew, a need for clear and accurate communication about COVID-19 was born. Soon, the communications tactics countries used to characterize the brewing pandemic would become vital to countries' containment of the coronavirus. Underestimating the virus might lead to catastrophic results. But was it possible to overestimate the fallout of the pandemic? Above all, what kind of procedure is best to adopt when dealing with the deadly unknown?

To answer these questions, we need not look far. Certain efforts Canada has taken in containing the coronavirus have proven some of the most successful in the world, namely for the country's exemplary communication practices surrounding the pandemic. The country demonstrates the importance of quick response and transparency in protecting its communities.

By streamlining information through credible figures of authority and comprehensively illustrating necessary collective measures, Canada continues to curb the rate of infection by appropriately communicating the risk associated with it. Though new information about COVID-19 continues to be discovered and the effectiveness of Canada's responses have yet to be fully proven, the country has performed exceptionally well thus far in comparison to others around the world. One of the most distinct elements of Canada's reaction to the virus has been the country's use of transformative dialogue, which has resulted in successful accommodation strategies like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The Canadian government's decision to adopt a communicative approach founded on cooperation illustrates the government's intimate understanding of its nation that has effectively limited the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review & Discussion

Firstly, we must define some key terms to establish a mutual understanding of the arguments this paper will explore. Initially, COVID-19 was considered an epidemic that was somewhat contained within China. To clarify, an epidemic occurs when "an illness . . . [presents] in excess of normal expectancy" (A Dictionary of Epidemiology, 2016, "Epidemic"). Epidemics are characterized mainly by "the number of cases . . . the agent, size, and type of population exposed; previous experience or lack of exposure to the disease; and time and place of occurrence" (A Dictionary of Epidemiology, 2016, "Epidemic"). The event of an epidemic should raise immediate concern, requiring "full field investigation" to identify the epidemic's origin in efforts to mitigate, or eliminate, the effects of illness (A Dictionary of Epidemiology, 2016, "Epidemic").

Alternatively, a pandemic is defined as "an epidemic occurring over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people" (A Dictionary of Epidemiology, 2016, "Pandemic"). While "only some pandemics cause severe disease . . . at a population level," the novel coronavirus has unfortunately proven to be one of these few, affecting over 1.6 million people across the world at the time this paper was written (A Dictionary of Epidemiology, 2016, "Pandemic"; Al Jazeera, 2020, para. 2). The World Health Organization (2020) defines coronaviruses as "a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans," and adds that they "are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)" (para. 1). COVID-19 is a newly-discovered type of coronavirus that health experts have yet to fully understand.

Despite the lack of knowledge that may exist about certain diseases, pandemics and their effects must still be appropriately communicated about in order to be reduced. One method of communication that is frequently revisited in times of global crises is known as risk communication. The World Health Organization (n.d.), or WHO, defines risk communication as "the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being" (para. 1). Effective risk communication, or ERC, is crucial in performing the necessary action required to reduce the threat. If the risk communication is weak or ineffective, people may not act appropriately to eliminate the threat, which may lead to harmful, if not fatal, consequences.
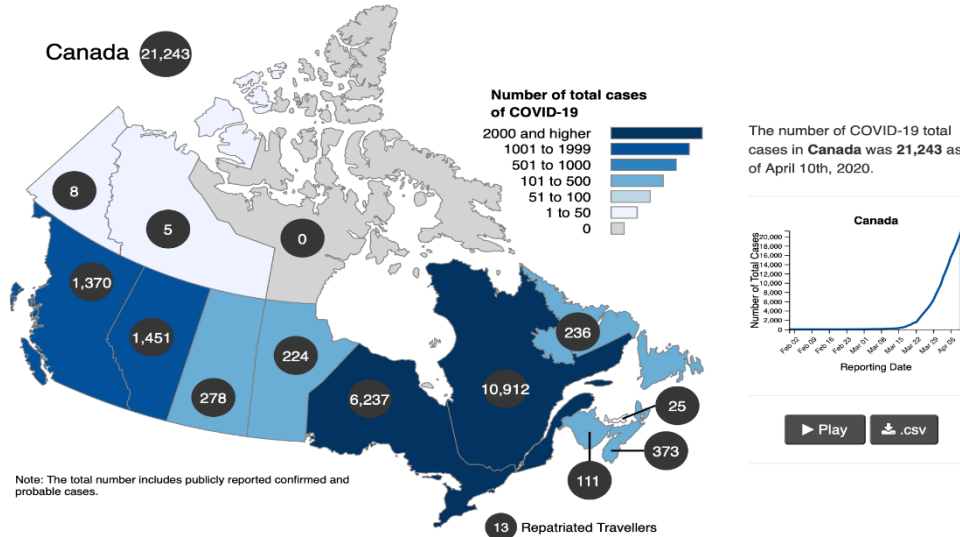
In the face of a pandemic, appropriate action should be constituted by quick response time and full transparency on behalf of leading authorities. We chose to define "quick response" within a pandemic setting as "a response based on an informed and proportionate assessment of health care capacity, the likelihood of surpassing it within a short time frame, and the will to intervene before such threshold is met." From Canada's first confirmed case of COVID-19 in "late January" to the nationwide closure of schools "mid-March," the timeliness of the country's response is subject to debate (Staples, 2020a; Staples, 2020b). We argue that given the largely mysterious nature of the coronavirus and its previously-unknown mortality rates, Canada reacted at a reasonable pace. Now in April, we are well-aware of the virus' potent transmissibility. But first, time was needed to learn of COVID-19's incubation periods and thus its true contagiousness. Canada chose to wait for months before enforcing strict travel bans and social distancing protocols (Staples, 2020b). But this decision was best for the nation; implementing these measures too soon may have overwhelmed Canadians. To go from one extreme (uninhibited close contact) to the other ("[strict] enforcement measures for people breaking quarantine") may potentially lead to "disobedience" as the government may then be perceived as a "coercive . . . authority" (Vogel, 2020, para. 14; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 78). Instead, the Canadian government utilized "social influence" to develop the landscape we observe today—an approach more suitable for the country, given the importance Canada places on collectivist values (Kelman & Hamilton, p. 78). Slowly introducing the methods chief medical health officers would later recommend led to a more sustainable and accommodating outcome for the nation.

In addition to responding quickly, the country also kept citizens updated on the developing situation as well as proper health practices, bearing in mind the public's demand for knowledge about the issue. Health officials continue to release statistics and projections about the coronavirus to maintain transparency with Canadian citizens. Both Abraham (2011) and Savoia et al. (2017) support the actions of the Canadian government by upholding transparency and trust as key factors for an effective risk communication response. Following interviews with experienced ERC professionals on successful practices of risk communication, Savoia et al. (2017) found "multiple interviewees reported that delaying the release of information to the public compromises transparency" (p. 213). Thus, transparency further relates to quick response time as, ideally, the public should immediately be made aware of issues that directly affect them. One way the government has been maintaining transparency with Canadian citizens is through the release of intelligible, up-to-date information. The Government of Canada's official website has a dedicated page for COVID-19 complete with information on the disease and the risk it poses, as well as a short quiz designed for self-assessment if one suspects they might be infected (Government of Canada, 2020a). The page also has a virtual assistant to answer questions about health and safety, financial support, and general questions about the disease (Government of Canada, 2020a). The COVID-19 section of the government website is complete with an interactive infographic detailing numbers of cases and deaths. In all, the page alone allows a brief insight into the liberties the Canadian government has taken to make knowledge on COVID-19 accessible for its citizens.

Current Count of Total Cases of COVID-19 in Canada as of April 10, 2020.

Last Data Update 2020-04-10 11:00 EDT

ⓘ Hover over provinces and territories to see cases over time or hit the play button to animate the map.

From Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak update*, Government of Canada, 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html.*

However, while efforts to be open with the public have been made, Canada's response could still be improved upon. Although the country is sharing reports of coronavirus cases, Platt (2020) states, "[the] report[s] [come] with a warning: they only have detailed information on barely half the cases, as they're reliant on provinces submitting case reports" (para. 15). Given the fluid nature of the situation, the Canadian government seems to be compensating for the delay as best they can. But the deficit of information may lead to frustration amongst Canadians as uncertainty burgeons within the country.

Thankfully, trends show that Canadians continue to identify with the narrative the country's leaders and health ministers have been transmitting. Wright (2020) states that "[82 percent] of Canadians have gotten with the program" since the initial outbreak of the virus. He reports that originally, "two-thirds [of] Canadians [were] not engaged in changing their life or lifestyle because of the coronavirus outbreak," whereas "today, . . . one in six have kept everything the same as it was"—a marked decrease of 50 percent (para. 7). Clearly, the government has succeeded in convincing the majority of Canadians of the threat the coronavirus poses. But what other specific attributes of Canada's risk communication strategy have been effective in limiting the spread of the virus?

Assigning credible spokespersons the responsibility of disseminating informed messages amongst the public has proven another particularly potent method of containing COVID-19 in Canada. Distilling information into one channel limits the noise felt from repetitive messaging and contrasting opinions. Savoia et al. (2017) support this as they explain that one of the most successful factors of effective risk communication involves "existing institutional mechanisms for ERC, including clear delineations of roles and responsibilities," such as "spokespersons" (p. 211-212). While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau continues to address the

nation daily, Canada parallels this authority by designating health-related spokespersons to represent and inform their respective provinces. Many provinces have taken the lead from their chief medical health officers, like Alberta's Dr. Deena Hinshaw, to deliver information on the virus. Hinshaw's recommendations include a variety of preventative measures, from "thorough hand-washing" to "keeping six feet away from others in public" (Staples, 2020a, para. 12). The health official's advice appears to be informed by infectious disease specialists also endorsing these practices (Vogel, 2020).

It seems that Canadians respond better to updates from those who represent the health sector because health officials are deemed more reliable sources of information. In the past, Canada made the mistake of broadcasting risk communications through a web of individuals. Aylesworth-Spink (2017) reports that during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, health officials mistakenly relied on the media and journalists to share crucial messages regarding the vaccine. According to the authors:

> The media did not share an understanding with public health officials about the societal problem at hand. Public health leaders wanted to restore stability through one overarching approach: to vaccinate all or most of the Canadian population, starting with those at greatest risk. However, contributing to this goal was not the media's only or even central concern. Instead, journalists wrote stories questioning the severity of the virus threat by presenting various and sometimes opposing opinions. (Aylesworth-Spink, 2017, p. 12)

By streamlining updates on COVID-19 through health officials, government websites, and informed political leaders, Canada diminishes the ability for the media to factually discredit or challenge the information health officials state. While media outlets continue to report on the news, dissenting opinions have been severely limited and are more likely to be discounted as a result of the faith Canadians have established in the country's authority figures. As a result, the Canadian government's risk communication cannot be credibly undermined.

Appointing roles of authority in times of crisis can prove a highly effective and powerful tool; however, risk communication fails when figureheads begin to point fingers for the issues at hand instead of promoting cooperation to solve them. This can be best observed in the contrast between Canada's and the United States' responses to the virus. On March 19, 2020, President Donald Trump referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus" during a press conference, contending that the virus originated from Wuhan, China (Cillizza, 2020). In blaming the other nation, Trump undermined the importance of individual responsibility in the virus' containment as he implied the issue created by China was not the United States' problem to solve. It is the lack of a cooperative, collectivist mindset required in times of crisis that played a role in the drastic spread of the virus in the United States. Jurecic and Wittes (2020) support this by stating that, although President Trump is not to blame for the inevitable spread, his dialogue has "likely caused many average Americans to take the virus less seriously—because, after all, the president isn't taking it seriously either—and discouraged them from following social-distancing measures that could save their [lives] and the lives of many others" (para. 15). The growing presence of the coronavirus in the United States backs this claim: currently, the country hosts over 430,000 cases (Al Jazeera, 2020). However, Trump's tirade did not end there; the President later threatened to withdraw funding from the WHO as he alleged they were to blame for the quick spread of the virus (Watts and Stracqualursi, 2020). Given that the WHO primarily

relies upon voluntary contributions, and "the U.S. is the single largest contributor to WHO," Trump's threats were not taken lightly (*The U.S. Government,* 2019, para. 9). The President's conduct illustrates exactly how not to act in times of crisis. Not only is the WHO not responsible for the current pandemic, disadvantaging an "international health authority" would mean disadvantaging the entire world (*The U.S. Government,* 2019, para. 2). Note how zero solutions for the pandemic were offered, nor any health insights gleaned, from the blame passed on China and the WHO. If anything, Trump indicates that blame only offers outrage and inaction.

  Conversely, Canadian officials have not produced messages of blame but, rather, of proactivity, detailing how citizens can remain safe by partaking in proper hygiene and social distancing. As a result, Canada remains relatively low on the tier of affected countries (Al Jazeera, 2020). In fact, when scaling the coronavirus case numbers to each country's population size, Canada has 60% fewer cases than the United States as of the time this paper was written (Al Jazeera, 2020). Abraham (2011) endorses Canada's avoidance of blame as he explains, "Communication during a health emergency or crisis often gets bogged down in questions of blame. Although communicators try to provide the public with information, the public, and very often the media, seem more interested in attributing blame" (p. 3). Therefore, if risk communication is to be successful, governmental messages need to offer solutions for issues instead of sensationalizing them, especially in the case of rapidly-spreading, unknown disease. Aylesworth-Spink (2017) states that "[d]issent abounded as researchers took different sides of the H1N1 issue; scientists disputed each other's research studies whereas government forces blamed drug manufacturers for vaccine delays" (p. 12). From this, it becomes clear that cooperation is essential when confronting a pandemic. When important messages are used to focus the attention on blame, the unity between populations and countries may be broken, ultimately hindering the solutions needed to make effective changes.

  The success felt from Canada's cooperation-based communication can be attributed mainly to transformative dialogue. As Ellis and Maoz (2013) explain, transformative dialogue, otherwise known as "contact [theory] states that under certain conditions, contact between groups in conflict reduces prejudice and changes negative intergroup attitudes" (p. 218). Throughout much of the misunderstanding and misinformation surrounding the virus, governments have been at odds with their nations as citizens demand clarity. Furthermore, with the harmful accusations and turmoil rife within our world right now, mutual understanding becomes even more necessary in identifying helpful solutions. There are multiple conditions attached to transformative dialogue that must be fulfilled to make it work, such as equal status, personal and sustained communication, and equality being habitual (Ellis & Maoz, 2013). However, the condition Canada has demonstrated best is "[required] cooperative interdependence, where members of the two groups engage in cooperative activities and depend on one another to achieve mutual goals" (Ellis & Maoz, 2013, p. 218). Savoia et al. (2017) also found that "[their] interviewees stressed the importance of establishing [two]-way communication mechanisms by listening to the public knowledge, opinions, reactions, and preferences" (p. 213). The Canadian government factored this notion into their response and gradually upped the intensity of their COVID communications as the threat of the virus became palpable. As a result, Canadians shortly followed suit, hence the 50% increase in pandemic-appropriate, social distancing behaviour. The two-way communication mechanism proved successful.

The interaction between Canadians and the Canadian government not only exemplifies Ellis & Maoz's (2013) and Savoia et al.'s (2017) recommendations but has also shaped the way Canada has accommodated its nation. Due to the necessary shutdown of non-essential businesses, Canada's unemployment rate "increased 2.2 percentage points to 7.8% in March [as] the largest one-month increase on record" (Statistics Canada, 2020). Citizens panicked about the future of their finances as businesses closed and lay-offs ensued. Soon, many Canadians would be without the means to put food on their tables. As financial turmoil started to become a real threat and Canadians began to raise their voices, the Canadian government needed to act quickly to protect citizens against the adverse effects of unexpected unemployment. Following the previous recommendation of Ellis & Maoz (2013) to "engage in cooperative [activity]" and "achieve [a] mutual [goal]" (p. 218) of economic stability alongside Canadian citizens, Canada's Department of Finance devised a response plan covering different financial supports, including the Child Care Benefit, Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and Mortgage Support (Government of Canada, 2020b). The financial aid projects both short-term and long-term relief for affected Canadians, with "[t]he $82 billion package splits into two main categories: $27 billion in direct [support] and $55 billion in tax deferrals" (Gawley, 2020, para. 7). Many citizens were grateful for the government's quick reaction despite yearning for a return to normalcy (MacLeod, 2020). Although no current data exists to measure the success of Canada's response plan, the transactional communication between Canada's Department of Finance and the public still exemplifies the strengths embedded in the Canadian government's transformative dialogue approach to risk communication.

In retrospect, we can observe transformative dialogue in all areas of our thesis proposed previously in this paper. Firstly, the Canadian government's quick response and transparency set the stage for transformative dialogue by directly involving Canadians. Using transformative dialogue included citizens in the conversation and allowed them to internalize the issues they would soon face. The transparency of the government's approach also assisted them in the later dialogue and creation of CERB by "engag[ing] [Canadians]" in an "appropriate [solution]" and "communicat[ing] mutuality and propinquity" with them (Romenti et al., 2014). Next, we deem that Canada's authoritative figures have demonstrated transformative dialogue through their roles as community representatives. Because "[t]ransformative [d]ialogue is a process in which a facilitator works with different members of a community in conflict to co-create a process that supports changes in the quality of people's interactions," these authority figures' approaches to COVID-19 have regulated communication surrounding the pandemic. They have also created an opportunity for the public to handle the crisis effectively and sustainably, thus "increasing . . . amount[s] of pro-social interaction" ("Conflict Transformation," 2019). The prevalence of transformative dialogue within Canada's crisis response is ultimately responsible for the country's transition into dealing with life in the age of the novel coronavirus.

Conclusion

Canada's diligence in containing the coronavirus was not only prudent but also highly perceptive. The country acted with a swift judiciousness in protecting its nation: once the coronavirus became a palpable threat, Canada intervened. Travel was restricted, guidelines

were issued, and Canadians worked together. Canada's practices of transparency awarded the country, and its officials, the credibility necessary to incite nationwide cooperation. It is important to note that knowledge about the coronavirus is still developing, and the current analysis may not reflect the overall outcome post-coronavirus. Risk communication and the results of self-isolation are difficult to measure in the sense that we can only compare Canada against other countries, as we only have one attempt to get it right and therefore no ability to reassess and try again. However, while there is always room for improvement, Canada's approach has seen positive results so far. When pitted against the United States, whose practices have proven nearly antithetical to Canada's, the nation's successes are highlighted even further. By remaining open-minded and engaging in transformative dialogue, Canada has both protected and accommodated its citizens, inspiring collectivistic values along the way. Though this paper primarily focuses on how risk communication has effectively brought Canadians together, there is room for further analysis of the different cultures within the nation and their respective response tendencies, like within Canada's diverse ethnic makeup or the left-right political spectrum. The risk communication methods Canada employed in combating the virus may be used as a foundation for other nations to adopt into their own approaches as well. Canada's action in the coronavirus pandemic serves as an upstanding example for future global crises.

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