

Introduction

Abstract. The long-lasting COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for risk and crisis communication which became intertwined in a manner unlike any other past global health crisis.

This chapter introduces the COVID-19 pandemic's specificities, discusses the need for a book that covers the different risk communication phases and governmental responses across countries and cultures, and offers an overview of the volume's content.

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COVID-19 is no longer the international public health emergency it was, but it is still circulating, and its devastating effects are still with us. Economic damage inflicted by the pandemic endures. Many healthcare systems are struggling. Millions of children are threatened by disease after missing out on routine childhood vaccinations. And three years after the first COVID-19 vaccines were developed, billions of people remain unprotected – overwhelmingly in developing countries – and economic performance in many countries has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

When the next pandemic arrives, we must do better. But we're not yet ready. We must prepare and act on the lessons of COVID-19 [emphasis added].

(António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2023)

This message given in 2023 to all nations by the UN Secretary-General can be seen, through our communication sciences lenses, as a call to identify the best risk communication strategies and to convince governmental and political leadership and central and local authorities to prepare accordingly for the next pandemic or global crisis. In our first volume ([Lilleker et al., 2021](#)), which responded to an imperative theoretical and practical need to be among the first to provide a state-of-the-art perspective on the situation of crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and related practical insights, we lamented the fact that the 27 national and two supranational case studies could only cover the first phase of the pandemic across these nations. But beyond the timeline of that volume, this global crisis involved numerous up and down peak moments of mass illness, followed by moments when we thought the crisis was over and

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everything returned to normal, and then suddenly new variants of the virus appeared that led to another wave of illnesses and mass deaths, in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

This unique configuration in which crisis and risk communications became so entangled created huge problems, not typical in standard circumstances, in which usually after managing a crisis, there is a period of calm for the preparation of the next crisis through risk communication and management strategies. That is why the present volume offers a more holistic overview of these pandemic years in which risk and crisis communication were intertwined, of the way in which governments, health experts, and other authorities tried to face the pandemic and convince their publics through different messages and communication strategies to apply preventive behaviors while dealing with the ever-growing challenges of mis-/disinformation, politicization, and polarization, as well as each country's unique cultural and specific challenges.

Given the global nature of the pandemic, the disparate spread of the virus, over two years of experience with the pandemic, and the differing national responses and strategies in risk communication, the responses to the spread of COVID-19 offer significant opportunities for comparatively studying various nations' risk communication practices and drawing insights and lessons that can better inform future endeavors. Consequently, this volume digs deeper, with 17 national case studies representing states across the world. The cases were selected with an emphasis on their worldwide representativeness – each of the six regions (Africa, America, Europe, the Middle East, South-East Asia, and Western Pacific) is represented by at least two countries. This volume is truly global, covering a range of political systems (from democratic to authoritarian), styles of leadership, and political contexts. Uniquely, the focus of the edited volume is to cover the period from the beginning of the pandemic through different stages of development to the point which seems to have resulted in an endemic situation. Therefore, this volume covers all the phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and compares different national approaches to risk communication.

Chapter 1 explains the theoretical framework through which each case-study chapter explores the risk communicative responses by national governments to the outbreak and global

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spread of the COVID-19 pandemic – a modified risk communication framework of Warren and Lofstedt's (2021) international comparative study on risk communication and COVID-19 in Europe. Each case-study chapter starts with an overview of the political context and the pandemic development within that country and then uses this framework to analyze and explore the different governments' risk communication milestones and changes during the main phases of the COVID-19 developments from 2020 to circa mid-2022, focusing on the main challenges and problems in terms of messenger attributes, consistency and clarity of communication, communication methods, message attributes, and public trust in government.

Finally, our conclusion chapter brings together all the patterns observed across all these nations and provides a series of lessons learned and insights that we hope can be used, as officials, governmental actors, and healthcare practitioners continue to refine their messaging and strategies for this “new normal” and prepare for the next crisis or pandemic which inevitably will come.

Note

References

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- Warren, G. W., & Lofstedt, R. (2022). Risk communication and COVID-19 in Europe: Lessons for future public health crises. *Journal of Risk Research*, 25(10), 1161–1175.

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