

Research Application Summary

## Strategic Communication: Weapon for Behaviour Change

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### Abstract

This article explicates Strategic Communication as an emerging but influential discipline in Science Communication research. In particular, it examines its role in causing behavior change and enabling organizations to fulfill their missions. To analyse Strategic Communication's role in causing behavioral change, the article explores how the concept was applied by world leaders, health professionals and the media during Covid-19 pandemic to create public awareness about the virus and to contain its spread. The article delves into the ingenuity of the strategic communication crafting and application of "flatten the curve" metaphor messaging which effectively helped to bring down the pandemic worldwide. A testimony that Strategic Communication properly implemented can cause behavior change. The article analysed refereed articles published online on Strategic Communications.

**Key words:** Behavioral change, Covid19, Organization Performance, Strategic Communication

### Résumé

Cet article explicite la Communication Stratégique en tant que discipline émergente mais influente dans la recherche en communication scientifique. En particulier, il examine son rôle dans la transformation des comportements et permet aux organisations de remplir leurs missions. Pour analyser le rôle de la Communication Stratégique dans le changement de comportement, l'article explore comment le concept a été appliqué par les dirigeants mondiaux, les professionnels de la santé et les médias pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 pour sensibiliser le public au virus et contenir sa propagation. L'article se penche sur l'ingéniosité de la conception et de l'application de la communication stratégique avec le message métaphorique "aplatir la courbe", qui a efficacement contribué à réduire la pandémie dans le monde entier. Un témoignage que la Communication Stratégique correctement mise en œuvre peut induire un changement de comportement. L'article a analysé des articles référencés publiés en ligne sur la Communication Stratégique.

**Mots-clés:** Changement de comportement, Covid-19, performance organisationnelle, Communication Stratégique

### Background

Researchers note that Strategic Communication is a recent development in Communication Science research and indicate the maiden publication in the discipline, the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* only graced the scholars' community in 2007; and nearly a decade later, the *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* followed in 2014, authored by Zerfass and Hothhausen. In the academic realm, these publications formalized and concretized Strategic Communication as an emerging but influential branch of communication

science which has a huge bearing on organizations' performance.

Like any new discipline, scholars opine that Strategic Communication has attracted continuous academic debate and criticism, as some authors argue that the Strategic Communication field lacks clarity (Nothhaft *et al.*, 2018), that its disciplinary status is still uncertain (Werderet *et al.*, 2018) and that its two main concepts "communication" and "strategy" are topics that have not, until now, been explored to their full extent (van Ruler, 2018; Winkler and Etter, 2018; Zeffasset *et al.*, 2018). However, despite this unsurprising skepticism, there is widespread consensus in recognizing the importance of its role in the performance of organizations.

Unlike other branches of communication, scholars distinguish Strategic Communication as being interdisciplinary embracing other disciplines. This means Strategic Communication can be analyzed through the lens of communication sciences but remains open to other academic fields. As an interactive discipline communicators continue to emphasize that the basis for communication processes in organizations is the same as that of any human communication activity, for "the essence of human beings is to communicate and receive communication" (Thayer, 1979). Pundits believe that organizational communication always seeks to exert influence and that "persuasion" is admittedly the essence of strategic communication (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007).

Balonas (2020) argues that Strategic Communication is quite the opposite of episodic, erratic or spontaneous communication. It is a field of knowledge and practices that values accountability since it is based on pre-defined objectives. Setting objectives is one of the most powerful aspects of strategic communication, since it commits the communication plan to concrete and measurable results which are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely, captured by the acronym (SMART). Moreover Balonas (2020) maintains that many communication initiatives are created in isolated manner, without framing and embracing strategic logic in the communication agenda. The field of development and social change is no exception. The author maintains that although development programs may be supported by awareness campaigns and communication materials, because of the way they are created, they could fail to deliver results unless well planned. This could be so because communication practices do not always follow the principles of strategic communication.

**Emerging Influence.** Academics say as a realm of knowledge, Strategic Communication is an emerging field within Communication Sciences and Organizational Research. It is a disciplinary field concerned with the influence of communication in fulfilling the organizational mission – that is, with its "strategic" dimension (van Ruler, 2018). In today's world of cutthroat rivalry, organizations compete fiercely for attention, admiration and loyalty of their stakeholders – clients, customers, employees, investors, interest groups, and even the general public (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). To succeed in sustaining loyalty of stakeholders, studies show that clear strategic vision on communication must be made, which improves organizational performance, increases product sales, motivates investors, and builds stronger relationships. In this context, Argentiet *et al.* (2005) suggest that contemporary organizations face the "strategic communication imperative – an increasingly urgent need for executives to ensure their communication practices directly contribute to the performance of the organizational strategy." Although Strategic Communication is a recent but growing phenomenon, its influence is aligned with the need to develop and streamline communication activities in organizations which enable them to achieve their strategic objectives. Because of this stance, the most quoted definition of Strategic Communication highlights the purposeful use of

communication by an organization to fulfill its mission, an assumption that all stakeholders will embrace and engage in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations and their causes (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007).

Based on this pioneering definition, two concepts seem to be relevant: The purposeful use of communication and the behavioural change that is implied in communication practices. Hence, Strategic Communication should be viewed as the practice of deliberate and purposeful communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity, to attain specific goals (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). At the macro-level, Strategic Communication is considered to be an area that analyzes communication in line with the organization's overall strategy, in order to achieve its strategic positioning (Argenti *et al.*, 2005), for which a holistic integrated approach is required.

Frandsen and Johansen (2017) make a case that to be successful in its role, Strategic Communication needs communication leaders who are strategic thinkers and who take a systems' approach to handling issues. For, as is now commonly presented, strategy is a field of study and practice that is concerned with overall performance of a system, usually in terms of human activity in systems. Scholars elaborate that strategic decisions are those decisions that determine an organization's overall direction and viability. They argue that decisions of this kind have a long-term perspective. In contrast operational decisions tend to focus on the short term and are anchored in the strategic plans of the organization. Operational decisions result in specifications that are narrower in scope and that organizations must carry out to implement higher level strategies. An operational decision might, for instance, relate to price setting in a particular geographic region.

While strategic thinking is an individual competence (Goldman, 2007) there are things which organizations can do to improve strategic thinking. Bon (2001) refers to this as strategic thinking at the organizational level with the organization providing opportunities for individual strategic thinking. "This includes creating structures, processes and systems that encourage strategic dialogue among top team members, and taking advantage of the ingenuity and creativity of every individual employee" (Bon, 2001).

**Scholars' and Researchers' Conceptualization.** Although there are many definitions of Strategic Communication, many researchers credit a seminal conceptualization of strategic communication to Hallahan *et al.* (2007) which appeared in the first edition of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* in 2007. These authors perceive Strategic Communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission," (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Thus, they differentiate Strategic Communication from integrated communication which simply attempts to coordinate communication activities such as public relations and marketing communication. And they emphasize that Strategic Communication "is how an organization communicates across organizational endeavours, and how an organization functions as a social actor to advance its mission" (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007).

Other communication researchers like Zerfass, Vercic *et al.* (2018) built on Hallahan *et al.* (2007) perspective to define Strategic Communication as encompassing all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, it is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals. According to this definition,

the word “substantial” is key, as issues facing an organization that are substantial or significant determine an organization’s “development, growth, identity or survival” (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). This distinction separates Strategic Communication from communication that may have a purpose but where the purpose is operational rather than strategic.

Yet another stream of scholars views Strategic Communication with different lens. Botan (2018) views Strategic Communication as “the use of information flowing into the organization or research to plan and carry out a communication campaign addressing the relationship between an organization and its publics”. For Botan (2018), Strategic Communication is research based, and publics centered, rather than organization or message centered. On their part Argenti *et al.* (2015) define Strategic Communication as “communication aligned with the overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning”.

**Role of Strategic Communication in Curbing Covid-19.** Given its role in causing behavior change and enabling organizations to fulfill their missions, what was Strategic Communication’s role during the Covid-19 pandemic? To answer this question, it is important to revisit the outbreak of thee pandemic and how world leaders, national governments, health professionals and journalists reacted. The WHO Director-General declared Covid-19 outbreak a “public emergency of international concern” on January 30 (WHO, 2020a). Meantime the international community was mobilizing to find ways to accelerate the development of a global strategy and preparedness to fight this unsettling outbreak (WHO, 2020b). In February 2020 it was reported Covid-19 had spread from China to 20 other countries; and in the same month *The Economist* alarmed the world when it reported the new virus was in 50 countries.

As the pandemic spread, the risks of misinformation became bigger, given that the public could not easily understand the new virus, exacerbated by the multiplicity of messages from global sources. The Covid-19 pandemic presented communication scholars and practitioners with the dilemma of how to deliver scientific messaging to the public in a short time without distortion or misinformation. The need to provide clear, honest and valid messages to the public globally was expressed by a February 2020 editorial of *The Lancet* which stated: “there may be no way to prevent Covid-19 pandemic in this globalised time, but verified information is the most effective prevention against the disease of the pandemic” (Finset *et al.*, 2020). It became the responsibility of scientists, health professionals, political leaders, and the media to take the lead in crafting accurate, clear, and consistent messages about the new virus so that the international community could benefit. Up to this time most of the information given was based on scientific data and presented in scientific jargon – which increased challenges.

To solve this challenge, science communicators suggested that a significant paradigm shift is necessary within the scientific community involving an approach to strategic communication thinking. Supported by Torp (2015), they recommended two simple strategies: a) to make it simple, and b) make it visual, as “the strategic turn” in health and crisis communication. Hence, to actualize this paradigm shift from science communication to ordinary communication which can be understood by the general public, the “flatten the curve” chart metaphor became the hallmark of science communication about Covid-19 pandemic. The chart is simple depicting two scenarios of the pandemic: i) on the side showing “without measures” the number of infections are rising, ii) on the side showing “with measures” the number of infections are falling (Figure 1).

The chart is visibly attractive, simple and easy to relate to. The message is, “strive to flatten the curve.”

In order to enhance the public comprehension of the infections’ diseases’ transmissions, the “flatten the curve” metaphor was globally used to share the Covid-19 education messages: the greater the reduction in transmission, the longer and flatter the epidemic curve would be, and this would reduce hospitalization and mortality. The metaphor’s simplicity enabled the public to appreciate precautionary measures like social distancing, handwashing, and wearing masks. The net effect of all these precautions researchers found out helped to curb the pandemic.

A survey commissioned two months after the “flatten the curve” chart metaphor was adopted by the global media, world leaders, scientists, health professionals and the media. Recorded the following responses:

“caution should be the order of the day... the curve is flatter.” Meaning the infection rates are down” (Merkel says Germany’s ‘Curve is flatter’ but remains cautious, 2020, para 1).

New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Arden, “...I remember my chief science advisor bringing me a graph that showed me what flattening the curve would look like for New Zealand (Jacinda Arden says Flattening the Curve was not sufficient for New Zealand, 2020, para 12).

The WHO repeatedly emphasized the importance of “flattening the curve” (Meredith, 2020).

“what we need to do is “flatten that down. You do that with trying to interfere with the natural flow of the outbreak,” Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infection.

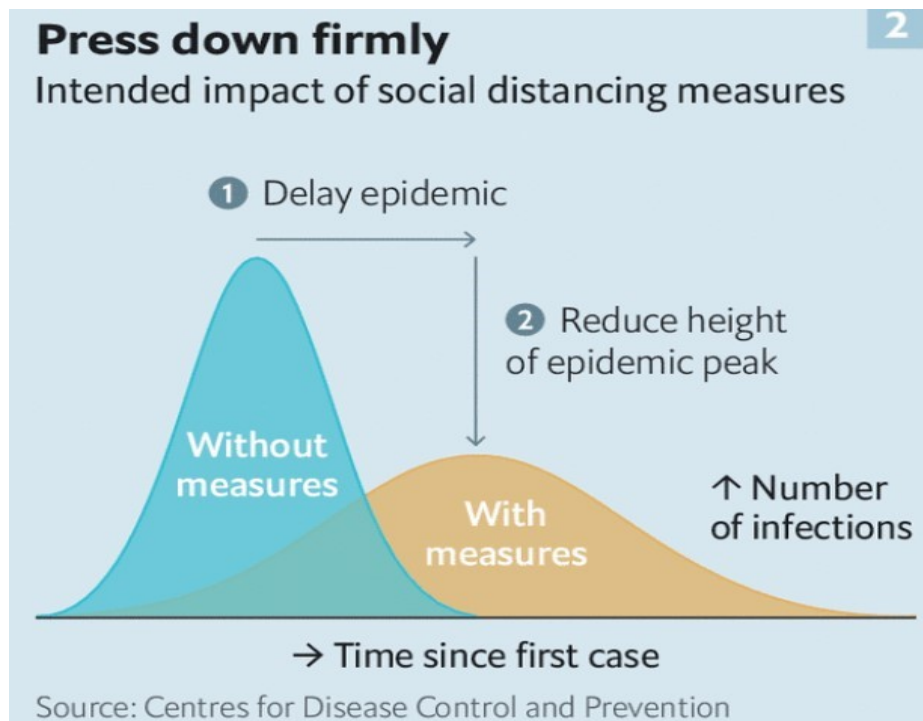


Figure 1. Goals of community mitigation of COVID19. Adopted from Balonas *et al.*, 2021.

## Conclusion

“...The “flatten the curve” metaphor was an effective strategic communication decision made by health professionals, scientists, political leaders and journalists amid the new pandemic Covid-19 as simple but clear messaging on the yet to be understood virus. This message metaphor served its purpose well: visible and well understood by every member of the public – if all followed the standard operating standards: maintaining social distance, wash hands avoid hugs, wear masks, and see a medical professional if symptoms show – the virus would be disconnected from spreading from one person to the next. In so doing, the curve ‘visibly’ flattened because the infection rates systematically reduced through the power of communication. In the contemporary world, it is widely believed that understanding communication is pivotal to understanding the Covid-19 pandemic, and that effective science communication has to be part of the solution (Koerber, 2021), that is why science communication was challenged to make a strategic turn and become “Strategic Science Communication” during the Covid-19 era.

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