

Crafting Efficiency and Legitimacy in Health Crisis Communication - Scandinavian COVID-19 Press Conferences

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Abstract: This presentation detailed a thematic analysis of press conferences held by public health authorities and governmental officials in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic to assess how they framed their messages to effectively resonate with the public, deliver explanatory insights, and provide actionable guidance following the IDEA model, alongside constructing legitimacy in their crisis leadership. The findings indicated that all three countries employed instructive and legitimate communication strategies; however, notable variations emerged between the nations as well as between government officials compared to public health experts. The political leaders in Norway and Denmark emphasized internalization and comprehensive explanations, conveying a strong sense of empathy and urgency. In contrast, the public health authorities in Sweden and Denmark focused on explanations and actionable insights, prioritizing data transparency and the dissemination of scientific information. As such, this presentation detailed the role that the sender plays in message construction during a prolonged crisis.

Keywords — IDEA model, Legitimate Crisis Leaders, Public Health, Political Communication, Prolonged Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major public health crisis, impacting healthcare, the economy, and education, necessitating coordinated responses from governments and non-governmental organizations. For the Scandinavian nations, that operated on high trust in public institutions and transparent communication, press conferences were crucial for government officials and public health authorities (PHAs) to convey updates, establish urgency, and foster public trust. Sweden used daily briefings to share information on infection rates and measures, while Norway held daily sessions early in the pandemic, and Denmark initiated a national lockdown announced by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen during a press conference on March 11, 2020.

This presentation included a thematic analysis that revealed how messaging encouraged adherence to health guidelines per the IDEA Model and Legitimacy, alongside multimodal artifacts like visuals and tone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PRESS CONFERENCE

Press conferences serve as an effective communication tool for promoting compliance with health measures through techniques like fear or peer pressure. They efficiently disseminate information to diverse stakeholders, including the media and community groups, combining speech, visuals, and symbols for broad outreach [1]. Press conferences inform the public and shape news coverage with visual elements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they became crucial in Scandinavia for delivering announcements, addressing media questions, and fostering public urgency [1].

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SCANDINAVIA

The Scandinavian countries are recognized for their high levels of institutional trust, which were largely maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic through effective communication strategies [9]. However, notable differences emerged in their approaches to crisis management. Denmark adopted strict mandates and rapid governmental interventions influenced by a cultural emphasis on personal boundaries and collective accountability. Norway implemented similar stringent measures but emphasized voluntary participation and trust in government to protect individual autonomy. Conversely, Sweden's strategy relied on voluntary adherence to guidelines, emphasizing citizens' personal accountability and confidence in scientific research. This approach allowed for lenient measures relative to its neighbors, yet public confidence in the government remained relatively high [9].

IDEA MODEL

A critical aspect of responding to an epidemic or pandemic is adapting complex scientific information for various audiences by translating expert research findings into accessible language for non-experts [2]. This entails that crisis leaders should enhance stakeholder self-efficacy by providing clear, actionable guidance on personal response activities. To assess Scandinavian crisis communication effectiveness, this study uses the IDEA model which highlights four key components: Internalization (showing stakeholder relevance), Distribution (multichannel communication), Explanation (providing clear, credible information), and Action (offering specific protective steps) [3].

LEGITIMACY

Successful outbreak management requires navigating complex political and social networks [4]. Government officials and PHAs need to maintain legitimacy and credibility to build public trust, which is crucial for effective crisis management [5]. Promoting legitimacy can involve maintaining transparency, focusing on professional competence, and engaging in consistent messaging [6][7]. Given the importance of legitimacy in Scandinavian crisis communication during the pandemic [8], it raises questions about how countries like Sweden, Norway, and Denmark managed their responses, and thus this study expands on the IDEA model with the concept of Legitimacy.

METHODS

To investigate the press conferences and briefings from PHAs and government officials across various media, this study focused on unfiltered recordings from official websites and social media. The analysis, which covered 22 briefings from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark totaling over 15 hours, aimed to compare themes, tone, and speech in prepared statements and responses to media inquiries, along with non-verbal elements like physical setups and visual aids.

Codes were categorized into four themes: Internalization (including identified people, specific places, time, degree of negative impact, additional negative impact, and empathy), Explanation (similar event, information from other countries, government response, credible sources named, scientific information, and intelligible information), Action (guidance, preparation, and examples on actionable recommendations), and Legitimacy (ability to act, interorganizational cooperation, expertise, resources, known and unknown facts, accountability).

RESULTS

MULTIMODAL FINDINGS

The Norwegian press conferences, mainly led by government officials, shifted from an urgent and empathetic tone to a more informal style. They used podiums in a formal setting against a blue background, conveying integrity and confidence [10]. Each speech began with a serious call to action, followed by a structured presentation from government officials and PHAs, maintaining a cohesive narrative.

In contrast, Swedish press conferences, led by PHAs, began with a global overview before focusing on national details. The presentations featured white backgrounds—symbolizing simplicity and cleanliness [10]—and included slides with data visualizations and actionable steps. Each spokesperson provided independent updates, creating less coordination than in Norway, but still conveyed collaboration among organizations.

Denmark's press conferences began with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the State Ministry, using an urgent and empathetic tone against a dark grey backdrop, suggesting maturity [10]. Subsequent briefings by the Danish Health Authority were streamed on Facebook, featuring a more casual style with minimal text and a color palette of white, green, and blue. These briefings maintained a formal tone but did not focus on addressing misinformation despite its prevalence on social media, opting instead for data-driven responses to live questions.

IDEA(L) MESSAGE STRATEGIES

The thematic analysis showed that Norway consistently prioritized internalization in press conferences more than Denmark and Sweden. Denmark addressed COVID-19 impacts in every briefing, showing empathy in 80% of cases, while Sweden focused on identifying affected individuals and places but expressed empathy in only 10% of their conferences.

Sweden excelled in providing explanations, covering all elements except for similar events in 40% of meetings. Norway followed suit with scientific information and government responses in 90% of appearances, but only 10% referenced similar events. Denmark, while including scientific information in all meetings, offered less explanation overall.

Regarding actions, both Norway and Denmark provided public guidance in all cases; Sweden did so in 90%. Denmark recommended actions for preparation in 80% of presentations, compared to Sweden's 60% and Norway's 40%.

In terms of legitimacy, Norway included references to expertise and cooperation in all appearances, with 70% acknowledging accountability. Denmark stated expertise in all press conferences and recognized accountability in 80% of cases, whereas Sweden focused more on their ability to act and included expertise references in 70% of appearances, acknowledging accountability in 40%.

DISCUSSION

This analysis of press conferences and briefings by government officials and PHAs in Scandinavian countries during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the communicative strategies that a majority of the populations of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark found satisfactory and maintained high levels of trust in the PHAs during the first stages of the pandemic [8]. The study indicates that these strategies aimed to resonate with stakeholders by increasing internalization, enhancing clarity by providing explanations, promoting self-efficacy via actionable guidance, and reinforcing legitimacy by providing information to increase trust and transparency, however, with notable differences in their approaches informed by cultural expectations and sender expectations.

In Sweden, PHAs adopted a data-driven communication style, prioritizing clear explanations over internalization, simplifying complex scientific findings for the public while emphasizing their ability to act. Norway, led by government officials, sought to foster internalization and conveyed urgency with an empathetic tone, focusing on personal connections rather than detailed presentations. Denmark's initial press conference mirrored Norway's empathetic style but was followed by PHAs adopting Sweden's technical approach, emphasizing updates and recommendations. Denmark's strategy highlighted actionable guidance and accountability while the scientific information shared was less accessible than in Sweden and Norway, potentially hindering public engagement.

CONCLUSION

The presentation illustrated how spokespersons from Scandinavian governments and PHAs differentiate between types of communication aimed at stakeholder engagement, elucidation of decision-making processes and events, and guidance on actions that enhance self-efficacy. This differentiation plays a crucial role in establishing legitimacy through institutional trust and credibility, which is essential for securing public compliance. The analysis revealed significant variances across countries and between government-led and public health expert-led press briefings. Norwegian and Danish political figures focused on fostering internalization and providing clear explanations while conveying empathy and urgency. Conversely, the Swedish and Danish PHAs emphasized the importance of delivering detailed explanations, actionable recommendations, transparency, and robust scientific information.

Author Biography

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