

# THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE'S ROLE IN COMBATING COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

*Centres of government (CoGs) have played an important role in tackling the crisis caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This paper discusses the high-level institutional arrangements put in place by governments to manage policy responses to the pandemic, with a special focus on CoG's leading or supporting role in three main dimensions: co-ordination and strategic planning, the use of evidence to inform decision-making, and communicating decisions to the public. As governments face unprecedented governance challenges, the pandemic has uncovered gaps in both government co-ordination and the use of evidence for policy making, which directly affect the nature and quality of the measures adopted to tackle the crisis and its aftermath. These challenges have led to a number of quick fixes and agile responses, which will need to be assessed when the worst of the crisis is over. In addition, in relation to the fact that experts' recommendations are generally technical and supposedly neutral, we note that in the COVID-19 crisis different experts have suggested different public health policies. We consider the British case of herd immunity and the US case of the exclusion of disabled people from medical care. These decisions have strong axiological implications and affect people profoundly in very sensitive domains. Another goal is, therefore, to argue that in such cases experts should justify their recommendations-which effectively become obligations-by the canons of public reason within the political process because when values are involved it is no longer just a matter of finding the "best technical solution," but also of making discretionary choices that affect citizens and that cannot be imposed solely on the basis of epistemic authority.*

**Keywords:** Communication, COVID-19, Government, Medical Care.

## INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic exemplifies the systemic nature of today's crises and the severe effect they can have on our societies and economies. These crises unfold in a fragmented institutional context, leaving central governments with fewer levers to activate in a crisis and more actors to engage with, from the private sector to local governments and civil society (Dearing & Singhal, 2020). Managing such crises and addressing their socio-economic consequences requires audacious policy action to maintain functioning healthcare systems, guarantee the continuity of education, preserve businesses and jobs, and maintain the stability of financial markets. Political leadership at the centre is essential to sustain the complex political, social and economic balance of adopting containment measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic while ensuring the provision of essential services. Such leadership is essential for maintaining citizens' trust in government. Simultaneously addressing these various competing policy objectives requires a dual approach working across government silos. This is necessary to promote national resilience and preserve well-being with agile and innovative responses at the

highest level, while co-ordinating and collaborating with lower levels of government and a large array of stakeholders (Lopes & McKay, 2020; Dalton et al., 2020).

The response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic exemplifies the ways in which governments adapt their crisis management to a complex crisis and institutional landscape. In particular, governments have often developed complementary approaches to traditional emergency management procedures, led or supported by the center of government. They had to do so as they were facing many unknown unknowns (Cockerham & Crew, 2020; Tulich, 2020). In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic became an iconic example of the sort of Black Swan events identified by Nicholas Taleb, unpredictable events of an extreme rarity that generate potentially severe societal consequences that lay beyond the realm of what is normally expected of such an occurrence.

## CONCLUSION

Often, crises have a useful role to help overcome organizational silos with a shared sense of urgency, which is often hard to replicate when government face more traditional issues competing for attention. The CoG's ability to transfer knowledge acquired during one type of crisis to another will become decisive as the rate, scope and extent of crises facing our societies increase. In this regard, the experience of Singapore in the aftermath of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak is notable. Indeed, while COVID-19 and SARS are very different diseases, with different global impacts, the time-bound structures established during SARS were replicated to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, allowing for a more pro-active response resulting in a relatively low mortality rate. In fact, in a number of jurisdictions and economies, such as Singapore, Korea, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan, the pre-existing experience of the SARS crisis led to a much higher degree of preparedness, and to greater resilience in adapting to the current crisis.

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