

Policy Brief

COMMUNICATING THE PANDEMIC

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KEY INFO

Research question: How then can a government deliver urgent advice to an entire national population facing a common health risk when that population does not have a shared set of experiences and values?

Policy area or theme: Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change

Methods: 10-wave population survey

Geographical area: UK-wide

Summary of the research

Communicating information effectively to all parts of the population during the pandemic is challenging and needs to take account of the different experiences and perspectives that exist within the British population. The effectiveness of attempts to reach and persuade citizens to protect themselves and one another depends upon four crucial objectives – ensuring that:

1. Clear and relevant information reaches people
2. People can absorb and comprehend such information
3. People can critically evaluate and ultimately trust what they are being told
4. People are able and willing to comply with official guidance

Our study was based on a ten-wave nationally-representative survey conducted in 2020 comprising data from 3,111 UK adults aged 18+. It shows the existence of six different population groups, characterised by differences in experience, attitude and behaviour.

The report identifies population segments in terms of their values, attitudes and experiences; socio-demographic profile; approaches to information-seeking and media sources; capacity to make sense of messages; evaluation of messages; and compliance with official guidance. The relationship between these various factors tells a story that needs to be taken on board by the communication strategists who have been charged with disseminating messages about the pandemic.

Policy recommendations

We identified six segments within the UK population:

- Individualist risk-takers (12% of the population)
- Non-information-seeking sceptics (19% of the population)
- Information-seeking rule-followers (21% of the population)

- The complacently confident (19% of the population)
- Information-seeking critics (16% of the population)
- The experientially risk-averse (12% of the population)

The key message from this report is that attempts to address the public as a homogeneous recipient of information and guidance relating to the pandemic are bound to fail. There is a need for a communication strategy in response to the current crisis that takes account of divergence between distinct population groups, while opening up space so that people holding particular perspectives can engage with others who have different attitudes and experiences. This will help to engender a clearer public sense of the civic principles underlying the national response to the pandemic. The lead investigator is now working with the UK Health Security Agency on a major study of health inequalities and their relationship to responsiveness to official health communication.

Key findings

- While almost everyone agrees that pandemics constitute an existential threat to lives, livelihoods and lifestyles, the ways in which threat is perceived depends upon a range of social positions, experiences and attitudes that cannot be reduced to a monolithic singularity.
- Attempts to address the public as a homogeneous recipient are bound to fail. Some groups within the national population will feel that their experiences are being recognised and their values shared, but others will feel unrecognised and devalorised.
- The pandemic raises a fundamental challenge to shared citizenship, and this calls for imaginative ways of encouraging inter-group understanding with a view to making concerted action possible and appealing.
- Sensitivity within official communication to different levels of personal efficacy would help to produce a range of message tones that are more representative of public levels of apprehension. Proximity to COVID is clearly a key determinant of risk perception.
- Understanding the relationship between structural inequalities and cultural dispositions should be a key priority for health communication strategists.

Contact

A major study, conducted by the Principal Investigator in collaboration with the UKHSA is forthcoming shortly.

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February 2022