

Mapping obstacles in governmental risk and crisis communication during prolonged crises: a six-country study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the conditions and challenges faced by governments in communicating during prolonged, with the COVID-19 pandemic as the illustrative case. Particular attention is given to the perspectives of actors directly involved in communication efforts, especially in how they make sense of their experiences, challenges and strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an international comparative design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 60 representatives from executive, public health and public relations sectors across six countries (Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) and multiple levels of governance. The representatives were asked to describe the obstacles in government communication during the pandemic, how they sought to address them and the solutions they proposed for future protracted crises.

Findings – The findings reveal a wide range of intra-, inter- and extra-organizational challenges shaping crisis communication. More than 20 obstacles are identified and organized into four domains: (1) the nature of the crisis, (2) intra-organizational factors, (3) inter-agency and inter-governmental coordination and (4) a complex, multimodal and polarized communication environment. Despite this diversity, seven key challenges emerge consistently across countries and governance levels.

Practical implications – The study proposes a framework that highlights structural and contextual factors shaping government crisis communication and provides strategic recommendations for improving communication in prolonged crises.

Originality/value – By foregrounding the perspectives of government communicators across countries (rare in existing research), this study offers a comparative, empirically grounded understanding of crisis communication challenges and advances theory through a typology and explanatory framework.

Keywords Prolonged crises, COVID-19, Government communication, Comparative studies, Crisis communication, Strategic communication

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In academic scholarship, “crises” have typically been conceptualized as short-term but potentially intense problems triggered for organizations. However, this traditional conceptualization fails to

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reflect the challenged reality of a prolonged crisis like COVID-19, which represented a societal-level crisis with health, political, economic and social impact (Diers-Lawson and Omondi, 2024; van Ginneken *et al.*, 2022). Unlike event-based crises, prolonged crises unfold over extended periods of uncertainty and policy change, requiring governments to sustain communication efforts while navigating evolving scientific knowledge, public expectations and political pressures. Under such conditions, government communication plays a critical role in shaping public understanding, trust in institutions and compliance with crisis response measures. Failures or inconsistencies in communication during prolonged crises can therefore undermine crisis governance and exacerbate societal tensions. While COVID-19 is receding from public consciousness, there remain important lessons to be learned to better address the complexity of future public health emergencies, disasters and prolonged crises.

Certainly, in the hundreds of thousands of articles published about the pandemic (Fraser *et al.*, 2021), there is already substantial research identifying lessons and best practices for government communication (e.g. Forman *et al.*, 2020; Ratzan *et al.*, 2020). Research has analyzed the content and effectiveness of government press releases, communiques and press briefings (e.g. Sellnow-Richmond *et al.*, 2023) social media content (e.g. Tasente *et al.*, 2023) and video blogs (e.g. Cui and Tong, 2023). It has also evaluated audience perception of government communication (e.g. Losa Diaz *et al.*, 2020). In addition, studies have investigated pandemic crisis management strategies (e.g. Ramírez Varela *et al.*, 2023), while others have focused on more specific issues such as inter-agency communication coordination (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2021). While these studies have generated valuable insights into communication practices, media dynamics and public responses, they provide comparatively limited insight into the organizational, institutional and political conditions under which government actors were attempting to communicate during the pandemic.

Indeed, the conditions surrounding and challenges of government communication remain largely unexplored, particularly research describing the experiences of government actors themselves. This gap is significant because governments are central communicative actors during prolonged crises, yet their communication capacity is shaped by complex institutional arrangements, intergovernmental coordination demands, evolving scientific information and highly polarized media environments. Without examining how government officials and communicators understood and navigated these challenges, it is difficult to explain why widely recommended communication practices – such as transparency, consistency and coordination – often prove difficult to implement in practice. Therefore, this study aims to build theory through a cross-national design by: (1) benchmarking obstacles and recommendations for government communication strategy; (2) considering the unique aspects of prolonged crises in government communication strategy and (3) creating a new framework based on the sensemaking processes of government, public health and communication officials.

Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has been classified by different scholars in many different ways with references to it being a “super wicked problem” (e.g. Auld *et al.*, 2021), “sticky crisis” (e.g. Jin *et al.*, 2021), or a “mega crisis” (e.g. Sellnow-Richmond and Lukacovic, 2024). However, in Diers-Lawson and Omondi’s (2024) conceptual synthesis of these types of disparate descriptions and summaries of this novel type of crisis, they differentiate prolonged crises from event-based crises based on six critical characteristics: time (see, e.g., Auld *et al.*, 2021), impact (see, e.g. Brinks and Ibert, 2020; Jin *et al.*, 2021), geography (see, e.g. Jin *et al.*, 2021; Sellnow-Richmond and Lukacovic, 2024), information management (see, e.g. Diers-Lawson, 2023), change likelihood (see, e.g. Diers-Lawson, 2023; Reeves *et al.*, 2020) and blame attribution (see, e.g. Bruine de Bruin *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, conceptualizing crises like COVID-19 as a prolonged crisis provides a more cohesive and exhaustive conceptualization of

transboundary, long-term crises. Yet, as it is a distinctive type of crisis, there needs to be more research exploring emergent strategic communication issues.

This research is needed because one of the critical challenges in today's "global risk society" is that local, regional, national and international systems and infrastructures contribute to not only the crisis response capacity but also the very risk environment itself (Löffelholz, 2022). In identifying the six critical factors differentiating prolonged crises from event-based crises, research suggests that there are four central challenges most directly related to government response. First, the moral outrage and heightened emotions will necessarily be present, especially during the critical phase(s) of prolonged crises (Coombs and Tachova, 2023). Second, policymaking and the communication of policy change are uniquely challenged during such times with risks of politicization and citizen reaction emerging (Auld et al., 2021). Third, time is a critical element, both because prolonged crises are not temporary disruptions, episodic or passing moments of chaos; they are far more complex (Auld et al., 2021; Diers-Lawson, 2024). Fourth, actors – state, NGO/IGO, media, and citizen – who seek solutions can also contribute to the problem (Sellnow-Richmond and Lukacovic, 2024). These characteristics suggest that government communication during prolonged crises is shaped not only by strategic intentions but also by the complex environments in which officials must interpret evolving risks, respond to public expectations and adapt communication practices over time. Understanding how government actors make sense of these evolving challenges is therefore essential for evaluating how communication strategies develop during prolonged crises.

Risk culture, media environment and autonomy

In an increasingly global context, governments are systems within the larger global system. That is to say that while individual governments are bound by the structures in which they operate, which can vary greatly across countries, at this point, it is difficult to untangle the causal relationships between the smaller systems and crisis response outcomes or whether there are more universal crisis experiences. For example, Huang et al. (2022) observed that more individualistic cultures were less likely to comply with virus containment strategies than less individualistic cultures. Similarly, a cross-country comparison by Tsai et al. (2023) observed that individualism and democracy levels influenced both disclosure of information on national websites and rates of vaccine uptake. Yet, whether these are correlated or causally related is difficult to determine. To be able to contextualize whether crisis response is dependent on the particular operational environments in which they operate OR whether there is a more universal experience of crises, comparative research is needed. Ultimately, such research can facilitate the creation of more effective descriptive and predictive typologies. Previous research suggests that media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 2016), risk cultures (Cornia et al., 2016) and relative levels of (de)centralization of political power in the government are likely to shape government communication. However, while these structural factors have been widely examined in relation to crisis outcomes, less attention has been given to how government actors themselves interpret and evaluate the constraints these environments place on their communication practices during prolonged crises.

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media systems theory argues that the media is a system that shapes and is shaped by political structures and changes because they are interdependent systems. The authors argue there are three models of media systems: (1) liberal; (2) democratic corporatist and (3) polarized pluralist. Though the model is criticized for being Euro/American centric and failing to capture the evolving and heterogeneous media systems emerging through digital disruption (see, e.g. Brüggemann et al., 2014), it remains an important framework. These media system characteristics are likely to influence how government actors experience and interpret communication challenges during prolonged crises, particularly when navigating competing media narratives, misinformation and heightened public scrutiny.

Second, the degree to which a government distributes power, ranging from being centralized or decentralized also shapes crisis response (e.g. [Lago-Peñas et al., 2025](#)). Naturally, we would expect meaningful differences between types of governments (e.g. modern democratic versus autocratic, theocratic, etc.); however, even within democracies, the institutional arrangements have been perceived as enabling or constraining crisis response. One note of importance is that healthcare in most Western Democracies is highly decentralized with subnational governments holding relatively high degrees of autonomy across healthcare functions and public health emergencies. Such institutional arrangements can shape not only crisis response outcomes but also how government actors interpret communication obstacles and evaluate coordination challenges across levels of government.

While the interactions of major systems like media and political systems are vital to understanding factors shaping government communication strategy, a cultural understanding of risk is a third factor that has been found to be vital in understanding government communication during prolonged crises ([Adebisi et al., 2021](#)). [Cornia et al. \(2016\)](#) define specific risk cultures as being: (1) individual-oriented, (2) state-oriented and/or (3) fatalist. The central question that differentiates these risk cultures is: who/what has agency for crises? In individual-oriented risk cultures, the assumption of agency lies with citizens; that is, when individual actors take appropriate action, crises or the effects of crises can be mitigated. In state-oriented risk cultures, the assumption of agency during crises falls on government actors; it is the government that has the agency to act to reduce risk and mitigate the effects of crises. Fatalist risk cultures do not make the same assumption that risks or crises are controllable. They believe crises are unavoidable because the assumption is that crises are caused by extraordinary forces or events; therefore, neither the citizens nor the state has the agency to prevent crises. These differing cultural expectations may influence how government actors understand their communicative responsibilities and how they later evaluate the effectiveness of their crisis communication strategies.

Importance of comparative government crisis communication research

While it may be true that the COVID-19 pandemic set the research agenda in motion for a greater focus on government communication strategy ([Löffelholz, 2022](#)), most of this research focuses on case studies from individual countries offering country-specific recommendations (e.g. [Kim and Kreps, 2020](#)). While useful, a snapshot of a government's communication at one moment in time does not sufficiently contribute to theory building or deep comparative analysis of the phenomenon of government communication during prolonged crises. Because prolonged crises transcend borders and country-specific mandates ([Diers-Lawson and Omondi, 2024](#)), government communication within this context needs to be better understood to explore some of the similarities and differences between countries. As [Esser and Hanitzsch \(2013\)](#) note, a comparative approach allows researchers to contextualize and critically reflect on communication practices by contrasting these against those in other societies. This approach then allows scholars to interrogate "naturalized" national phenomena or perspectives and to see the extent to which it applies in other environments (p.4). Comparative analysis is therefore particularly valuable for identifying how government actors interpret obstacles and evaluate lessons learned across different institutional and cultural environments.

From a pan-European perspective, in an analysis of 236 COVID-19 related scientific publications and reports, [Diers-Lawson's \(2024\)](#) research, which was also presented to the EU's COVID special review committee in January 2023 provides a starting point for considering "best practices" emerging from a comparative crisis communication approach in the context of COVID-19 as a prolonged crisis. This synthesis literature identified six communication-related best practices from governments during the prolonged crisis:

- (1) Efficacy-based communication strategies are more effective compared to fear-based strategies.

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- (2) It is important that governments manage the uncertainty surrounding the prolonged crisis.
 - (3) During prolonged crises, governments should encourage citizen engagement because citizens increasingly want their voices heard.
 - (4) Governments must build public trust by avoiding politicizing the prolonged crisis, being defensive about criticisms, and focus on accommodating public interest and the explanation for its policies.
 - (5) Governments must also tailor their messages to adapt key instructions to diverse audiences, especially vulnerable populations.
 - (6) Communication from various levels of governments should appear coordinated across agencies and organizations to build public confidence in the response.
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While this research identifies emergent best practices, it does not directly explore the government perspective nor the experienced obstacles in achieving these governmental best practices, so it is difficult to theorize from them. That is, it is one thing to identify comparative best practice, but it is another to build capacity – for this, critical reflection on the experience of developing and implementing government communication strategy is needed. Understanding how government actors themselves interpret the obstacles they faced and how they evaluate lessons from those experiences is therefore essential for translating best-practice recommendations into realistic crisis communication capacity building. We argue that there are three reasons why directly exploring the experiences of government actors improves theory and practice in prolonged crisis response.

First, sensemaking about the challenges of responding to a prolonged crisis from the communicators and officials provides greater depth and nuance to the evaluation of governmental crisis communication. Sensemaking in this context brings structure to the unknown as multiple nations “interact in pursuit of the unknown” (Weick, 1995, p. 6). Sensemaking has been applied to the COVID-19 pandemic to ascertain how individuals cultivated incomplete information to form structures of understanding and response (Deejay *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Thomas *et al.* (2022) observed the dueling constraints of short response time and the public’s demand for accuracy government practitioners face in sensemaking with incomplete information during emergencies. Examining how government actors engage in sensemaking about these challenges can therefore illuminate how they interpret and evaluate obstacles that shaped government communication throughout a prolonged crisis.

Second, as Diers-Lawson’s (2024) synthesis of findings from single-nation and cross-national evaluations of government response to COVID-19 demonstrates, while there are unique aspects to responding to prolonged crises in different nations, there are more commonalities in crisis response strategy. This is particularly true in a prolonged crisis, which is a transboundary crisis as well. For example, Medeiros *et al.* (2022) observed similarities in nation’s taking a pragmatic sensemaking style or perspective for strategically reducing COVID-19 infections as the pandemic persisted.

Third, while Diers-Lawson (2024) points out that coordinating communication is a best practice, the reality is that intergovernmental and interorganizational coordination is difficult due to fragmentation, decentralization, and political dynamics (see, e.g. Bowling *et al.*, 2020; Casula and Pazos-Vidal, 2021; Kuhlmann and Franzke, 2022). Relatedly, Pham *et al.* (2023) observed biases can constrained collaborative sensemaking among government agencies with Vietnam.

However, studies deriving recommendations from the actual experiences of government actors themselves remain few and far between, especially those employing an international comparative design. One of the few examples of comparative research is Savoia *et al.*’s (2023) research based on interviews with 27 government representatives from 19 countries. The authors identified nine principles of communication, such as timeliness, transparency,

accuracy and consistency, as well as 36 actionable recommendations for improving crisis communication capacity for governments. These recommendations include (1) establishing permanent communication teams for preparedness and response and (2) fostering relationships between public, private and nongovernmental/community entities before crises. The study, however, focuses on identifying evaluative communication management recommendations rather than comparative sensemaking about the common challenges experienced by communication managers and practitioners. Consequently, research remains limited in explaining both how government actors interpreted the obstacles they faced during a prolonged crisis and how they evaluate the lessons learned from those experiences for future crisis communication preparedness. As such, a study with a clear international comparative design should make an important contribution to research in governmental communication management during prolonged crises, particularly one focusing on comparative governmental sensemaking and evaluation of their response to a major prolonged crisis, like COVID-19. Therefore, we pose the following two research questions:

- RQ1. How do government actors sensemake to evaluate the obstacles they faced in managing government communication throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ2. How do government actors evaluate lessons learned to improve governmental risk and crisis communication for future prolonged crises?

Methods

Because the study's aims are to capture government communicators' experiences and critical reflections about the COVID-19 pandemic, data were gathered using semi-structured qualitative interviews, a method best suited to exploring complex human experience and insights. The interview guide focused on questions and concepts related to government risk and crisis communication functions, coordination, experiences, challenges and critical reflections on the factors influencing decision-making and action. The final interview guide consisted of 35 prompts that were pretested in two interviews in April 2022.

Sample

To reasonably explore the obstacles and recommendations surrounding government communication during prolonged crises, it was important to identify a diverse sample of countries. To ensure that countries were included representing diverse pandemic experiences, media systems, risk cultures and forms of government, seven countries were selected (see [Figure 1](#)).

Sample: recruiting participants from across government levels and functions. The sampling strategy for interviewees considered the specific roles of executive public policy makers, public health and communications officials at the national, regional and local levels. The objective was to arrive at a comprehensive view of crisis response through the perspectives of political, health and communication leaders during a prolonged crisis (see [Figure 1](#)).

The recruitment of the interviewees proved to be difficult; in part because recruitment started near the end of the pandemic, so there was role attrition and in part because by this point, government effectiveness was under close review in all countries, sometimes making officials hesitant to participate. Targeted recruitment based on identifying people and positions from public records began in April 2022 and continued until December 2022. While the desire to participate remained high at the local and regional level, it significantly decreased at the national levels (some governments issued a general rejection, which meant that the entire unit declined to participate). Therefore, the team also used snowball sampling as higher-level officials directed us to officials under their jurisdiction who were willing and able to speak about the pandemic.

N. COMMS. INTERVIEWS	N. HEALTH INTERVIEWS	N. EXEC. INTERVIEWS	COUNTRY	MEDIA SYSTEM	RISK CULTURE	GOVERNMENT (DE)CENTRALIZATION
4 (3-1-0)	1 (1-0-0)	3 (2-0-1)	ITALY	Polarized Pluralist	Fatalist	Unitary Parliamentary Republic
6 (3-3-0)	1 (1-0-0)	8 (1-6-1)	NETHERLANDS	Democratic Corporatist	Individual-Oriented	Unitary State with Parliamentary Monarchy
4 (2-2-0)	1 (1-0-0)	3 (1-2-0)	SPAIN	Polarized Pluralist	Fatalist* (Arcila-Cabrero et al., 2021; Charron et al., 2022)	Unitary State with Parliamentary Monarchy, Governance Decentralized, Autonomous Communities, Protected Powers
4 (2-2-0)	3 (1-2-0)	4 (3-0-1)	SWEDEN	Democratic Corporatist	State-Oriented	Unitary State with Parliamentary Monarchy
1 (1-0-0)	9 (5-4-0)	1 (1-0-0)	UNITED KINGDOM	Liberal	Individual-Oriented* (Nielsen et al., 2020; Weinberg, 2022)	Unitary State with Parliamentary Monarchy, Asymmetrical Devolution of Governance for Constituent Nations
3 (1-2-0)	1 (1-0-0)	3 (1-1-1)	UNITED STATES	Liberal	Individual-Oriented* (Barry et al., 2012; Hardy et al., 2021; Liu & Yang, 2021)	Federal Republic with Presidential System

Figure 1. Sample Summary for Government Officials and Communicators. *Notes: The original typologies did not classify the country, so the type was identified based on available empirical studies. The number of participants in the interviews is reflected for the total and the national-regional-municipal in brackets. Source: Authors' original work*

Despite the recruitment challenges, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2022 and February 2023 with representatives of governments and public healthcare institutions from the six countries (see [Figure 1](#)): 15 from the Netherlands, 11 each from Sweden and the United Kingdom, 8 each from Italy and Spain, and 7 from the United States. This constituted 22 executive-level participants, 16 public health participants and 22 communication participants.

Data collection procedures

The interviews were primarily conducted online with video conferencing tools. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, who agreed to speak under the condition of confidentiality, meaning their names, positions, and organization locations would be anonymized to protect their identities. Interviews lasted on average one hour (between 35 and 90 min). In most cases, a single person participated in the interview, while in some cases, two or three people did. Interviews were typically conducted in the project language – English. However, if our interviewees preferred to be interviewed in their mother tongue, the interview guide was translated into each language by native speaker interviewers for each language whenever possible. While translating, we considered the nuances of meaning and how they may vary across countries ([Murphy, 2018](#)). We received assistance from our international partners, comprised of communication experts and native speakers, to ensure item equivalence.

Data analysis

Thematic saturation was achieved with this sample. We conducted a qualitative content analysis on the interview transcripts using MAXQDA 2022, following a 33-page coding scheme. This scheme consisted of categories derived from both the identified theoretical dimensions and the content discussed during the interviews. The coding scheme included two formal variables (interviewee and coder codes) and 23 content variables, organized into seven dimensions: responsibilities of the organization and the individual, risk and crisis

communication strategies, intra-, inter- and extra-organizational influencing factors, obstacles and optimization opportunities. While there is a category that directly corresponds to obstacles, the interview partners referred to them in statements that were also coded under other categories, such as “target groups,” “communication strategies” and “evaluation methods.”

In lieu of an intercoder reliability test, the coding scheme was pretested in three rounds and reports were discussed in several coder meetings. These were done to clarify the meaning of categories and refine the coding scheme, leading to the exclusion of some subcategories.

Using a constant comparison method (see [Richards and Morse, 2012](#); [Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)), emergent themes were matched to the conceptual grounding (i.e. nature of prolonged crises, “best practices” in governmental COVID-19 response, media systems, risk cultures and government (de)centralization) to produce the subsequent results and discussion.

Results and discussion

Understanding both the sensemaking and evaluation of government officials’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic comes down to a single word – obstacles. These data demonstrate that the unifying experience in government communication strategy development and implementation during a prolonged crisis is that it is fraught with obstacles. Moreover, these data demonstrate that in the context of a societal-level prolonged crisis, there are fewer differences between countries and little to no evidence that risk cultures, media systems, or government (de)centralization emerged as ways to frame the experiences of governments in responding to and managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the approach in this results and discussion section is to focus on what did emerge – the obstacles governments faced in responding to and managing the prolonged crisis.

Findings revealed that the more than 20 obstacles identified by the MAXQDA procedure within the seven dimensions – responsibilities, risk and crisis communication, intra-, inter- and extra-organizational influencing factors and optimization opportunities, were centered on four categories of obstacles: (1) the nature of the crisis; (2) intra-organizational (e.g. crisis preparation mechanisms of the organization); (3) inter-agency and inter-governmental coordination and (4) a complicated multimodal, polarized communication environment (see [Table 1](#)). These findings indicated limited differences based on government structures, media systems, nor risk cultures, which are detailed below.

Aside from helping to identify a typology of government communication obstacles, the interviews (summarized in [Table 1](#)) provide several important insights regarding the obstacles to government communication. First, the interviews demonstrate a collective belief that insufficient planning, capacity and policy consistency represented significant obstacles in communication internally, between agencies, and with their publics. More specifically, these data help us to identify nine major obstacles present in most of the countries, suggesting that during large, prolonged crises, like COVID-19, government communicators and strategists at all levels face similar obstacles (see [Figure 2](#)).

Second, despite a common experience with the major obstacles facing government communicators, the interviews also revealed that, to some extent, government centralization, media systems and risk cultures also shaped the obstacles experienced in the six countries. The most meaningful factor influencing the number of obstacles that government communicators experienced was the level of government with meaningful differences in obstacles communicated at the national and subnational levels of government. Therefore, the level of government should be more meaningfully considered in government communication planning – particularly, the capacities and interaction between government actors at different levels. Spain was a noteworthy exception to this, displaying the least disparity between the national and subnational governments reported in the interviews. Spain also has the most decentralized government, but also perhaps the most structured decentralization. Because healthcare governance is largely decentralized in Western democracies, it seems that the structure

Table 1. Summary of obstacles identified by government officials and communicators

Obstacle category	Obstacle	Countries	Subregions
Crisis Nature	Uncertain, Multiplex, Prolonged Crisis	Italy	N/A
		Netherlands	Amsterdam-Amstelland, North Limburg, South Limburg, Friesland
Intra-Organizational	Crisis Plans, Structures Insufficient and/or Outdated	Spain	Madrid, Valencia
		Sweden	Västra Götaland, Stockholm
		UK	Northern Ireland, Wales
		US	Washington, New York
		Italy	Local Gov't Assn., Veneto
		Netherlands	Amsterdam-Amstelland, South Limburg
		Spain	N/A
		Sweden	Västra Götaland, Stockholm
		UK	Wales
		US	Washington
	Difficulty in Assembling, Maintaining Resources for Communication	Italy	Veneto
		Netherlands	Amsterdam-Amstelland, North Limburg, South Limburg
		Spain	N/A
		Sweden	Västra Götaland, Stockholm
		UK	Wales
	No Initial Coherent Plan	US	Washington
		Sweden	N/A
		US (Sub)	Washington
	Insufficient Human Capacity in Crisis Response	Italy	N/A
		Sweden	Västra Götaland
	Insufficient Local Government Resources	US (Sub)	Washington
		Netherlands (Sub)	South Limburg
		Sweden (Sub)	Västra Götaland, Stockholm
	Inflexible Funding	Italy	N/A
		Sweden	N/A
		US	N/A
	Inconsistent Personnel and Decision-Makers	UK	N/A
Inter-Organizational	Agency Mandates and Structures Insufficient for Coordination	Italy	N/A
		Netherlands	North Limburg
		Sweden	N/A
		US (PHI)	N/A
	Inconsistent Message and/or Policy Across Agencies for Coordination	Italy	N/A
		Netherlands	North Limburg, South Limburg
		Spain	N/A
		UK	Northern Ireland, Wales
	Political Friction and Interference	US	Washington, New York
		Italy	N/A
		Spain	Madrid
		US	Washington, New York
	Advice Not Citizen-Centered – Too much Modeling	UK	N/A
		US	N/A
		Sweden	N/A
		UK (Sub)	Wales
	Subnational Governments Unable to Implement National Policy	Italy (Sub)	Campania, Local Govt Assn, Veneto
		Netherlands (Sub)	Amsterdam-Amstelland, Local Govt Assn
		Spain (Sub)	Madrid
		Sweden (Sub)	Stockholm
	Difficult to Get Funding from National Governments	US (Sub)	Washington
		Netherlands (Sub)	Local Govt Assn
	Too Many Roadblocks to Communication Clearance	US (PHI)	N/A
		Spain	N/A
	Intergovernmental Inconsistency	Spain	N/A

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Obstacle category	Obstacle	Countries	Subregions
Multi-Modal Polarized Communication Environment	High Levels of Mis- and Dis-Information	Italy	N/A
		Netherlands	North Limburg, South Limburg, Local Govt Assn
		Spain	Valencia
		Sweden	Västra Götaland, Stockholm
		UK	Northern Ireland, Wales
	Climate of Distrust Limiting Communication Effectiveness	US	Washington, New York
		Italy	N/A
		Netherlands	South Limburg, Frysland
		Spain	N/A
		UK	Northern Ireland
	Limited Journalist Capacity for Pandemic Reporting	US	New York
		Italy	N/A
		Spain	N/A
	Media Obfuscated Government Messages	US	N/A
		Italy	N/A
		Netherlands (Sub)	North Limburg, Frysland
		Sweden (Sub)	Stockholm
	Social Media Platforms Challenging to Use	UK	Wales
		US	Washington, New York
		Netherlands (Sub)	Frysland, Amsterdam-Amstelland, South Limburg, Local Govt Assn
		Sweden	Västra Götaland
		UK (Sub)	Wales
	Behavior of High-Profile People Damage Trust in Government	US	New York
		UK	N/A
	Media Too Critical of Government	Netherlands (Sub)	North Limburg, Frysland
		Spain	N/A
		US (Sub)	Washington

provided by Spain’s decentralization structure may have helped to mitigate the differences in obstacles experienced by their national and subnational governments. By contrast, the most disparity between national and subnational governments occurred in highly unitary parliamentary monarchies (i.e. the Netherlands and Sweden). These two countries also happen to be the two countries with democratic corporatist media systems. However, the limited consistency and strength of these reflections warrant additional research to determine the role that decentralization plays in government communication during prolonged crises.

The third critical insight was that risk culture largely shaped the obstacles experienced by countries regarding the multi-modal polarized communication environment. There are indications that it could be a moderator in government communication. For example, while Sweden still faced obstacles with its communication environment, participants from Sweden reported considerably fewer and smaller problems in managing the overall communication environment. Sweden also happens to be the only nation with a state-oriented risk culture. The other five countries either had fatalistic or individual-oriented risk cultures. This suggests that institutional efficacy/agency may create a fundamentally different political environment for governments that removes or at least mitigates communication obstacles. These three insights provide a context for better understanding each of the critical findings relating to the types of obstacles identified by the interviews as well as the ways that the practitioners considered their own best practices in the context of capacity-building after the pandemic.

Prolonged crisis obstacles in government communication management

As government and public health officials were about their pandemic experience, the recurring sentiment communicated was that no government nor institution could have prepared for this



Figure 2. Classifying obstacles in government communication management during prolonged crises. Source: Authors' original work

kind of a prolonged crisis. Participants described the pandemic in the same way that [Diers-Lawson and Omondi \(2024\)](#) summarized prolonged crises as multiplex, protracted, transboundary crises rife with uncertainty. Each of the six countries included in the comparison made this point at the national level. Moreover, in all but Italy, the point was also made at the subnational level as well and often in multiple places. This finding is consistent with previous sensemaking research suggesting that the incomplete information ([Deejay et al., 2023](#)) and the public's demand for timely and accurate guidance ([Thomas et al., 2022](#)) are consistent constraints to sensemaking in crises such as pandemics. Aside from confirming the validity of "prolonged crises" as a distinctive type of crisis, this also suggests that there are meaningful opportunities for cross-national planning and collaboration for prolonged crises as well.

In fact, one of the best opportunities for cross-national planning is to manage the scientific uncertainty in the case of these kinds of public health emergencies. The interviewees noted that scientific uncertainty is the heart of the obstacle they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapidly evolving evidence base was open to many interpretations, difficult to communicate, and damaged compliance with reactive policy making. Limitations in cross-regional and cross-national planning were also identified as critical challenges as the transboundary nature of the crisis made it difficult to narrate. Likewise, though transparency was an inherent communication objective identified across the participants, communicating through the uncertainty of the prolonged crisis made it difficult to demonstrate transparency and to communicate both about the known and unknown. A vital part of instructional communication is explaining not only what to do but also why ([Sellnow et al., 2023](#)). However, as officials in the United Kingdom and Netherlands shared, having that conversation

with society was difficult during COVID-19 because they were trying to fairly represent what was known and unknown, maintain credibility and minimize “push-backs” or resistance to the message.

Intra-organizational obstacles: too little competence, capacity, preparation

In identifying intra-organizational obstacles, government structure, media systems and risk cultures seemed to play limited roles because respondents from each of the six countries in the study at both national and subnational government levels noted that the countries were simply not prepared for a prolonged public health emergency like COVID-19. One of the primary reasons for this was a lack of internal capacity to respond. Participants noted that while they all had existing crisis management plans, none of them were fit for purpose in this type of crisis. Second, they also noted that assembling and sustaining resources – especially human resources – for the communication effort was a core challenge (see [Figure 3](#) for major obstacles). However, even within countries, the experiences at the national and subnational levels were not the same. For example, the English-focused UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) participants noted that the “national” incident emergency response plan was useful for establishing operational, communication principles, and cross-government response arrangements. However, that was not a universal “British” experience in the devolved health system as a Welsh official noted that “manualized sort of principles” informed the response, but they had to “make things up to some extent” as the crisis went on because they were “learning about the disease on an almost daily basis.”

As [Table 1](#) suggests, there were additional capacity-oriented obstacles faced by different countries during the pandemic. For example, the United States, Sweden and Italy all noted challenges with inflexible funding mechanisms that did not adequately let governments and/or public health organizations move money to support interventions as needed. Similarly, local government units in Sweden and the Netherlands both noted that they did not have sufficient resources to implement the communication interventions needed to meet their objectives. Three countries also noted that it was not just the material resources to support communication

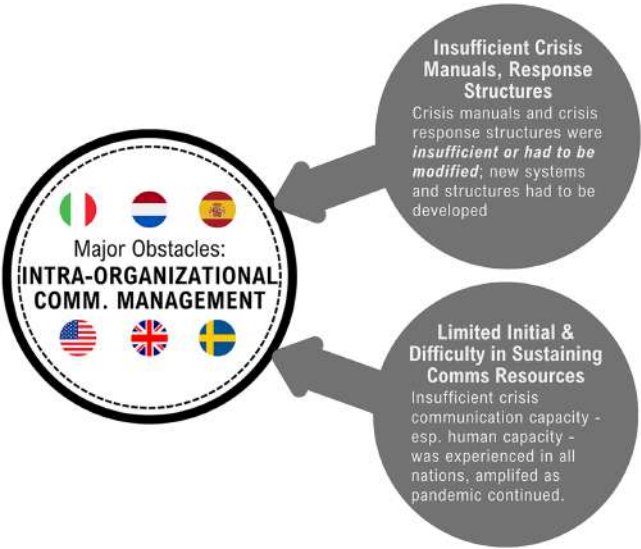


Figure 3. Major intra-organizational government communication management obstacles. Source: Authors’ original work

interventions; the United States, Italy and subnational government in Sweden all noted that developing crisis communication competence in government and public health communicators was also a critical capacity shortcoming. Finally, there were unique experiences in different countries. For example, frequent government leadership reshuffling and changing structures in the United Kingdom were noted as a key obstacle for pandemic communication management whereas a subnational government respondent in the United States noted a critical lack of a government-wide strategy early in the pandemic. No matter the obstacles identified, governments identified clear capacity shortcomings for successful government communication during COVID-19.

Inter-agency and inter-organizational obstacles: politics and mandates

As with the intra-agency obstacles, the inter-agency and organizational obstacles seemed to be “universal” experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Capacity difficulties identified at the organizational level for government communication certainly also contributed to the inter-organizational obstacles that participants reported when reflecting on their experience with COVID-19. At both national and subnational levels, two major obstacles emerged (see Figure 4). First, given the limited and sometimes inflexible resources (both human and monetary) for building internal crisis communication capacity, there were limited initial and barely sustainable communication resources for inter-organizational coordination. In some cases, agency mandates even prevented seamless coordination with some participants, noting that they lacked a coordination blueprint. Second, each nation identified critical coordination problems attributable to inconsistent messaging and/or policy across governments, levels of government, and different agencies, which created meaningful obstacles for effective communication management. Finally, a third major obstacle emerged for subnational governments. Subnational governments struggled to implement or align their strategy with national-level policy, also noting that sometimes the advice simply came too late.



Figure 4. Inter-organizational obstacles – unsustainable, inconsistent and nontransferrable approaches.
Source: Author's own work

Combining these major obstacles with the additional minor ones identified in Table 1, three broad themes emerge. First, the mandates overall were not fit-for-purpose in cross-border, cross-agency, and cross-level coordination. In Sweden, the United States, Italy and the Netherlands, for example, agency mandates were either too narrow or specific to allow seamless coordination between organizations during the prolonged crisis. This complements the struggle that subnational governments in five countries reported in interpreting and implementing national-level policy because scenarios simply did not translate to all regions. Second, because of inconsistent policy across borders, regions and agencies, government communicators often found themselves having to respond to questions or complaints arising from inconsistent messages and/or policy. Finally, and unsurprisingly in a major prolonged crisis, political friction and interference emerged and was more pronounced in countries like Spain, Italy and the United States compared to the others.

Obstacles from a polarized multimodal communication environment

The final group of obstacles, like the other three, represented a relatively unified experience despite government structure and media system. Only risk culture seemed to meaningfully influence this with Sweden, as the only example of a state-oriented risk culture was different. Participants noted that their already stretched government communication effort was increasingly challenged by a highly polarized and challenging multimodal communication environment to navigate filled with mis- and disinformation and where journalism seemed ill-equipped to improve the information environment (see Figure 5). Four major obstacles and three themes emerged in the discussion of the polarized multimodal communication environment. Unsurprisingly, first and foremost, government communicators note that the infodemic was a universal obstacle at both national and subnational levels of government. They noted that one of the complexities surrounding untangling mis- and disinformation is better understanding and better communicating about scientific uncertainty. In other words, the “story” emerging from the infodemic was simply easier to understand than the uncertainty

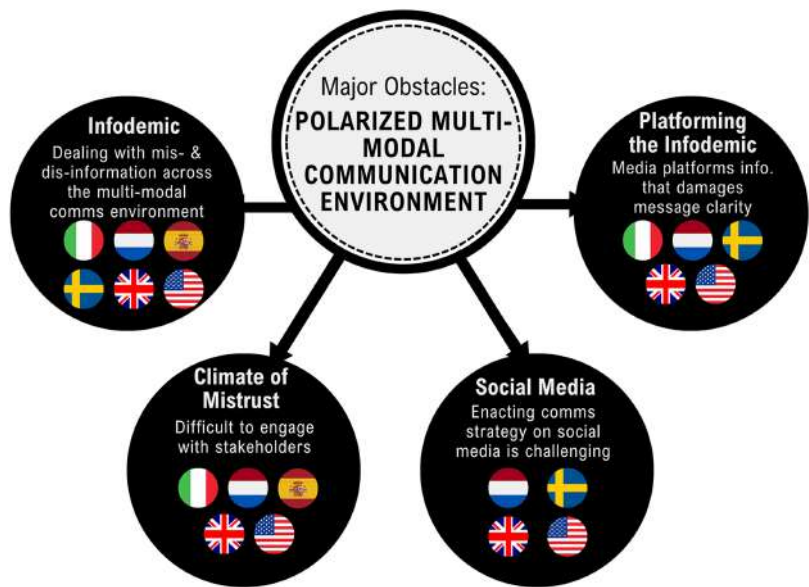


Figure 5. Obstacles presented by a polarized multimodal communication environment. Source: Authors’ own work

of an unprecedented societal-level crisis and a disease that was not well-understood early on. Second, most countries also experienced an evolving, complex and increasingly problematic climate of mistrust emerging as the prolonged crisis continued. Third, there was a duality of the obstacle associated with social media noted – it was both necessary and difficult to successfully enact social media strategy in a capacity lean environment. Finally, broadly and across different channels, government communicators saw the media as providing a platform for obfuscating messages – both directly and indirectly.

Yet, these issues were even more complex than these major obstacles noted (see [Table 1](#)). Fundamentally, interviewees from all countries – except Sweden – emphasized the difficulty of wading through an increasingly hostile and politicized climate as time passed during the pandemic. These high levels of polarization uniquely challenged the resource-strapped agencies to successfully enact a communication plan. Additionally, collectively, the countries reflected that media relations and reportage represented key challenges for government communication. For example, Italy, United Kingdom and the United States complained that journalists were simply not equipped for effective science communication whereas Spain, subnational governments in the Netherlands and the United States believed the media was too critical of the government. It would be fair to say that most of the government communicators described the media as an *agent of complication* during the prolonged crisis.

By contrast, all the interviewees in Sweden, at both regional and national levels, believe that the government enjoys high levels of social trust, which helped facilitate the implementation of COVID-19-related policies. The trust is bidirectional: the national level interviewees said that they trust their constituents to make the right decisions once they are equipped with the right information. One national-level official explained that high trust is important, especially in an approach that does not use “lockdowns.” These statements imply a unique element of the risk culture of the nation-state: the sociocultural concept of “*folkvett*,” or what Orlowski and Goldsmith (2020, p. 293) defined as “the common sense of the people as a collective.” Orlowski and Goldsmith explained that the *folkvett* was integrated into the pandemic response, which relies on a “more explicit cooperation between the state’s response and people’s individual responsibility to curtail the spread - itself a very ‘Swedish’ strategy” (p. 293).

Overcoming obstacles with better communication during prolonged crises

In directly answering the second research question, interview participants also identified clear recommendations for better communication during prolonged crises. As has been the case throughout these findings, there were limited – if any – meaningful differences identified based on government structure, media systems or risk cultures. However, three categories of communication recommendations with several specific recommendations emerged, including (see [Figure 6](#)): improving overall strategy for prolonged crises; improving internal capacity; and better managing polarized multimodal communication environments. Notably, each of these recommendations encourages a degree of flexibility or adaptability over the long term, that exceeds previous assumptions and best practices for event-based crises.

Fundamentally, the government communicators advocated for fundamental shifts in practice, including creating, as one Swedish government official noted, a seemingly paradoxical “system for the unknown,” meaning a structure with predefined roles, people with the skills for prolonged crises, continual training and upskilling, and maintaining a “common language” among organizations. These qualities are intended to empower crisis communicators as they encounter the inevitable uncertainty of prolonged crises. Similarly, a US-based respondent noted that such a system would need to be flexible enough to “ramp up the response rapidly.” But these changes were not just about human and financial resource capacity building, government communicators also saw a need for improving or developing better legal frameworks for addressing prolonged crises. For example, this could mean clarifying the legal instruments needed to better manage prolonged crises to avoid, as the

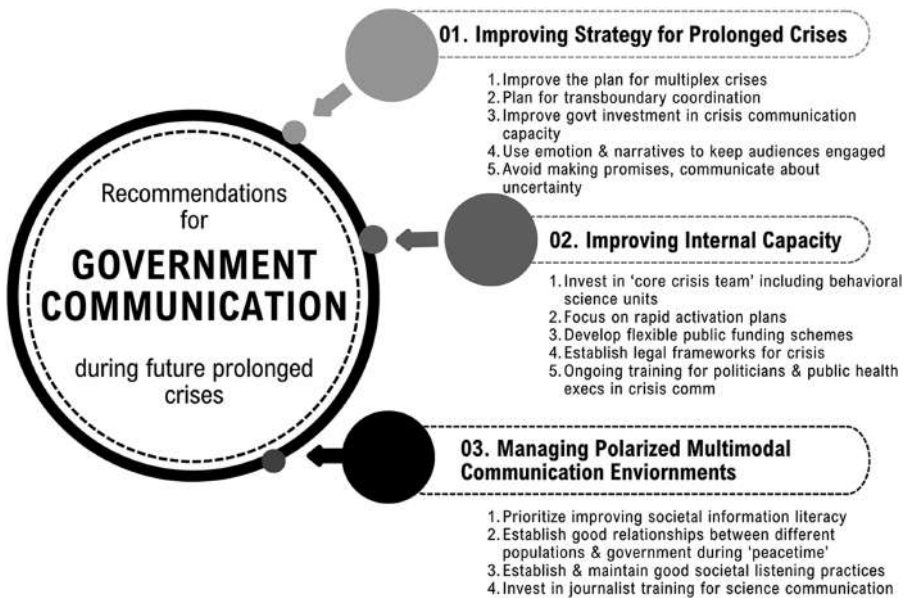


Figure 6. Recommendations from government communicators for prolonged crises. Source: Authors' own work

Spanish noted “confrontations” between national and subnational governments or resolve the initial “chaos” that Dutch participants described as characterizing the initial stages of the pandemic.

Interviewees consistently also noted that to build sustainable systems of crisis response, governments needed to invest and perhaps fundamentally rethink what crisis communication means and whether the assumptions from typical crises could readily be applied to “longer periods of uncertainty” associated with prolonged crises. But participants further note that transboundary crises also require different and planned international coordination schemes because “thinking in borders has not helped us at all” in terms of both policy and the interpretation of scientific evidence. A United Kingdom-based participant noted that these differences in interpretations lead to governments “giving different messages . . . sometimes they are sort of subtly different” that often lead to significant “impact in terms of confusing people.” A final element to this sustainable system of crisis response was learning how to better communicate uncertainty. A member of the Northern Ireland government reflected on one of their best practices noting that, “in order not to damage trust, where we don’t know things, we need to be honest about that and then explain the rationale for why we’re providing particular advice or taking particular courses of action in the presence of that uncertainty.” This transparency and trust are vital because during prolonged crises, messaging and recommendations will have to change based on the latest information or even waning compliance and so Swedish communicators reported emphasizing storytelling and emotional appeal in their messages. Unlike event-based crises, where uncertainty is typically managed and resolved by a single organization, industry or nation, managing uncertainty in prolonged crises is relational, requiring international collaboration dialogue.

Finally, participants highlighted the vital importance of both peacetime and crisis response in combatting the problems associated with infodemics with investment in permanent risk communication teams. The interviews consistently emphasized that, at the heart of the capacity-building effort, governments must prioritize relationship building, community

engagement and social listening. They also noted that part of the peacetime risk communication work needs to emphasize improving societal information literacy – particularly regarding scientific information. Government communicators acknowledge that “it’s difficult to understand that the science is working by trial and error”, which might lead to “confusion” when policies change in response to the situation.

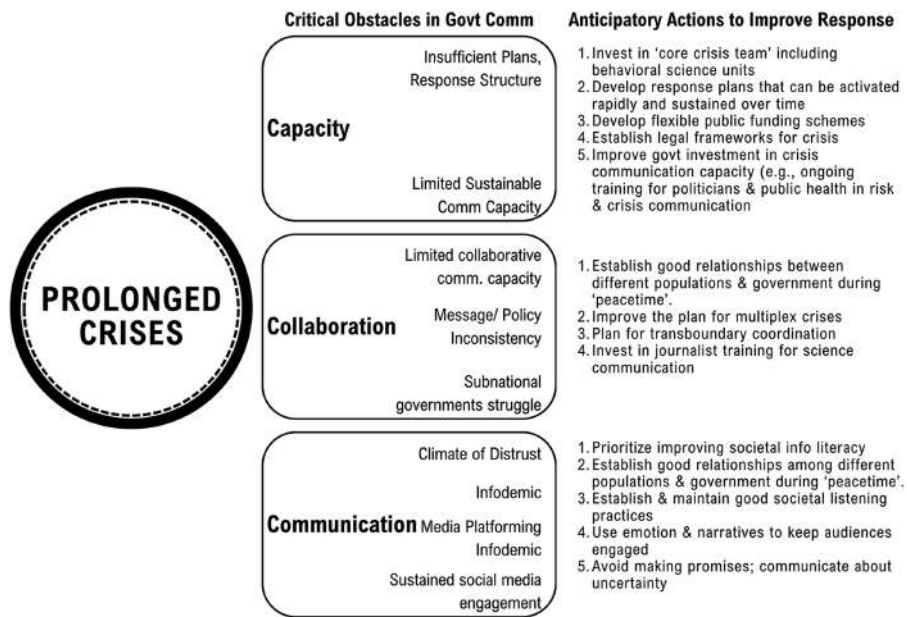
Participants identify two levels of investment in information and science literacy. First, some suggested that it should be embedded in the national education curriculum – starting as early as primary school “so that people have a good enough grounding when there are messages out there about protecting them.” Second, participants suggested that a concerted effort needs to be placed on improving scientific literacy for journalists and media professionals because many felt “it was very difficult to get journalists to understand and be able to decipher” complex epidemiological data, which could provide “a true picture of what was happening with less margin of difference”. These statements align with the findings of other researchers, such as [Mesmer et al. \(2024\)](#), who found that “there was a lack of emphasis on uncertainty” and insufficient explanation of “the science associated with COVID-19” (p.790). Overall, participants recognize basic information and science literacy skills are essential regardless of crisis type. Thus, fortifying this skillset contributes to fulfilling the compelling need in prolonged crises to prepare for the unknown.

Conclusions

Collectively, government officials at national and subnational levels, along with public health in all nations agree that the communication obstacles they experienced during COVID-19 were attributable to both the unprecedented scale of the crisis, but more importantly to the prolonged nature of the crisis. While future research should explore the influence of government structure, media systems, and risk cultures in more and more diverse contexts (e.g. non-Western and/or democracies), the most important factors emerging in the sensemaking and critical evaluation of government communication during the pandemic were the obstacles created both by the nature of the crisis and governments’ relative ability to manage the complexity of this experience. This largely confirms [Diers-Lawson and Omondi \(2024\)](#) conceptualization differentiating between event-based and prolonged crises as a new framework for characterizing crises. However, that framework focused on the summary characteristics of what made the crisis type distinctive. The findings from this study drawing its sample of multi-level and multi-functional practitioners across media systems, democratic government types and different risk cultures highlight the validity of considering prolonged crises as distinctive.

Practical implications

Moreover, these findings highlight specific differences in government communication within the context of prolonged crises compared to their previous experiences. These findings further demonstrate that government communication needs are also distinctive during prolonged crises. As in event-based crises, governments must have the capacity to respond rapidly at the onset of a prolonged crisis. This initial response, however, must be both agile and sustainable. Response strategies must meet both the initial needs and shifting demands indicative of prolonged crises. Moreover, the relational needs for evidence-based crisis response plans are magnified in prolonged crises. Study participants indicated that the longer crisis duration led to a strained relationship on multiple levels as well as legal complexities. Hence, planning for prolonged crises requires considerable attention to establishing and fortifying relationship. Collaboration with traditional and new media sources and an emphasis on media literacy are also of increasing importance in prolonged crises. These challenges and opportunities should be fully considered in advance of prolonged crises. These findings are explicitly articulated in [Figure 7](#). The model presented in [Figure 7](#) summarizes a capacity, collaboration and



C3 Anticipatory Framework for Government Communication During Prolonged Crises

Figure 7. C3 Anticipatory framework for government communication during prolonged crises. Source: Authors' own work

communication (C3) anticipatory framework for government communication in prolonged crises. It summarizes and categorizes the findings (see [Figures 2–6](#)) into a coherent framework that focuses on the critical challenges associated with the intra-organizational, interorganizational and polarized communication environment facing government communicators today. As such, this framework makes a meaningful contribution to scholarship by using sensemaking and evaluation as post-crisis tools to improve the approaches, capacity building and structures need for crisis communication and government emergency response during prolonged crises. Risk and crisis communication is an applied field, so theory building in this field should effectively contribute to changes in our thinking about the field as well as provide applied contributions. We suggest that the C3 framework does both because it: (1) demonstrates clear support for differentiating between event-based and prolonged crises; (2) suggests that there are some relatively universal experiences in government communication amongst Western democracies experiencing societal-level prolonged crises indicating transferability of experience and best practice and (3) identifies limitations in current assumptions about how government structure, media systems and risk cultures affect government communication.

The framework is preliminary, but promising. As a preliminary framework for government communication during prolonged crises, it needs to be validated in other media systems, government types, and across risk cultures. It also needs to be validated during other types of crises as well. However, this study has a strong start as a multi-country, multi-level study of the challenges and recommendations for governmental communication during prolonged crises. The study and resulting framework have also highlighted significant gaps in anticipatory crisis communication practice, while also challenging assumptions on differences and similarities between countries. As we live in societies with conditions that are likely to precipitate more prolonged crises, it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to confront such

assumptions and even challenge established practices and systems in crisis communication and management in general. As COVID-19 made abundantly clear, the linear assumptions of evident-based crisis best practices and theorizing fail to account for the intensifying demands of prolonged crises.

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Ethical-statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Technische Universität Ilmenau. The committee granted clearance during its meeting on April 12, 2022. All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards as described in the documents presented for ethical approval.

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