



Enabling Mutual Trust and Collective Action amid Covid-19 Crisis: A Rapid Assessment of Risk/Crisis Communication of Local Government Units through Social Media

Xavier Venn Asuncion¹ and Reymund Flores²

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study looked into the risk/crisis communication of Local Government Units (LGUs) in social media using the case of three highly urbanized cities in the country – Quezon City, Iloilo City, and Davao City. This was done through a rapid online assessment of their social media posts for three weeks since the imposition of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in the National Capital Region (NCR), March 12 – April 04, 2020. The main objective of this policy brief is to outline and discuss good practices, and possible strategies that LGUs can adopt for effective risk/crisis communication using social media so that they can become better enablers of mutual trust and collective action against the challenges and emerging threats of COVID-19. We recommend the LGUs to establish their own risk/crisis communication teams with designated people or groups who will handle their social media activities during the COVID-19 crisis. Their risk/crisis communication teams can develop a plan and integrate the identified good practices and recommendations in this study.

Good Practices:

- Regular updates/reports on local crisis response and management
- Promotion of Self Protective Behaviors
- Encouraging Civic Engagement
- Regular updates/reports on local crisis situation
- Addressing misinformation, fake news and other issues about the crisis

Recommendations:

- Inclusion of a scheduled plan along with the regular updates/reports on local crisis response and management
- Interaction/engagement with users
- Use of native language, more understandable, and non-technical terms
- More nuanced reports/updates on local crisis situation
- Information sharing and exchanges among neighboring LGUs in their social media pages
- Making use of public officials' social media pages for risk/crisis communication

¹ University Researcher, Center for Local and Regional Governance, *University of the Philippines* & Master of Science in Urban Management and Development, *Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam*

² Assistant Professor, *CAS-Social Science Department, West Visayas State University* & Doctor of Public Administration, *National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines*

Role of Government as Civic Enabler

Our fight against COVID-19 heavily relies on the government's role as civic enabler or its ability to enable strategic, systematic, and effective collective action towards addressing future risks and managing the current crisis. Collective action comprises both individual, and group behavior that contributes to slowing down the transmission of the disease as well as mitigating its impacts. This could range from people's adherence to social distancing, proper hygiene and quarantine protocols to resource/knowledge sharing through cross-sectoral partnerships and collaborations.

Mutual trust is the foundation of collective action. The extent to which people are motivated to follow the government and make informed decisions to protect themselves, their families and communities against the threats of a crisis depends on how much they trust public institutions (WHO, 2017). Lack of mutual trust could result to social unrests; incoherence in crisis and emergency response; and people relying on personal judgements or erroneous information which could potentially further aggravate crisis situations.

Risk/Crisis Communication and Social Media

Integral to facilitating and fostering mutual trust and collective action is risk/crisis communication. This broadly involves effective and accurate dissemination and exchange of information about current and future risks, hazards and impacts before, during and after a crisis (DiCeleme & Jackson, 2017). Individuals and groups across sectors may use this communication space to feed valuable ground information, suggest possible courses of action, and contribute something to ease the burden of the government in crisis management.

Among communication channels that has become an efficient tool for risk/crisis communication is social media. This is because social media platforms allow for quick and effective way of communicating and engaging with large and diverse audiences (SAMHSA, 2019). It is especially useful in the Philippines where there is high level of diffusion, not just among the general public, but also in the government and public offices including LGUs (Alampay et. al, 2018).

Social Media Applications for Risk/Crisis Communication

This section outlines the good practices in social media applications for risk/crisis communication through case studies of three selected highly urbanized cities in the country - Quezon City, Iloilo City, and Davao City. This was done through a rapid online assessment of their social media posts for three weeks since the imposition of ECQ in the National Capital Region (NCR), March 12 – April 04, 2020.

Regular updates/reports on local crisis response and management.

The three LGUs have provided regular update/reports about their efforts, initiatives and activities to address the current public health crisis. It comprises almost 60 percent to over 70 percent of their total number of posts in three weeks which is the highest among all identified categories. These posts generally include, among others, information about the LGUs' decontamination/disinfection efforts; relief distribution; provision of transportation services, medical supplies and additional support to frontliners. Also included are updates/reports on policies, guidelines and protocols, as well as public issuances, adopted by the LGU such as with regard to the implementation of the enhanced community quarantine; monitoring of local prices; social distancing protocols; curfew hours; and liquor

ban. These regular updates/reports could help in building and maintaining mutual trust as they provide evidence that the LGU is doing its best to manage the crisis situation.

Promotion of Self Protective Behaviors. In Davao City, the LGU also focused on sharing many information from various sources about the nature of the COVID-19 virus and precautionary measures to prevent being infected with the disease. These are usually in the form of educational and informative videos, infographics, and photos answering questions like - what the virus is; what are the symptoms; how it spreads; and what can be done to protect yourself and prevent its spread. These types of posts help people have an increased awareness of the risks posed by COVID-19 which allows the public to make informed decisions to better prepare themselves against the virus. It also helps the people understand the rationale behind why certain policies, and measures such as social distancing protocols and ECQ, were put in place.

Encouraging Civic Engagement. Within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, civic engagement involves active participation and support of people and groups in addressing the impacts and managing risks by sharing, for example, their resources, skills and knowledge to the government or with others, in general. The case studies suggest that LGUs initiate civic engagement in social media through posts that call for support and donations from private individuals and firms. What further fosters civic engagement are appreciation posts for donations, contributions and other forms of support. These are usually in the form of photos showing who are the donors/contributors, and how they are helping, along with a caption expressing the LGU's gratitude.

Regular updates/reports on local crisis situation. These types of post in social media include information about the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases; patients who have died or were able to recover from the disease; Patients Under Investigation (PUIs); and Patients Under Monitoring (PUM). These help create situational awareness among people and communities. Consequently, this could drive and influence collective action. This is because they will be more motivated to practice self-protective behaviors if they know the degree to which they are exposed to the risks of COVID-19. At the same time, it could also encourage them to be more civically engaged because they are more aware of the extent of the current crisis situation in their locality.

Addressing misinformation, fake news and other issues about the crisis. 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. This is particularly a concern during a crisis when there is higher media dependency and the spread of information are faster because of people's heightened emotions. Misinformation and fake news are dangerous during a crisis as it could erode mutual trust, and misdirect collective action. Aside from misinformation, and fake news, social media can also be used to address and clarify other issues that could potentially exacerbate or worsen the current crisis situation. Based on case studies, these posts are usually in the form of clarificatory statements that are sometimes accompanied by photos showing the wrong information, fake news, or the issue being clarified.

Recommendations

These recommendations were derived from the case study findings and through a quick review of related literature:

Inclusion of a scheduled plan along with the regular updates/reports on local crisis response and management. This is especially useful for updates/reports regarding relief distribution. Even in unrelated posts, there were many comments and negative sentiments asking about when their area will receive food packs, and other relief kits. As such, it could benefit the LGUs if they include a scheduled plan of how they will go about their crisis response and management. In relief distribution, for example, this will boost public trust and provides assurance that the LGU will cover all barangays.

Interaction/engagement with users. One of the features of social media that makes it an effective channel for risk/communication is its capacity to enable two-way communication (Farha, 2015). However, the case studies suggest that LGUs have not been taking advantage of this feature. Many comments were queries, concerns and suggestions about how the LGU is responding to the crisis. Responding to these queries, concerns, and suggestions and engaging the public could boost mutual trust and collective action.

Use of native language, more understandable, and non-technical terms. Risk/Crisis communication messages are only conveyed successfully if they are clearly understood by the public (SAMHSA, 2019). Use of foreign language, and technical terms could distort how people understand these messages.

More nuanced reports/updates on local crisis situation. The clearer the reports/updates on local crisis situation are, the more aware people will be of their risk exposure and the gravity of

the current crisis situation. For example, in Quezon City, the numbers regarding COVID-19 cases are broken down per barangay. This is useful because those residing in barangays that were identified to have relatively higher number of confirmed COVID-19 cases will be more vigilant and persuaded to practice self-protective behaviors. LGUs could also include situational reports about their current healthcare capacity, and availability of resources. This can guide civic engagement as people will be able to identify entry points for support and assistance.

Information sharing and exchanges among neighboring LGUs in their social media pages. The case studies suggest that policy regulations and restrictions are often times implemented in varying degrees among different LGUs. Those residing within the LGU-boundaries are affected by the differences in policies which could result to public confusion. The propensity of such confusion can be reduced if LGUs will share information about the measures adopted by neighboring LGUs.

Making use of public officials' social media pages for risk/crisis communication. Evidently, the use of multiple social media pages would result to higher reach in disseminating risk/crisis communication messages. Also, based on the case studies, the social media pages of Local Chief Executives (LCEs)/Mayors tend to have higher following (likes and followers) and higher post engagements (shares and reacts) than the official pages of the LGUs.

It is important to note that risk/crisis communication is not limited to social media use. There are more channels and platforms for communication that LGUs can use for facilitating and disseminating risk/crisis information. The World Health Organization (WHO), as well as other academic and scientific literature,

suggests that governments must integrate risk/crisis communication into their overall crisis and emergency response. This generally involves the creation of a Risk/Crisis Communication Team which will develop a Risk/Crisis Communication Plan. As such, we recommend the LGUs to establish their own risk/crisis communication teams with designated and trained people or groups who will handle their social media activities during the COVID-19 crisis. They may integrate the aforementioned good practices and recommendations in the development of their risk/crisis communication plans. LGUs can use the tool prepared by WHO on the development of a Risk Communication and Community Engagement Plan (RCCE) - <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-readiness-and-initial-response-for-novel-coronaviruses>

Conclusion

Risk/Crisis Communication is an integral component in the LGU's crisis response and management. This requires risk/crisis communicators, generally the LCEs, to have the skill and will in setting their respective LGUs to become enablers of mutual trust and collective action in health emergency situations. Their ability to respond to the demands of more practicable policy choices and in the evolving concerns of their constituencies can become defining factors for mutual trust building among people, business firms, and other social sectors. Mutual trust is one essential foundation in influencing civic motivation to open opportunities for collective action (Flores, 2019). Insights, key takeaways, and recommendations from this study highlighted how social media helps LGUs become better enablers of mutual trust and collective action through effective risk/crisis communication. Hence, it is crucial for LGUs to adopt timely and effective management and strategies using social media during this COVID-19 crisis.

REFERENCES

Alampay, E., Asuncion, X.V., & Delos Santos, M. (2018). *Management of Social Media for Disaster Risk Reduction and Mitigation in Philippine Local Government Units*. Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance.

DiClemente R., & Jackson, J. (2017). *Risk Communication*. International Encyclopedia of Public Health, 2nd Edition.

Farha, M. A. (2015). *Social Media and Crises Communication Management*. Communication Management Course Paper - Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Flores, R. (2019). *Modeling the Organizational Willingness for Cross-sector Collaboration in Disaster Risk Management Planning*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2019). *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials*. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP19-01-01-005. Rockville, MD, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

WHO (2017). *Communicating Risk in Public Health Emergencies: A WHO guideline for emergency risk communication (ERC) policy and practice*.

**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.*