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Pandemic Communications Beyond Risk and Crisis: A Change of Course for Law Enforcement During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 contributed to what we know about pandemic communications, typically framed through risk and crisis. Risk and crisis as frameworks are limited, however, and this article argues that there are differences between primary and secondary pandemic communications, illustrated in this study by the typically change-adverse law enforcement community (LEC) that during COVID-19 not only had to control risk but also had to change their course on other nonrisk and crisis communications practices.

KEYWORDS

Health communication/
medical communication;
workplace studies/
professional practice; risk
communication; crisis
communication; pandemic
communications; law
enforcement
communication;
organizational change

One group of professionals familiar with communicating about crises is the law enforcement community (LEC).¹ The LEC must mitigate risks, weather catastrophes, and grapple with disasters through their communication of public safety measures. The COVID-19 pandemic was no exception to this form of risk and crisis communication. Such as in the case when the LEC played a part in managing the outbreak of the Spanish flu (refer to Barry, 2009), during COVID-19, the community had a responsibility not only to know details about the pandemic but also to coordinate a response to mitigate danger. Even more so, because of the uniqueness and worldwide reach of this event in more recent history, the pandemic required a novel and often technically mediated effort on the part of the LEC to communicate a range of information in a variety of ways that, at least for a time, globally changed the day-to-day working environment. Due to these added communication responsibilities to mitigate the pandemic, though, how exactly did the LEC's communication change during the pandemic? And how does this change occur, particularly for the LEC which is traditionally reluctant to change? Further, why does this matter to technical and professional communication (TPC) scholars?

Drawing from this premise, a series of interviews with members from the LEC in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands during 2020, and guided by the research question, how did the pandemic affect the way that the traditionally status quo-seeking LEC communicated, and why does this matter to TPC?, this article argues that not only did the LEC have to create uniform, creative ways to interact with the public about health-related crisis and risk, but the LEC also had to adapt their communication procedures that did not necessarily work to deliver risk and crisis information but still reflected a shift in communication due to the exigency of the pandemic. They had no other choice but to adapt.

Further, these two classifications matter because they provide evidence that the pandemic created both primary and secondary pandemic communications in general, where specific forms of communication emerged not just to publicize risk and crisis, but communications also changed in response to the pandemic but not necessarily to manage the pandemic. These two categories are a salient finding for this article because, often, pandemic communications are primarily defined through a lens of crisis and risk, but there are other ways the pandemic affected communication practices. Ultimately documenting these differences

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draws attention to the larger impact of the pandemic in general and broadens how we might measure the impact of the pandemic in the future. For those interested specifically in law enforcement communication, it also shows that necessity forced the LEC to change their course, even if temporarily.

Literature review—pandemic communications as risk and crisis communication

Before looking at the research conducted to support these conclusions, though, it is first useful to discuss how pandemic communications have already been discussed. As noted, this discourse is often focused on risk and crisis. In a basic description of purpose, Vaughan and Tinker, 2009 report that pandemic communications help the public understand the health risk, prevention, resilience, and recovery during a pandemic (p. S324). Further, pandemic communications also outline what the risks are, show how to prevent the spread of the illness, and help the public with how to stay prepared and motivated throughout the pandemic until conditions are stabilized.

The purpose of this communication means that pandemic communications also involve crafting messages, which means that communicators must decide what risks need to be communicated and how (Lambrecht, 2020). Messages can be simple and easy, like recommendations for more hand washing, or they can be more complex and controversial, such as “quarantines and school and public facility closures” (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009, p. S324). Further, messages must also be highly trustworthy, and audiences are called upon to act based on the content of the directives given (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). It is also a communication that must be tailored to specific audiences because some groups like special populations (Quinn, 2008) or more vulnerable people (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009) might be at a greater risk or are not available through popular channels of communication. The communication is also both a past, present, and forward-thinking discourse that can either “educate public health planners about existing vulnerabilities and resources,” such as before a pandemic occurs, “prepare the public to adapt to changing circumstances or uncertainty” at the onset of a pandemic, connect “affected populations and risk managers” as the pandemic matures, or help lead populations to recovery (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009, p. S324).

Set in this backdrop then, pandemic communications are often framed as a form of risk communication in a time of crisis. To understand risk a little more, the general idea of risk refers to “external dangers” (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997, p. 3) and is often perceived as something negative because a risk is closely aligned “to the chance of avoiding an unwanted outcome” (Giddens, 1999, p. 3). Some risks are inherent to the natural world, and others are what Anthony Giddens refers to as “manufactured risks,” or risks that are created through the progress of science, technology, or human development (p. 4). As Giddens (1999) notes, risks in general are an attempt to control not only what is presently occurring, but also planning what considerations might come in the future.

In a broad understanding, risk communication then involves minimizing a sizable range of risks before they start through the dissemination of information about possible dangers (Kostelnick, 2007; Stratman et al., 1995). Typically, risks might concern health, safety, or the environment (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013, p. 2) or risks surrounding “natural resource management, the built environment, infrastructure, chemicals, food, energy, and contingency preparedness” (Boholm, 2019). For resource and building risks, one could also think about risks as the potential for overtaxing resource reserves like water in a desert community, the dangers of building design or city planning either for earthquakes or social stability, the consequences of using a particular pesticide in farming, the safety of food transportation, or the available energy reserves now and for the future. Safety risks could be from the possibility of injuring oneself while using a food grinder, and environmental risks can be the probability of a tornado spinning toward a particular community. Health risks could be the dangers posed by lack of exercise, or in the case of this article, the risk might be the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Because a health risk like a pandemic is an emergency, it also moves the communication from not only risk communications, but also a more acute form of crisis communication. Crisis communications can be closely tied to communication of health risks through emergency discourse or mitigation strategies (e.g., Carrieri et al., 2021; Choi & Powers, 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Powell, 2021; Villanova, 2022; Wong et al., 2021). Crisis response is a type of risk communication in response to some type of

calamity or perception of calamity, and according to Lundgren and McMakin (2013), it is a transmission “in the face of extreme, sudden danger – an accident at an industrial plant, the impending break in an earthen dam, or the outbreak of a deadly disease” (p. 4). This type of communication occurs at a variety of stages of an emergency from the onset to its passing, and it works not only to control a crisis but also to relay messages of care and discourses of consensus to connect with audiences (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013, p. 5).

What is important to remember, though, and what shows up in the analysis of this article’s study, is that a pandemic event does not only cause effects directly related to managing the risk and crisis of the ongoing health event, but pandemics also affect populations in secondary ways. To be more detailed, according to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2020), on a broad level, *primary* effects of a pandemic are “the direct and immediate consequences of the epidemic on human health.” Alternatively, the organization notes *secondary* effects are more indirect effects of the pandemic that can be traced back to difficulties that either stem from the pandemic or societal responses to the pandemic. These secondary effects could range from, e.g., the result of fear in a population as illustrated by Kirk St.Amant (2020), growing fear or unrest in a population over objection to containment measures (UNICEF, 2020), increased mental disorders from isolation (Mansfield et al., 2021), or stress from the loss of a job or a breadwinner (UNICEF, 2021).

These primary and secondary distinctions do not particularly show up in scholarship on pandemic communications, though. Often, the focus remains on communicating risk and crisis. This tendency to view through crisis and risk is limited, however, because communication practices during a pandemic also reflect these two primary and secondary distinctions. It is the purpose of this article to illustrate these two forms of pandemic communications and define what they mean and why they are important.

It is also of note for this article that although literature about the police and the pandemic exists (e.g., Fang & Guanyang, 2023; Farmer & Copenhaver, 2021), the distinctions of these two forms of communication also do not readily appear in the LEC context. What this study does speak to, however, are studies of organizational change within the LEC. Although not motionless, the LEC is typically described as a legacy-adherent group that prefers the status quo and is reluctant to change. For instance, Lorinskas et al. (1985) comments that criminal justice organizations “seek stability and tend to resist change,” and although almost all organizations in general try to be stable and predictable through aspects such as rules, regulations, and hierarchies, criminal justice organizations are particularly good at keeping a stable status quo by skillfully redirecting public pressures to continue the trajectory the agencies were on (pp. 41–42). Yet, as this study will show, primary and secondary pandemic communications represent change for the community.

Method

To accomplish the article’s goals, I draw on a series of interviews with members of the LEC carried out from June to December 2020 during the earlier onset of the pandemic. Of the volunteers for the study, one participant worked with the police in Spain, one participant was a retired law enforcement official now consulting with law enforcement agencies for emergency response in the UK, and five were working for the Dutch police. Although interviews with seven volunteers were initially conducted, the participant from the UK as well as four participants from the Netherlands directly addressed the pandemic’s effect on their daily communication practices. The interviews of those five individuals are what served as the basis for this article. Specific job titles and further personal details about the participants are not being included in this article to protect the anonymity of those interviewed.

Interviewees were obtained through snowball sampling, which gathered referrals from other participants. The interviews were semistructured, and although prior to the pandemic, more questions and in-person visits had been planned, participants were asked, via an online conferencing platform, one initial, open-ended question to describe their work each day, particularly their work with technology. The online, semistructured format of approximately one hour allowed for additional questions to be formulated as needed, and it was inspired by studies on the meaning of work (Terkel, 1985). It also

allowed flexibility for interviews that had initially been planned for site visits. In-person visits would have allowed the researcher affordances of direct observation, but instead, the interviewees had more time to devote to describing their activities and environments through their own words.

The research project in general was based on how members of the LEC communicate at work, particularly under a larger framework of using technology to carry out their duties. This topic was designed to provide broad insight into the daily routines of the LEC, and although the technology aspect of the research design was initially planned prior to the onset of the pandemic, the focus was ultimately generative for the analysis question for this article because the pandemic required so much social distancing that often the communication changes were mediated through technologies. Again, the driving questions for this article are: how did the pandemic effect the way that the traditionally status quo-seeking LEC communicated, and why does this matter to TC? To answer to the first half of question, the answer was based on a content analysis of the interview data. To answer to the second question, a more holistic review of the content analysis was employed.

To answer the first question more specifically, I used thematic analysis to identify overlapping patterns in the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). The process involves searching across different types of documents (in this case, the seven and then five interviews) to find repeated patterns as well as moving back and forth between writing and revising codes. Most important to thematic analysis is to document the choices made in the analysis, and not profess that the categories of themes “emerged” from nowhere but rather to indicate how and why classifications were chosen.

For this analysis, first, after an initial reading, I identified a thematic pattern referencing the pandemic. I then went through the interviews and isolated the passages about the coronavirus’ impact on the interviewee’s communications. Next, I organized the passages and reduced the themes into comprehensive but broad categories, which led to two representative patterns. First, the interviewees found new and often creative ways to interact and handle directly the controlling health-related crisis and risk for the public, labeled in this article “risk and crisis-related pandemic communication.” Second, the participants also had to adapt communication practices that did not necessarily work to publicly control risk and crisis information but still reflected a shift due to the exigency of the pandemic. This category is labeled “nonrisk and crisis-related pandemic communication.” Both categories reflected changes to communication because of the pandemic, but the changes did not serve the same function.

To illustrate the coding of these two categories, for the first category of risk and crisis-based communication changes, one interviewee noted the UK made “this new program called Test and Trace,” which was created to help identify who the infected had come in contact with, and this passage was categorized as managing risks to the public because it specifically addressed communicating pandemic-related health procedures. For the second category, another interviewee noted that COVID-19 had motivated their question, “What are we going to do to empower the people left to work at home?” This passage was categorized under the second form of communications because it implied that the police shifted their communication because of the pandemic, but the changes were not made to communicate and manage the risks outside their organization but were instead about empowerment.

Findings

Within these two broad categories, there were five subcategories in the first category, and there were four groups of findings in the second category.

Risk and crisis-related pandemic communication

The interviewees discussed how their communication had to change to handle the public health risk of the pandemic, which is a more classical way related to risk and crisis. Breaking this category down further, the pandemic created at least five spaces of adapting to or adopting communication changes. Many of the comments illustrating this form of communication came from the participant in the UK

who was working on organizing emergency response directly related to the pandemic. Given that the information from one source puts limitations on this study, the participant was still able to articulate at least five subthemes of communication related to the pandemic that could in some cases be identified elsewhere in the Netherlands-based interviews.

Adopt uniform classification of COVID-19 illnesses, cases, and death

Agencies changed their communication practices to adopt uniform classification of COVID-19 illnesses, cases, and death, which was a direct change made to communicate risks and manage crisis. To gauge how many people were afflicted with the virus and where they were located, the UK respondent noted that there first needed to be a consensus of what classified as the COVID-19 illness in the first place. Then considerations needed to be made about what were the limits of the diagnosis, and what constituted a death from COVID-19. To illustrate this, UK respondent reported that in the UK, hospitals and care homes were reporting deaths differently, with some recorded after positive test results and other deaths were recorded as probable due to the likelihood of the symptoms. The participant stated:

We're still struggling. And the data on, even the data on who's dying and where they're dying, is, isn't, isn't very good, because we've got, we've got the four different countries going around Scotland and Northern Ireland, all recording information slightly differently. We have data recorded from the hospitals of people that have been, that died as a result, have been tested positive for the virus. And then we have people who are certified as dying, probably from Corona, the virus. We have data that's collected from care homes that's recorded differently.

This passage is particularly related to risk and crisis-related communication changes because it highlights the nuances that emerge when communicating about an emerging disease. Although the importance of classification, especially medical classification, has historical precedence (Bowker & Starr, 1999), this participant illustrates how COVID-19 was in the process of (inter)national consensus by professionals often working in their isolated areas but needed a more coordination. Each county had their own hotspots, and what the virus looked like in a particular population varied greatly during the pandemic, so communication establishing just what the disease was, how it was being classified, and how the LEC could respond to these ordered threats became of particular importance. As Atherton (2021) reminds us, too, uniform classifications are particularly important because “incomplete demographic data obscures the virus’s full impact on marginalized communities” (p. 80).

Disseminate information to the public

Communication practices changed when the community had to find new ways to *disseminate information* to the public about the virus. In this case, this dissemination was also a question of technology. Although police use of technology to help reach citizens is not a new phenomenon (e.g., Mols & Pridmore, 2019), communication during COVID-19 almost required some forms of technological mediation due to social distancing expectations. Researchers have noted that the World Health Organization (WHO) used WhatsApp (Walwema, 2020), and in the UK, the participant noted apps became an outlet to communicate potential exposure to the virus in a remote way (although the participant also noted that although many households were trying out an app, “the people [who] are most vulnerable are the elderly who don’t use these phones.”) Further, in the Netherlands, a Dutch participant noted that they “recently bought some new drones to to warn the public to keep distance for the Covid measures.”

This category about disseminating information to the public about the virus is particularly grounded in the first category related to risk and crisis because the content of the messages focused on communicating about the risks in the most effective and efficient ways, especially in the context of forced social isolation. This response also helps illustrate the aforementioned fundamentals of crisis and risk pandemic communications that requires a message is tailored toward specific audiences like vulnerable populations and shows how the COVID-19 pandemic in particular required unique and creative ways for the LEC to communicate the crisis that extended beyond their traditional status quo.

Establish new supply chains with mapping and visualizations

The pandemic changed communication practices by requiring a need to establish new supply chains with mapping and visualizations because there needed to be a quick and efficient way to identify places where supplies existed or might be needed most. According to the UK participant, it was important for emergency responders to think about what supplies would be needed to combat the virus, where those supplies would come from, and what areas were at particular risk. To illustrate, the participant likened other emergencies to COVID-19 and stated:

[In other disasters], we needed to know excavators or diggers, whatever you might call for an emergency or any sort of facility that was outside of government in the private sector, so it could be lorries, trucks. . . . You know, it's a way of saying, well, what, what, what do we get out there if we need it? Where, where, where is it? Where do we get it? It's a bit like now with emergency supplies and the Corona virus—it's about where do we where can we get this from? There's lots of stuff out there.

This example is in the first category about communicating risk and crisis because establishing and mapping supply chains is an essential piece of crisis communications to visualize constraints (Gardner & Cooper, 2003, p. 39), and the community needed to get together to identify who has what, where, and when it would be available. Agencies were being forced to reach out and create alliances to identify which items were necessary and where the products would come from (e.g., from masks and gloves, to respirators, to barricades and signage, and to trucks and rail to transport these articles). As noted in TC scholarship, although visuals can be used to distort information (Doan, 2020), maps or other visuals can help give meaning to risk and assist in ethical decision making (Amidon et al., 2020), so these visuals were essential for good communication and risk management.

Force increased cooperation between local and central governments

The pandemic changed communication practices by forcing increased cooperation between local and central governments. As the UK participant noted, the central government was thought to be good at organizing a response and mobilizing supplies, but only local knowledge can tell where supplies need to go. Local knowledge can tell someone to avoid a particular grocery store or restaurant, whereas the central level can just statistically determinemore macro-level hotspots. The participant further emphasized that managing only from a central level was “fraught with danger,” and that although statistics are useful, they do not tell the whole story. Humans must interpret the data at a local level. For instance, in the UK, one area reflected a spike in cases that were attributed to being a seaside town. Critical review, however, determined it was a more isolated outbreak at a hospital, not traveling vacationers. As Sara Doan (2020) noted, a thorough evaluation of adequate data points would be required to avoid telling the wrong story. For the COVID-19 event, communication between the local and central levels was crucial to understanding risks.

This point is particularly grounded in risk and crisis communication because, like other points, there needed to be coordination to manage and contain the pandemic and its risks. Atherton (2021) reminds us that data takes place in context, and as the UK participant noted, one central agency alone could not identify the intricacies of place-based issues.

Spark the exigency for genres of written communication

The pandemic changed communication practices by sparking the exigency for genres of written communication, especially those that could consolidate and translate potentially important, but complicated and dispersed, points of information. For instance, the UK participant started a weekly COVID-19 briefing to aggregate the various government communications like official directives, updated statistics, important news briefs, or press releases, organizing the messages in thematic ways so that the most up-to-date information was available to the public in an easy-to-navigate form. The interviewee noted, “I have to get

these coronavirus notes out every morning. That's what's it like this morning. And I mean, it's nine o'clock. I have a few things coming. I have to sort it out."

This change in communication shows that other agencies started putting out daily risk-related correspondence, but the interviewee also saw another need to consolidate these documents. This category is rooted in risk and crisis because the purpose was specifically to share health information about the pandemic with the public. Particularly, the interviewee saw it as a form of rhetorical, audience-friendly translation that differed from the more formal, technical government guidelines, a process, which St. Amant (2020) noted is essential for technical medical communication especially concerning crises. These consolidated briefings also helped manage the "infodemic" and glut of pandemic information (World Health Organization, n.d.) by streamlining various information sources with a public audience in mind.

Looking at these five categories together, we are presented a picture of a community that must establish uniform classifications of COVID-19, had to disseminate information about COVID-19, had to map and visualize new communications chains, had to increase interagency cooperation, and created the need for new communications products such as those that aggregate and translate pandemic information for a public audience. Together, these forms of communication represented changes made directly to communicate the control and management of the pandemic risks and communicate these risks to the public. For those studying TPC, this category is particularly useful because it reaffirms more traditional ways that risk and crisis communication are theorized but it also adds a new situated context. For law enforcement scholars, it also shows how the LEC was reacting and changing their communication procedures.

NonRisk and crisis-related pandemic communication

Respondents did not just point out risk and crisis-related communication changes, though. They also noted secondary effects to communication that drew their exigency from the pandemic, but the changes to communication were not necessarily about communicating and managing health risks and crises. Like the previous category, various ways of communication changed because the pandemic fit under this category, particularly four that grouped well together.

Communication of crime

The pandemic motivated changes to *communication of crime*, especially for cybercrime. Because of the pandemic, cybercrime grabbed more police concentration, which required a shift in time, energy, and communication to mitigate the issues. This change was motivated by three factors. First, as one interviewee noted, due to forced lockdowns and quarantines, the amount of people purchasing online in general increased, which raised the probability of problems with orders. Second, untrustworthy sites increased by either selling false products or claiming partnerships with legitimate agencies like the Red Cross when those partnerships did not exist. A participant illustrates this emergence of questionable sites when they noted that the police saw "thousands, thousands of domain names registered" for selling medical items, many of them maliciously. These all needed to be reviewed. Finally, it was also noted that when people did buy online, they also sometimes did not receive the exact item they purchased, did not receive the item in the specified time advertised, or did not receive the item at all, leading to more complaints about online fraud. One Dutch participant summarized many of these issues when they stated that online fraud, is "very, very busy because of the COVID-19 because most people use the Internet to sell, buy things. And it takes so long, and people make fake sites, or it takes a long time before you get your product."

This trend was categorized in the second category because it was not concerned with minimizing health risks of the pandemic. Instead, interviewees noted changes in procedures to address cybercrime which increased due to the pandemic, but the communication practices were not directly involved in spreading information about public health. This increase in cybercrime thus not only caused more

time to be devoted to both investigation of potential fraud, but also caused police agencies to have to reach out across teams and technologies to get enough personnel to react to these increased crimes that ranged from artificial intelligence (AI) to help from police volunteers. Both were already being piloted in the Netherlands to help streamline the work that humans and full-time employees had to do, but the pandemic highlighted the importance of this use for cybercrime and fraud.

Work and communicate from home

The pandemic changed communication practices in the LEC by requiring workers to work and communicate from home. The change in communications procedures is especially illustrated by the Dutch participants. For the Dutch interviewees, to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19, personnel not traditionally allowed or even considered to work from home had to minimize contact with others and conduct their day-to-day activities in more isolated fashions like the home office. Two particularly novel changes occurred first when 1-1-2 emergency response workers in the Netherlands had to do their jobs at home to dispatch emergency services. A Dutch participant noted:

It was not, and when I told you a year ago, we would arrange call centers [sic], emergency call center, crisis center from home, I think you would laugh at me as a police colleague. It was not seen as something which is possible, but we organized it in a few weeks of time, the first crisis, we had colleagues working from home in 1-1-2 call centers.

Second, even routine meetings in the Netherlands were also brought online. Prior to the pandemic, sentiment was that not only would it have been almost unfathomable to suggest that emergency calls be answered from one's home, at an even more basic level, routine meetings were even not allowed to be conducted from virtual spaces due in part to privacy concerns. The pandemic, however, removed the option of the status quo and required radical changes to be made. One participant stated, "And then I come to my point for Corona . . . [Microsoft] Teams wasn't used before. So, in a crisis within a few weeks, they made sure everybody could use MS Teams, which also pretty, pretty good." Moving online was especially a challenge because online communication was not openly welcome, especially by certain levels of administration. The interviewee continued, "Especially the old bosses had to face the fact that they were not really into technology, at the start, because they were never, they were still wanting to meet physically, for example."

Overall, the examples reflect changes to communication procedures due to working from home that reflect a change in the way communication was achieved due to the pandemic, again, the changes were not directly related to communicating risk and crisis.

How the LEC communicated in training activities

The pandemic also changed the way the LEC communicated by changing how the LEC communicated in training activities, both in content and delivery. Again, the communication shift was not to communicate pandemic health events, but the shifts were a result of the pandemic and requirements of social isolation. This shift in training was especially the case with the UK participant.

Regarding training content, the interviewee saw law enforcement training as particularly an in-person activity. To train someone to respond to a plane crash, it is useful to walk around a model of a plane crash. To train someone to look for drugs in a vehicle, it is important to have someone physically searching a car. To train for airport safety, you need someone walking around to look at the behavior of a given population. To simulate VIP response, one needs to know how a physical location compares to building blueprints. However, due to travel restrictions and caps to the number of people that can be at the same place at the same time, training had to be reevaluated. Neither experts who delivered the training nor students who take the training could continue the status quo. The pandemic thus forced ways to creatively train for these events remotely, even if partially online.

Further, if the content was going to be delivered through technology, the UK participant also noted that this created a need for new technology-intensive communication skills to deliver this training content virtually. Although the content of the training and the knowledge of the trainer remained important during in person trainings, online courses now required that the training had to look good, too. There were now considerations for lighting, editing, and sonic elements like volume and possibly music. This consideration was especially pressing for the UK interviewee who worked primarily as an expert consultant in emergency response who had to remain competitive in the market to get consulting work but now had to quickly adopt and learn technologies that had previously not been a necessity or even something desirable. Although the interviewee had invaluable experience in emergency management, the digital delivery was now an additional stress. The participant commented with mixed emotions about the increased pressure and questionable effectiveness of technologically mediated training:

I suppose in terms of there is there's a huge amount that can be done with the technology. If the quality is, is really good, you can have just your lighting and the way you sit, and you can say what service you've got. Good, a good connection . . . I still say I wouldn't want to do it as a substitute for the real thing. It just depends how long this is going to last . . . it's getting your product and then marketing it and then showing that it's of some, some value.

In their case, the respondent continued to discuss signing up for their own filming-related training courses to figure out how to professionally record the delivery of their own content. Had the pandemic and social distancing not occurred, then they would have been able to continue delivery of their expertise in person in both classroom and field contexts without worrying about communicating with professional and technological expertise.

Personal communications and networking

Finally, interviewees spoke of the changes to personal communications and networking, often negatively. Again, this alteration of communication practices was necessitated by the pandemic but were not communication intended to communicate health risks to the public.

First, both UK and Dutch participants noted that the pandemic decreased the personal communication that workers had with each other, to include at the routine level but also for larger international and interagency cooperation as well as conferences for the emergency response industry. The UK participant noted difficulties in taking networking online. The interviewee stated about online meetings from a more social perspective:

I do quite a lot of stuff at the conferences of talking at conferences around security in major emergencies, I guess taking the networking and the meeting people out of it. I guess a lot of this stuff can be done online. It might not be quite the same, but I suppose it if you can get the same results.

Although this change was discussed positively in some ways because it encouraged new ways of connecting, the respondent commented that this decrease in conferences was particularly detrimental for the consultant who relied on those type of activities to network and meet new connections for training opportunities. Further, as stated, just as in the training aspect, to explore new ways to develop business and network with others would again call upon technical and aesthetic expertise of lighting, editing, and audio to advertise oneself and one's services in a pleasing, professional, and competitive way. This element could disproportionately target older or less affluent individuals who were not as technically savvy or did not have access to expensive technologies.

One other more unfortunate change noted was the difficulty in learning and communicating with others outside one's primary language. Practicing of foreign languages was more difficult with reduced socializing, and an increase in cyber-crime which often requires a grasp of the English language was more difficult to practice. A Dutch participant noted that investigating cybercrime, which, as noted, had increased during the pandemic, created its own language challenges because "cybercrime is, of course, internationally English." Another Dutch participant noted that the isolation from others during the coronavirus made it difficult to practice foreign language skills.

Overall, these four areas come together to represent changes in the LECs communication, but they were not focused on communication risk and crisis information.

Summing up the study's overall findings in general, especially in context of the first half of the research question: how did the pandemic effect the way that the traditionally status quo-seeking LEC communicated? Both categories provide evidence for the conclusion that not only did the LEC have to develop creative ways to interact externally such as with the public about health-related crisis and risk, but the LEC also had to adapt their own communication procedures that did not necessarily work to manage or deliver risk and crisis information about the pandemic but still reflected a shift due to the exigency of the pandemic. For the risk and crisis-related pandemic communication, interviewees found it necessary to think of new ways to manage the pandemic's health effects. For the nonrisk and crisis-related pandemic communication, interviewees found it necessary to find new alliance and tactics to manage the situations that took their exigency from the pandemic but did not necessarily function to manage health risks.

Further analysis and discussion

To answer the second half of the research question, though, takes additional reflection about the significance of these findings. That second half of the question was: why does this matter to TC scholars? What does it matter that there are at least two categories of communication that can trace their exigency back to the pandemic and that the LEC shifted gears? I argue the answer to that question is twofold in the form of definitions and lenses.

Definitions

First, this study calls into being these two areas and helps solidify definitions of both primary and secondary forms of pandemic communications. Drawing from the established differentiations between primary and secondary effects of the pandemic provided by UNICEF (2020) mentioned earlier in the review of literature, I argue that as evidenced from this study, a definition of primary pandemic communications is that they are communication practices directly related to the control of a pandemic. These risk and crisis-related communication changes were illustrated in the study results. Examples of this type of communication in the research ranged from the publication of viral hotspots to the sharing statistical death information, or to the discourses and technologies required to enforce social distancing. Correspondingly, secondary pandemic communications can thus be understood as altered communication practices resulting from the pandemic and taking place during the pandemic, but not directly involved in spreading information about public health. These might include new digital communication procedures due to work from home freedoms, an organization's shift to focus on increasing cybercrime, or reduction in communication with those speaking foreign languages. It is of note that although the secondary forms of pandemic communications can touch on health-related topics, the difference between the two forms of pandemic communication are that again, primary pandemic communications are related to controlling risk and crisis and are often between someone in a position to deliver health-related information to the public, whereas secondary pandemic communications have an exigency in the pandemic but are not directly involved in managing health risk or crisis.

Lenses

Second, these definitions can then be used as lenses by researchers in both the TC and law enforcement, and differentiating between primary and secondary pandemic communications is particularly salient for several reasons. First, for TC, it taps on the connections between the field's existing focus on the communication of risk and crisis information to the public (e.g., Bishop et al., 2022; Ding, 2009), but it also extends chances to catalog the pandemic's impact in greater detail. As evidenced from this study, a more traditional look at pandemic communication might focus on how the LEC communicated about the pandemic through mechanisms such as shared

definitions, technological apps, or more cooperation. However, including secondary impacts could also involve communication about an employee's stress from a shift to the different and less familiar work of e.g., cybercrime communication, or it could involve researching if the forced online training had any greater societal impact on say crime prevention due to lack of hands-on experience or if being forced online impacted older or marginalized communities without access to technologies. This benefit can also help connect risk and crisis communication scholars to health and rhetoric scholars looking to further explore the impact of the pandemic.

Making the distinction between primary and secondary communications also impacts those in TPC who study organizations. In the TPC community, there is already an overlap between technical and professional communication and grounding in particular industries and institutions like nonprofits (Faber, 1999; Hopton & Walton, 2019) higher learning (Maylath et al., 2010; Yeats & Thompson, 2010), and government and law enforcement (Young, 2023), and the communication practices noted in this study also contribute to TPC research that could consider the long-term impact of the pandemic on both primary and secondary communication practices in other organizations.

Finally, in one more example for TPC scholars, it is of note that the study in general can provide useful content for TPC research by illustrating the usefulness of an international framework. This structure encourages a turn toward cultural rhetorics that emphasize how positionality, context, and situation matter. In the case of this study, the interviews presented highlighted two international perspectives from both the Netherlands and the UK, and the differences between the responses showed how not just, e.g., countries within the UK had differing ideas of how the pandemic was classified, but also, the pandemic impacted the UK and the Netherlands in different ways.

In addition to TPC researchers, law enforcement researchers also benefit, especially those looking into organizational change. As noted earlier and supported by other scholars such as Holly Campeau (2019) and Tom Cocroft (2013), law enforcement tends to maintain the status quo and resists transformation. It is also of note, though, as briefly mentioned, that the LEC is not motionless, and scholars such as Campeau (2019), Cocroft (2013), and Lorinskas et al. (1985) have also noted that change can occur. To identify these cracks, though, and move forward with progressive scholarship on police culture, Cocroft (2013) argues one thing to be done is to conduct more ethnographic research. Empirical work helps to detach from the assumptions present in literature and instead to hear those voices in the departments. Although Cocroft notes that an ethnographic-only view would be "impractical," listening to more voices would help to provide more balance to literature looking at organizational and cultural change in police cultures. More nuances help move beyond the literature's own status quo. It is in this space where this study sits. This study not only gives insight into communications practices within the LEC, but it also shows how and why the organization changed in response to the pandemic.

Limitations

There are, admittedly, limitations to drawing larger conclusions based on a limited number of interviews. However, the interviews serve as illustrative examples to draw attention to the larger breadth of the pandemic's impact on communication in a larger sense. I would argue that with a broader idea of pandemic communication, there can be more documentation completed in organizations at the pivotal time of the pandemic to determine if the pandemic created a punctuated equilibrium of communications or technological change.

Further, there are several points brought up in a more cursory way that could each individually be expanded on, particularly in context of TC research. For instance, the article notes the impact of the virus classification on marginalized communities, the use of technology to disseminate information to vulnerable communities, the challenges for those without technological skills to connect online, the potential risks for visualizations to distort information or help ethical decision making, or the need for contextual, cultural rhetoric when analyzing each instance of communication. Although each point would be worth pursuing further, these expansions were beyond the scope of this article.

It is also noted, then, that it would be worthwhile to follow up with the participants to understand which forms of communication continued over past the pandemic or trace the progression of the phasing out of some of the procedures. It would also be worth debate to consider when the pandemic officially ends. For instance, the 1-1-2 emergency line work from home was not a long-term communications solution even at the time of the interviews, but meetings with the possibility of joining online were looked upon more favorably and may have garnered more long-term support. Some participants did hint at these themes of longevity during the interviews, such as when one Dutch interviewee commented that despite an ever-present push for more attention to cybercrime, previously, not much had changed. However, the participant noted, COVID-19 has finally put cybercrime “a bit higher on the [police] agenda.” The same participant also noted a more long-term outlook and said, “the oil tanker, which the police is, is changing course, very slowly” implying that the police is a large and cumbersome body that does not rapidly shift directions, but it has turned the wheel a bit. However, although it was not within the scope of this project to allow for continued contact of the participants, it would be of use to conduct a follow-up or other exploratory study focusing particularly on primary and secondary pandemic communications to note if, and when, secondary pandemic communications (in direct response to a pandemic) were normalized into nonpandemic, but routine communication practices.

Conclusion

Overall, then, this article does three things: 1) it highlights the changes the LEC had to make to effectively communicate health risks, but it also 2) illustrates pandemic communications are more than just forms of messages to the public. They are changes of communication that are indirectly related to the pandemic but do not work to manage the health impacts of the pandemic. Finally, 3) it also argues that recognizing the distinctions between these two forms of communication is useful for identifying the larger impact of the pandemic on organizational communication practices as well as notes the practical implications for TPC for incorporating these different definitions.

Although this article focuses on a particular example for the LEC, larger parallels can be derived from it. Smite et al. (2023) argue that the pandemic has left a permanent shift in how many industries work. Although the LEC was the focus, going forward, it would be useful for those looking at pandemic communications to think beyond risk and crisis and into the more secondary realms of analysis. Paying attention to the various forms of pandemic communication is especially true as the height of the pandemic moves farther into the past and scholarship reflects and traces the changes, both big and small of how organizations and society have shifted in response to the punctuated equilibrium of the pandemic or returned to the status quo existing in prepandemic times.

Note

1. Drawing from Jim Dawson (2019), for this article, the law enforcement community is defined as a community comprised of personnel “who are employed by, under the supervision of, or interact with the [criminal justice] system” (p. 1). The law enforcement community can be a more stereotypical idea of a police officer or detective, more broadly a corrections officer, or apply even more broadly to emergency responders working for law enforcement agencies or mental health workers tasked with working for enforcement institutions.

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