Toward an Improved Risk/Crisis Communication in this time of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Baseline Study for Local Government Units

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study mainly explores the communication preferences of the public; their level of trust in the government; and the factors affecting their risk/crisis perception amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It is aimed at providing insights on how Local Government Units (LGUs) can effectively communicate with the public in this current crisis. The key findings of this study were derived from the data collected through an online survey and analysis using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). This online survey, through chain referrals, was conducted from 28 April to 4 May 2020. The assumptions for SEM and the questions used in the survey instrument were based on reviewed literature and on a previous study about how LGUs can use social media to enable mutual trust and collective action during this pandemic.

Key Findings

Communication Preferences
- Social media is the primary channel for receiving/seeking information
- Preference for other communication channels of people aged 40 and above
- People receive/seek information once or more daily

Factors Affecting Perceived Risk/Crisis Communication Effectiveness
- Frequent and timely communication
- Financial updates/reports related to COVID-19 response
- Presence of interactive communication
- Use of native/local language

Risk Perception and Public Trust
- Generally high risk/crisis perception
- Factors that influence risk perception formation: *perceived severity of the crisis, life disruption, perceived severity of the disease, and perceived susceptibility*
- Higher perceived effectiveness of LGU-risk/crisis communication enables trust building
- Public trust and risk perception influence how the public perceive the benefits of health and safety measures/protocols imposed
- Observance of self-protective behavior will more likely happen when the public believes that safety measures/protocols are beneficial to them

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INTRODUCTION

Risk and crisis communication is among the most important aspects in managing and responding to the harmful and negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It involves responding to the public's need for information so that they can address the immediate and potential effects of a disaster or an emergency (Lachlan et al. 2015). Within the context of COVID-19, this, among others, may include information about how they can protect themselves from the virus; how they can help in slowing down/preventing its transmission; the government's health and emergency response/strategies; number of confirmed cases/Persons Under Investigation (PUI)/Persons Under Monitoring (PUM); state of healthcare capacity; transmission scenarios etc. These types of information can enable the public to make informed decisions with respect to protecting themselves or their communities from COVID-19 as well as facilitate civic engagement and collective action toward mitigating the current crisis and preventing future risks.

In developing a risk/crisis communication plan/strategy for COVID-19, the initial step involves an assessment of the public's risk perception toward the disease (WHO, 2020). Risk Perception is the subjective judgement of an individual about the nature and severity of a risk (Renner et al., 2015). In health decision-making, individuals are expected to navigate choices that involve weighing the risks and potential consequences over possible benefits of an action (Ferrer and Klein, 2015). Citing the A/H1N1 virus or 'swine flu' outbreak in 2009,

Renner and Reuter (2012) believed that the success of public health intervention programs is largely dependent on risk perception. It is therefore considered as a major determinant of individual and collective protective action and behavior. Information about the people's risk perception can serve as bases for coming up with risk/crisis communication messages to address misconceptions and negative or potentially detrimental perceptions.

Aside from risk perception, the public's communication preferences should also be assessed. This could be a reference to identify how risk/crisis communication messages can be strategically delivered. It answers questions such as 'which communication channel to use?'; 'how frequent should information be disseminated?'; 'how to enable participation from the people?'; 'in what language should information be provided?' etc.

METHODOLOGY

This study looked into the aforementioned factors in order to provide baseline information that could guide Local Government Units (LGUs) to effectively communicate with their constituents amidst the current pandemic. Aside from risk perception and communication preferences, the public's perception on the current crisis as well as how much they trust their LGUs in terms of their health crisis response and management strategies were likewise examined. This was done through an online survey conducted from 28 April to 4 May 2020. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The assumptions for SEM and the questions used in the survey instrument were based on reviewed

literature and on a previous study about how LGUs can use social media to enable mutual trust and collective action during the COVID-19 crisis. The following are the specific variables measured in this study:

- Communication Preferences (of both the respondents and their LGUs.)
- Perceived Benefits of Health and Safety Measures/Protocols
- Life Disruption (degree to which their lives were disrupted because of COVID-19)
- Self-Protective Behavior (degree to which they practice self-protective behavior)
- Perceived Susceptibility (to COVID-19)
- Perceived Severity of the Disease
- Perceived Severity of the Crisis
- Public Trust
- Perceived Effectiveness of LGU's Risk/Crisis Communication
- Civic Engagement

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

It is important to note that the generalizability of the findings is limited to the obtained sample from the online survey. Nevertheless, the LGUs may use these findings as guide to effectively communicate with their constituents.

The following is a summary of the respondents' profile:

Geographic. A total of 250 responses were collected from 96 cities/municipalities in 31 provinces and 15 regions of the country. Most responses came from the National Capital Region (NCR, 31%), Zamboanga del Norte (17%) and Iloilo (11%), comprising almost 60 percent of the overall respondents.

Age Group. Most (76%) of the respondents were from age groups 18-29 (42%) and 30-39 (34%). The rest belong to age groups 40-49 (14%), 50-59 (9%), and 60 and above (1%).

Sex. Most or 64% of the respondents are female while 36% are male respondents.

Highest Educational Attainment. Majority (56%) of the respondents were college graduates. A relatively high number of responses also came from those who have completed graduate studies at 34%.

Occupation (status prior to the Enhanced Community Quarantine or ECQ). Most (78%) of the respondents were employed before the implementation of ECQ. Others were students (9%), and self-employed (7%). Only 6% was unemployed.

HIGHLIGHTS

This section enumerates and briefly discusses the highlights and key takeaways from the study.

Communication Preferences

- **Social media is the primary channel for receiving/seeking information.** Majority (57%) of the respondents said that they usually receive/seek risk/crisis information from their LGUs through social media. Others usually receive/seek them from television (18%); online news articles (8%); government websites (7%); barangay/community announcements (4%); and mobile messaging applications (2%).

- **Preference for other communication channels of people aged 40 and above.** Majority (62%) of the respondents between 18-39 years old said that they usually access information through social media but for 40 years old and above respondents, only 41% prefer social media over other communication channels.

- **People receive/seek information once or more daily.** Around 35% of the respondents access information from their LGUs once, while 24% of them access it more than once daily. At 59%, this comprises the majority of the respondents. The most frequently/timely disseminated types of information based on the survey responses are updates/reports on local COVID-19 situation; updates/reports on COVID-19 response/management; information on safety measures against COVID-19; and appreciation posts for donors/contributors.

Factors Affecting Perceived Effectiveness of LGUs' Risk/Crisis Communication

- **Frequent and timely communication.** The results of the simultaneous regression and path analysis showed that when LGUs produce more and timely information related to the present health crisis, it will more likely result to positive public perception on their risk/crisis communication effectiveness. The cross tabulation between frequency and timeliness of communication; and perceived effectiveness of an LGU's risk/crisis communication also supports

these results where the overall mean (3.91) falls within the higher end of the six-point discrete visual analog scale (DVAS) used to measure the variable *(perceived effectiveness of LGU's risk/crisis communication).*

- **Financial updates/reports related to COVID-19 response.** Relative to other types of information, the LGUs who provided the most and timely financial updates/reports related to COVID-19 response received the highest rating from the respondents with respect to their risk/crisis communication effectiveness. However, it is also the least frequent/timely type of information released by LGUs based on the responses.

- **Presence of interactive communication.** More than half (52%) of the respondents said that their LGUs use two-way communication channels where they could send feedback, suggestions and interact with their respective LGUs. Most (72%) of them are able to do these via social media, either by sending a direct message to their LGU's social media accounts (usually through facebook), or by posting a comment on their posts. The cross tabulations also suggest that people are more likely to associate effectiveness of risk/crisis communication with the presence of two-way communications channels.

- **Use of native/local language.** Most of the respondents' LGUs communicate with the public using native/local language (40%) and Filipino (32%) while 24% of the

respondents said that their LGUs use English. The rest (4%) of the respondents said that their LGUs use either English and Filipino or English and native/local language. While the findings suggest that generally, the use of any language can lead to high perceived effectiveness of risk/crisis communication, it is deemed most effective when native/local language is used.

Risk Perception and Public Trust

▪ *Generally high risk/crisis perception.* All the factors measured to assess the respondents' risk/crisis perception got high mean scores within the six-point DVAS *(4 to 5.41).* This suggests a generally high risk/crisis perception among the respondents.

▪ *Factors involved in risk perception formation: perceived severity of the crisis; life disruption; perceived severity of the disease; and perceived susceptibility.* The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) revealed that perceived severity of the crisis, life disruption, perceived severity of the disease, and perceived susceptibility have significant contributions in the formation of the latent variable – *risk perception*, in the context of the COVID-19 public health crisis. It further showed that life disruption and the person's perception on the severity of the [health] crisis contribute more in the formation of their risk perception. The results of the CFA suggest that individual risk perceptions tends to be higher as their perception based on these factors increases.

▪ *Higher perceived effectiveness of LGU-risk/crisis communication enables trust building.* The simultaneous regression and path analysis to the model have shown that LGU-risk/crisis communication must be effective to improve public trust. This is consistent with the idea of van Zoonen and van der Meer (2015) that a higher public perception on the effectiveness of risk/crisis communication implies credibility in terms of content or source.

▪ *Public trust and risk perception have implications to the public's perception on the benefits of the health and safety measures/protocols imposed.* Tormala and Clarkson (2008) underscored that demonstrating credibility is necessary to foster trust in order to increase the effect of the message. The simultaneous regression and path analysis to the model affirms their argument where a higher-level of public trust to the LGU will more likely lead to positive perception on the benefits of the health and safety measures/protocols being implemented. Moreover, it reveals that the greater the perceived risk for one's own health, the higher the chance that the individual will appreciate and develop positive perception to the benefits of the health and safety measures/protocols.

▪ *Observance of self-protective behavior will more likely happen when the public believes that safety measures/protocols are beneficial to them.* The path analysis to the model provided statistical evidence that for the respondents, perceived benefits of

health and safety measures/protocols could affect their decision to observe self-protective behaviors. This implies that in this time of health crisis where risk perception increases, the public will more likely to believe in the benefits of health and safety policies, provided, that there is high level of public trust in their LGUs. This could result to higher motivation in observing self-protective actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE RESPONDENTS

The following are the recommendations from the respondents to improve their LGU's risk/crisis communication and COVID-19 response. The recommendations are summarized according to emergent themes.

To improve risk/crisis communication

- **Maximize the use of social media.** Social media can be used for a more efficient and active dissemination of COVID-19 related information. Moreover, it can be used to collect feedback and suggestions, or interact with the public by way of creating a facebook group or through live chatting and doing online polls.

- **Use of multiple means/channels for communication.** Use of more means/channels for communication can enable LGUs to reach more people as different platforms have varying levels of accessibility to the public. Among the most suggested strategies include the use of mobile messaging or blast texting, and

establishment of 24-hour hotline services, help desks, and information centers.

- **More frequent/active communication.** As the findings from this study suggest, frequency/timeliness of communication affect perceived effectiveness of risk/crisis communication. LGUs must actively provide daily COVID-19 updates/reports.

- **Improve the quality of reports/updates.** This basically involves improving the quality of the content that LGUs release or communicate. This includes, for example, a more detailed reporting of the current situation and of their COVID-19 related plans/strategies. Also, LGUs should be more consistent in presenting data; use infographics; use more understandable terms and local dialect; be more transparent in their use of local funds; and use reliable sources in disseminating information.

- **Enhance the involvement of barangays.** This is not just with respect to disseminating information but also in verifying information on the ground. The barangays can also be involved in collaborating with the communities to collect insights and suggestions and to ensure inclusivity in their COVID-19 response.

To improve COVID-19 response

- **Strict and equal enforcement of policies/protocols.** According to the respondents, LGUs should not be selective in enforcing safety and health policies and

protocols. This suggests that there have been many violators of current policies/protocols with respect to quarantine and social distancing.

- *Strengthen Healthcare and Testing Capacity.* LGUs could invest in medical supplies and facilities to strengthen their current healthcare and testing capacity. Strengthening the healthcare capacity also includes provision of support to healthcare workers and medical frontliners.

- *More efficient and inclusive distribution of relief/assistance.* The current system of relief/assistance of LGUs should be more efficient and inclusive. To some respondents, the provisions of relief/assistance in their LGUs have been slow and in some instances, distributions have not been inclusive.

- *Adoption of Transparency and Accountability Measures.* More transparency and accountability measures should be put in place to assure the public that public funds are being used properly. Some of the respondents in the survey expressed their disappointment toward the corruption, politics, and '*padrino*' system practiced in their respective localities.

DISCUSSION

Social Media Use. The emergence of new media platforms enabled individuals who were formerly passive receivers of risk information from traditional media to become active producers and disseminators. During outbreaks of infectious diseases – such as Ebola, MERS, and now COVID-19, communicators on social media played critical roles in the rapid production, sharing, and dissemination of information (Paek & Hove, 2017). However, while social media has provided opportunities for effective communication, as an unregulated space, it has also led to the proliferation of misinformation and fake news (Asuncion & Flores, 2020). This is a concern in crisis situations when there is higher media dependency, and the spread of information is faster because of people's heightened emotions due to uncertainty and anxiety. It is in this situation that the role of the government in providing accurate, timely, and reliable information comes into play. LGUs, as risk/crisis communicators, should focus on trust building during public health crisis. The more trustworthy the message and source is, the more that the public will receive the message positively (Tormala & Clarkson, 2008).

Risk Perception. Wright et al. (2002) explained that risk perception can be reflective of the information regarding personal experiences and considers how people, specifically laypeople, construe risk. It can also be influenced by what information is most salient or available to them (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). For example, individuals perceived risk to be higher when someone in their family or community has been infected by the virus (Chen and Kaphingst, 2010). Information about the individual's susceptibility to the disease also plays a role in the formation of risk perception. Risk perception likewise tends to be higher when health threat is seen as uncontrollable or dreaded (Slovic, 1987). Distress and anxiety that cause life disruptions

are likewise associated with higher risk perception (Mathur and Levy, 2013).

Public Trust. The present study also supports the theoretical assumptions advanced in our previous study about how LGUs can use social media to enable mutual trust and collective action where it was discussed how integral risk/crisis communication is in facilitating and fostering mutual trust. According to Turcotte et al. (2015), when people believe that the information came from quality sources, they are more likely to trust this information. DiCelemente and Jackson (2017) explained that for risk/crisis communication to be effective it should broadly involve accurate and timely dissemination and exchange of information about current and future risks, hazards and impacts before, during, and after a crisis. Thus, to gain public trust to their health policy actions, LGUs must see to it that they are doing their risk/crisis communication effectively, with credibility, and clearly understood by the public.

CONCLUSION

Looking at risk/crisis communication does not only involve the question *'if it is being done',* but also *'if it is being done right'.* The findings from this study can help LGUs in this regard when they decide what and how to communicate with the public during this time of health crisis.

Also, it is important to remember that media institutions and networks are important government partners in shaping public awareness about the risks we face and in providing updates/reports about our current situation. They help provide more accessibility to risk/crisis information which is essential during this very challenging times of great uncertainty and anxiety.

*The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors' institutional affiliations and other related agencies.

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