

MOROCCAN COMMUNICATION OF COVID19 CRISIS

MANY SUCCESSES AND SOME NECESSARY REFRAMING



Policy Note

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HOW TO MANAGE YOUR COMMUNICATION IN AN OPTIMAL WAY IN TIMES OF CRISIS?



Such a question can regain interest in a context of great uncertainty such as the one the world is going through at the moment with Covid19. This is an opportunity to look back at the Moroccan experience and read it, with a few precautions. If parallelism with ancient disasters is not allowed, in view of the violent and sudden nature of the present one, we must therefore beware of any «solutionist» approach. In spite of the virtues it can be adorned with, communication helps in crisis management. But here more than ever, it is unable to avoid the economic, social and health consequences of the pandemic, which are unprecedented in their scale.

First of all, it should be remembered that for any crisis management, the alert system is based on a double process, decision-making on one hand and communication on the other. For the second component we are interested in now, that of communication, the stakes are well documented in information science as well as empirical reality. Even so, there is no ready-made answer, with interdisciplinary analytical frameworks, to the intersection of determinants in relation to society or the individual and to be sought both in work on crowd psychology, the theory of uses and rewards, and that of «focalizing events».

But first of all, what are we talking about? From a conceptual point of view, crisis communication has not always been easy to stabilize, and even less so in recent years with new disciplinary anchors such as for research on the so-called sensitive communication. The latter is a current to which crisis communication is now attached (and which brings together other concepts in particular such as risk communication or acceptability communication).

In recent years, concerns about crisis communication have focused a lot on the subject of fake news. Sometimes even to the point of taking the spotlight on health emergencies. As in the case of the Ebola epidemic, a flood of inaccurate and false information from all sides has caused panic among the population. As we know, the same drift is observed on the Covid19 with the collateral effect of the pandemic, an



outbreak of disinformation (intentionally false information) and misinformation (false information through negligence), to the point of worrying the WHO, which has warned against what it now calls «infodemia». However, the reliability of information and sources is not the only challenge of crisis communication, which must seek to reassure, legitimize public action and disinhibit perceptions of a power vacuum, and, in relation to an objective that is consubstantial with it, to induce a given behavior. In the latter level, respect of confinement, for example, seems to be at the top of the list of priorities.

In the wake of this, a small deconstruction of a preconceived idea: crisis communication is more than communication during a crisis. Rather, it corresponds more to the organization of communication on a social reality around the crisis. This reality is based on a complex cognitive dynamic influenced by the modes of consumption and information processing by an individual or a group of individuals. In the case of Covid19, for example, the perception of risk will never be the same for everyone, as it integrates cultural, rational, experiential variables, etc. Consequently, the messages of crisis communication are never one-way, but are part of a feedback loop between their producers and receivers.

Since it can contribute to overestimating or, rather, underestimating the perception of a risk, this question of the process of informational interaction has remained a permanent challenge in crisis management/communication. It often leads to the need to cross-check variables to improve understanding. Whether exploring the influence of communication ethics, the dynamics of information flows, the profile of the audiences/concerned parties involved, or the role of the media.

This crossover between different prisms of analysis must remain permanent for anyone who wants to question the current Moroccan experience of crisis communication. This experience has had some success but, as we shall see below, it does not absolve us from the need to refocus to ensure the sustainability of the undertaken actions.

LET US FIRST EXAMINE WHAT IS LINKED TO THE FIRST OF THESE SUCCESSES, THAT OF TEMPORALITY.

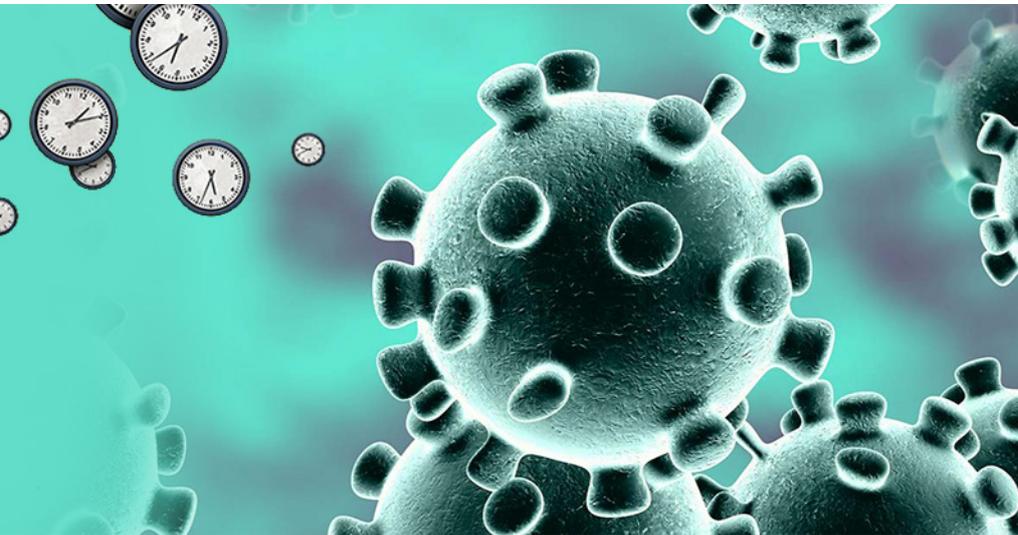


Morocco has indeed been able to negotiate its communication during all the phases of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis response... while waiting to be able to congratulate itself on a post-crisis success, at the end of a conclusion that we hope will be rapid, fingers crossed. The disciplinary anchoring allows other reading grids that bring out a two-step approach.

The first phase seems to combine the characteristics of the so-called «controlled discretion» strategy. In crisis communication, it means gradually releasing information so as not to destabilize the target too much, while allowing it to digest the shock gradually. This is what has been observed for the various leaflets of the emergency health system (closure of the air space, confinement, obligation to wear masks, etc.) communicated in a fragmented manner.

Then a second phase characterized by communication about the contribution to the Covid19 Fund and about the logistics of compensating the victims. This approach is fairly similar to the so-called «reconstruction» strategy, with one difference: the assumption of responsibility dimension does not appear as in the eponymous strategy. In brief, this is normal, given the unprecedented nature of the crisis and the events that led to it.

The more interesting thing, it is also possible to detect the implicit experimentation of the contextualized actions of crisis communication, through narrative and visual forms of messages where the objective is to encourage confinement in a playful and pedagogical way. These approaches also seem to be aimed at convincing the public opinion that public authorities are trustworthy. In parallel to the mobilizing campaigns, prescribers (artists, sportsmen, etc...), videos showing the now popular, not to say iconic, authority agent haranguing crowds in Safi, or those of images of policemen feeding cats in Tangier, put these archetypal sequences into perspective. In accordance with the grid of narrative theory, this type of narrative is adorned with virtues for the effectiveness of communication messages, in that it translates into a strong emotional



commitment among the population.

The chapter on Chloroquine communication is equally instructive. It must be said that the issue has never at any time taken the form of a public problem or political crisis as in France or, to a lesser extent, in the United States. The Ministry of Health quickly communicated its therapeutic choices without any controversy. At first glance, it is tempting to detect the stereotypical symptoms of a passive and docile opinion. In reality, in the absence of scientific certainty, Moroccan society probably does not avoid the question of therapeutic risks. Leaving aside the background of the battles to validate the protocols, and considering that the country did not have to wait for a hypothetical outcome to the debate, it has nevertheless delegated the responsibility for benefit-risk arbitration to the State, in which it continues to have confidence. Even if it means defying the dominant North-South media agenda!

This confidence was undoubtedly nourished by the assessment of the Moroccan management of Covid19, which was the subject of an international plebiscite. It is true that the line of command has from the outset taken care to deploy an impeccable organization between the different hierarchical structures, both at the central and local levels... Here too, the royal guidance played a decisive role, enhancing the quality of networking and making it possible to prevent the friction that some jurisdictional overlaps could have caused

Crisis communication, which was also used for dynamics and mobilization, had immediate effects for some public spheres. While procedures for well-established teams such as those in the interior suffer no reservations, Health, another department at the front line of the pandemic, was able to avoid a chaotic situation, having to experiment hastily with new communication habits and reorganizing quickly to make up for the shortcomings of its routine structures. One of the most spectacular effects has been the reactivation of official accounts, hitherto in hibernation, on social networks, which are now one of the preferred channels of communication.

REGARDLESS OF THE SUCCESSES NEGOTIATED IN THE EARLY DAYS, THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN ITS CURRENT FORMAT MAY BE IMPROVED OVER TIME.

If introspection is required, it should lead to questioning what really matters: reassuring and continuing to convince people to stay at home because there are no other alternatives for the moment. These messages must, more than anything else, attract attention or stand out, to use the terminology of the timeless model of Mitchell et al. (1997)¹ on the stakeholders.

Looking only at confinement, while the population is generally complying with the measures, it must be admitted that the awareness message is not audible throughout the country. The latest figures on offences show that more than 36,000 people have been arrested as of April 15th for violating the state of health emergency.

A FIRST REFOCUSING SUGGESTS THAT THERE IS NOT JUST ONE, BUT SEVERAL AUDIENCES.

the contemporary approaches to crisis communication (or communication for short), the concept of an active and passive public is of particular importance. It provides information on possible areas for improvement in terms of targeting audiences. The first, more sophisticated category, deserves greater commitment from the communicator, as it can facilitate mobilization by sharing important information throughout the crisis management process. The media are perfectly suited to this role. But thought should also be given to other forms of mobilization (via neighborhood associations, for example) to be deployed in working-class and high-density neighborhoods in order to obtain greater citizen involvement.

A SECOND IS TO FOCUS ON THE CONTENT OF THE COMMUNICATION ITSELF.

Since it presupposes elements of persuasion, the message requires credibility and coherence. Unfortunately, the latter criterion has not been fully met, as was the case with the 100,000 test kits from South Korea. The information based on a press release from the watch committee had been leaked early by the media, who were doing their job. The Health Department first denied it before admitting that it had made a mistake and confirmed the existence of the 100,000 kit market.

TO THE CREDIT OF THE OFFICIAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION, THE THIRD AXIS IS A PRIVATE MATTER AND DOES NOT CONCERN A HEALTH DIMENSION.

It should be remembered that the economic and social recovery plan provides for a series of measures including, first and foremost, financial support for businesses and households in difficulty. To reassure the population, the progress and deployment of the plan, which is largely paid for by the banks, must be communicated regularly. This is an important signal for the reconstruction phase.

FINALLY, THE FOURTH AND LAST AXIS OF FOCUS CONCERNS THE QUALITY OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION.

Crisis communication, driven by social networks in particular, is challenged by the demands of highly fragmented audiences. This heterogeneity is also presented as one of the main difficulties of online crisis communication. It also explains the difficulties in negotiating the web as a real public space. The profile of these targets encourages the adoption of conversational/exchange skills, not diffusion skills, but rather multidirectional communication skills, more in tune with contemporary interactive environments. In developments in information science, the emphasis is no longer even on linear communication, but on networked communication. Here again, one may wonder whether the static and linear format of the debrief, the daily video press conference of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health is still in line with expectations?

We must face the fact that any mobilization will never eliminate the risk that may arise at any time and will continue to complicate the knowledge to be mastered, and therefore the ideal formulas for crisis communication, on a subject that is moving by excellence. For example, it was enough for a «black swan» to appear on April 14th in Fez with a cascade of contaminations from a shopping mall, to be tempted to balance the scope of the first victories. However, one should not give up and try again and again...

¹Mitchell et al put forward a method for classifying stakeholders by examining three key attributes: urgency (time), power (ability to influence others) and legitimacy (moral or legal capacity to influence). Their work has been widely used in crisis management research. Mitchell, R.K., Agle, B.R., and Wood, D.T. (1997) Towards a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: defining the principal of who and what really counts. *Academy of Management Review*, 22, 853-886.

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