

Research Summary

Subject

Subject:

- Crisis Communication and Community Resilience in the Niagara Region During COVID-19

Citation:

- Koerber, Duncan, Ribaric, Tim, Johnson, Fletcher, Murgu, Cal, & Sharron, David. (2024). *The Role of Municipalities in Communicating for Community Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study of Niagara Region's Crisis Communication*. Canadian Journal of Communication, 49(1), 64–99. doi:10.3138/cjc-2023-0003

Other studies referenced in this summary:

- Cohen, O., Goldberg, A., Lahad, M., & Aharonson-Daniel, L. (2017).
- Coombs, W. T. (2020).
- Sauer, M. A., Truelove, S., Gerste, A. K., & Limaye, R. J. (2021).
- McGuire, D., Cunningham, J. E. A., Reynolds, K., & Matthews-Smith, G. (2020).
- Olsson, E. K. (2014).
- Sanders, K. (2020).

Introduction

Background:

- The COVID-19 pandemic posed not only a significant health crisis but also a crisis communication challenge for governments at all levels. Municipal governments played a crucial yet often underappreciated role in crisis communication efforts, using their websites to inform, educate, and engage citizens. Effective crisis communication is essential for building community resilience, particularly during prolonged crises such as the pandemic.

Research question:

- How did municipalities in the Niagara Region communicate crisis information during the COVID-19 pandemic to support community resilience?

Hypothesis (if applicable):

- The study did not explicitly state a hypothesis but operated under the assumption that municipal crisis communication efforts play a vital role in informing and engaging communities during crises.

Methodology

- The study analyzed municipal COVID-19 webpage content from the Niagara Region's 13 municipalities between March 2020 and December 2021.
- It employed computational research methods, including web archiving through the Archive-It platform and content analysis via the SolrWayback search platform.
- The study used a combination of keyword searches, sentiment analysis, and close readings of over 300 webpages to track communication strategies over time.
- The study applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods to assess patterns in municipal messaging, focusing on education, information dissemination, and citizen engagement.

Results / Discussion

Findings:

- The Niagara Region's upper-tier municipality provided comprehensive COVID-19 communication, while lower-tier municipalities varied significantly in their effectiveness.
- Municipal websites primarily served to educate and inform citizens about public health measures, regulations, and service changes.
- Engagement efforts included social media integration, community campaigns, and direct appeals from municipal leaders. Some municipalities, such as Niagara-on-the-Lake and Pelham, effectively used emotional appeals to encourage compliance and build community solidarity.
- Sentiment analysis showed that most municipal communication was neutral or slightly positive, aligning with best practices for crisis communication.
- There were inconsistencies in messaging, particularly regarding early guidance on airborne transmission and mask-wearing, which may have impacted public trust.

Conclusions:

- Municipal crisis communication efforts played a key role in supporting public health measures and community resilience.
- While some municipalities effectively engaged their citizens, others provided only minimal updates, indicating disparities in crisis communication effectiveness across the region.
- The study highlights the need for more consistent and coordinated municipal communication strategies during future crises.

Limitations:

- The study did not assess audience reception or engagement metrics, making it difficult to determine the effectiveness of specific communication strategies.
- It focused solely on website content and did not systematically analyze municipal social media accounts.
- The study's findings are limited to the Niagara Region and may not be generalizable to other municipalities with different governance structures and resources.

Commentary by Trustmakers

While recognizing this paper's limitations, it does speak to something we at Trustmakers have seen many times. Managing issues and preparing for crises is much more effective than trying to respond quickly and "on the fly". Preparation is also much less resource-intensive when you consider the amount of resources that go into a situation that catches you completely off guard.

It speaks to something we have joked about many times in the office – if you have to call in a crisis communications firm to deal with a big urgent mess, then it is probably too late for you to build trust and support.

So, we encourage organizations to have radar system where you track issues and then have set teams, response plans, and templates that are ready for adaptation. As is a best practice in risk communication, we encourage the ongoing provision of information and engagement with your audiences long before there is a crisis. And, as this study points out, it will help you do something else that is key to success – coordinate with other parties with an interest or role in the issue before everyone is in a panicky mindset and events are unfolding quickly. Coordination and consistency are hard to manage when you're in the middle of a situation. Far better to set up those structures and processes well in advance.