

# No Time, No Willingness, or Just ‘No’? Government Leaders’ Attitudes Toward Involvement in Risk and Crisis Communication Research

Pauline Gidget Estella

Technische Universität Ilmenau  
Ilmenau, Germany

Martin Löffelholz

Technische Universität Ilmenau  
Ilmenau, Germany

**Abstract:** Government communication during crises is a well-researched field, with the COVID-19 pandemic alone generating a plethora of studies. However, the willingness of government actors to participate in crisis communication research has received little attention, despite the need for evidence-based evaluation. The same is true for methodological reflections in comparative crisis communication research. Using a case study approach, this study addresses this gap by analyzing the experiences in the recruitment phase of a seven-country comparative study on pandemic risk and crisis communication, in which we sought to interview key crisis response actors across different functions and levels of government. We found that the governments in some countries appear to be far more open to participating in research than others, which can be seen within the context of science-related populism. Methodological considerations, recruitment strategies, and other challenges were also discussed, as well as recommendations for future comparative studies using the same approach. The paper thus serves as both a methodological reflection and a discussion of the challenges of fostering academia-government collaboration (government actors as respondents) in crisis communication research.

**Keywords** — COVID-19, Government communication, organizational communication, prolonged crises

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## INTRODUCTION

Government communication in times of crisis is far from being under-researched. Hundreds, if not thousands, of articles have been published on the COVID-19 pandemic alone, exploring different aspects, perspectives, and settings. However, studies of the intra- and inter-organizational factors that shape communication practices are relatively rare, especially those in which communicators and policy makers themselves report on their experiences and challenges. Equally rare (if not more so) are studies that explore the willingness of government actors to engage in crisis research, despite the importance of evidence-based evaluation studies.

This paper aims to address the above research gaps, focusing on methodological considerations and the openness of government stakeholders (executives, public health officials, and communication practitioners) to participate in research on the inner workings of crisis communication. It adopts a case study approach, analyzing our experiences and decisions in a seven-country comparative study of pandemic risk and crisis communication in which we interviewed high-level officials and communicators. As such, it is both a methodological paper and a paper that discusses issues or challenges in academia-government cooperation in risk and crisis communication research.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is extensive research on government risk and crisis communication during the COVID-19 mega-crisis, studies of communication dynamics both within organizations and across institutional boundaries remain scarce. One might assume that this deficiency is due to the difficulty of recruiting participants, especially when it comes to government officials or staff, who are often constrained in sharing information about themselves and their institutions. The same can be said about considerations of methodology and research epistemologies. Because the pandemic is a crisis event that is more complex and prolonged than those typically examined in research, studies that outline best practices and key challenges can provide guidance for future inquiry. In this paper, we discuss the challenges of engaging with government actors in our comparative qualitative study, the patterns of engagement we observed, and the methodological considerations that informed our approach.

While the topic of government-academia cooperation is well-studied, there is little to no research on the willingness of government actors to participate or the barriers to participation. Instead, studies on government-academia collaboration often focus on funding and investment challenges, the translation of research into policy, and institutional barriers [e.g., 1]. There is research exploring the conditions and reasons of people who decline to participate in academic research [e.g., 2], but none of these include government actors as respondents. Common reasons for declining to participate in research include lack of extrinsic motivation, such as rewards for participation or structural disincentives, social vulnerability, poor informed consent procedures, and lack of knowledge about research and its role in society [e.g., 3].

One particularly interesting study that has influenced our focus is the work of Blanchett et al. [4] on journalists as research participants, where they explore the difficulty in recruiting practitioners, and the ways in which researchers have attempted to overcome this obstacle in an international comparative study. The authors analyzed the experience through the “lens of social exchange” and emphasized the significance of “relationship-building as a focal point in order to adequately contextualize findings within a sociology of news framework” (p.1). Because the paper focused on the recruitment phase as the data, it was also able to offer recommendations on research strategies.

In light of what has been discussed in this section, this case study will address the following research question: To what extent, and for what reasons, have government officials in Europe and the United States been willing to participate in research that systematically evaluates communication responses to protracted crises?

## METHODS OR PROCEDURES

This paper draws its data from the recruitment phase of a comparative qualitative study of government risk and crisis communication in seven countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, we conducted interviews with representatives from the political executive, communication, and public health functions within national and regional/state governments in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), and United States (US), as well as representatives from local government associations (N = 75). The logic behind the sampling is the idea that representatives from different functions can provide different perspectives, creating a more comprehensive view of crisis communication and the intra- and inter-organizational factors that they believe may have shaped it. Furthermore, by defining the crisis management functions and key offices in the pandemic response, the sampling technique can be applied across the seven countries, thus maintaining functional equivalence. The countries were selected to capture environments within the so-called Global North that, while exhibiting important differences in risk culture, media systems, and governance centralization, still share strong similarities [5, 6].

The team began identifying potential interviewees from public records in April 2022, and the recruitment phase lasted from May 2022 to February 2023. Correspondence was conducted by team members who spoke the official language of the country. Initial contact was made via official email addresses and web forms, while follow-up was carried out via Skype phone calls. We also sent messages via LinkedIn, which was successful in a few cases (when the interviewee could not be reached through official channels). Recruitment was a complex and difficult process, as many of the invited interviewees declined because for various reasons (to be discussed further in the results section). We also used snowball sampling especially at the higher levels of government, as officials referred us to other staff who they felt could best speak to the situation.

We documented the entire recruitment process by keeping a log of all contact attempts: Who called or emailed, date and time, with hyperlinks to evidence, such as screenshot of the Skype call log. This approach allowed us to track the number of contact attempts over time, the channels used, and the reasons for declining to participate in the research.

## RESULTS

With 75 accepted interview requests out of a total of 380 invitations, the average success rate across the countries was 19.7%. The mean success rate was 25.3% (SD = 11.85%). The success rates per country were as follows: Sweden (40.74%), the Netherlands (32.6%), Germany (30%), Italy (13.7%), Spain (13.04%), UK (12.85%), and US (5.74%). While our experience in this study cannot be considered equivalent to a representative survey of government officials and communicators, it is worth noting that governments in Northern and Central European countries (Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany) were more willing or able to participate in our crisis communication research than those in Southern European countries (Italy and Spain), the UK, and US. We also found that the response time to interview requests was generally shorter in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany.

The most commonly cited reason for declining requests to participate was time constraints, although some respondents cited an ongoing public review of pandemic policy and government performance. Many contacts declined without explanation. In the US, in particular, a significant number of contact attempts went unanswered. Efforts to secure participation from governments in 15 right-leaning (“red”) states were also unsuccessful. Several offices in the UK and the Netherlands issued omnibus refusals, in which entire organizations declined to participate, leaving us with only predecessors to interview. In one particularly striking example of refusal, an official in one of the red states in US explicitly stated that they were “not interested in any pandemic research”.

## DISCUSSION

In this case study, it is clear that the vast majority of government officials in US and selected European countries are not very eager to participate in crisis communication research. However, it is also clear that the openness of officials considerably varies from country to country. As mentioned in the previous section, governments in Northern and Central European countries (Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany), where levels of political polarization and distrust of authorities are relatively lower, were more willing or able to participate in our crisis communication research compared to those in Southern European countries (Italy and Spain), the UK, and the US. At the absence of ways to understand reasons behind declining participation (e.g., interviews), we can make sense of these patterns through literature-based conjecture.

First, these results make sense in the context of conservative and populist governments, which are often associated with low levels of popular trust in institutions. Populist and conservative governments, and their supporters, tend to politicize or resent scientific endeavors and institutions, and in some cases such governments even disenfranchise scientific pursuits, primarily by defunding them [7]. This is part of what Mede and Schäfer [8] call “science-related populism” that pits “ordinary people” against the maligned “academic elite” (p. 473).

Second, the level of openness to research participation in some countries can be partly explained by the strong enforcement of legal guarantees of freedom of information and the well-entrenched tradition of open government, especially in the Nordic countries [9]. Such a political culture emphasizes transparency (in policymaking, implementation, and evaluation), consensus, and citizen participation [10]. Interestingly, models and definitions of open government also vary across European democracies, with some emphasizing transparency but neglecting open decision-making [10].

Finally, the limited interest in research on government crisis communication may reflect a low regard for research as a means of evaluating one’s own practices. Government actors may view evaluative research either as a key to improvement or as a potential exposure of failures in crisis response. Nevertheless, there are ways in which scholars can improve the chances of engaging government actors in research. In our study, snowball sampling worked well because interviewees, especially high-level officials, referred us to other potential interviewees within their jurisdictions. This is consistent with what Blanchett et al. [4] wrote about the importance of relationship-building in recruiting participants. Moreover, from our experience, we believe that participation can be further encouraged by contextualizing their research participation in terms of benefits to science and the larger (even global) society and by describing data protection in detail.

In terms of research practicalities, our sampling technique, underpinned by theoretical frameworks in crisis studies and political science, is worth replicating for future comparative studies. The final sample shows the different dimensions and functions that might shape government crisis response and that can be applied across the countries for functional equivalence. However, we also had to take into account the uniqueness of some systems, which left us with the following considerations in attempting to achieve functional equivalence: 1) inclusion of organizations that played an important role in the pandemic crisis response but have no direct counterparts elsewhere, 2) definition of ‘left-leaning’ and ‘right-leaning’ states, as realities can be more nuanced, 3) definition of subnational governments to include, for example, the provincial level in Sweden, which does not have the same responsibilities as regional/state governments in other countries, and 4) definition of public communications, as some governments separated their communications to the public from communications to the media. Digital tools, particularly Skype, can be very useful not only for calling targeted participants, but also for documenting contact attempts, which can serve as an evidence base for studies of recruitment patterns (or as a way of demonstrating that the team exercised due diligence in contacting key actors).

## CONCLUSION

This case study explored the willingness of government actors to engage in research on crisis communication. While the case study is not a representative survey or a set of interviews with government actors, it shows patterns in the openness of crisis response actors to participating in research evaluating their practices. Based on our recruitment experiences, we observed that governments in some countries were more receptive to research participation than others, a pattern that can be interpreted through the lens of science-related populism [9] and the concept of open government [10]. We also offered recommendations on sampling, recruitment strategies, and methodological considerations in a comparative study. Future research can focus into the actual reasons for declining participation through interviews or surveys.

## Author Biography

Pauline Gidget Estella holds a PhD in Communication from the Technische Universität Ilmenau, where she is currently working as a postdoctoral fellow. Email address: pauline-gidget.estella@tu-ilmenau.de

Dr. Martin Löffelholz is Professor of Media Studies and Chair of the International Crisis Communication Research Group in Technische

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