

Communications and COVID-19: Fundamentals for Effective Government to Citizen Crisis Communications

Introduction

Effective communications during a pandemic is critical as governments mobilize citizens to take action to protect public health. Done poorly, it can mean an erosion in trust, the immediate loss of lives and longer-term negative social and economic ramifications. This Recovery and Resilience Note looks at response and recovery communications for governments and public officials, focusing on effective citizen-centric communications during times of crisis that can be applied at the local and national levels of government during the COVID-19 crisis. This note is by no means exhaustive, as communications touches so many aspects of response and recovery, but lays out a few key foundational lessons from ISE's experience in government and disaster/crisis communications, providing some tools, examples and resources to help governments deliver credible, correct, timely and accessible information to their citizens.

Facing an Infodemic

A pandemic, or any crisis, is a time when **citizens look to their government at all levels, from local to national, to provide critical services but also to provide credible and rapid access to information.** Effective government communications to inform, educate and keep residents safe is a key function at the core of a state's effectiveness.

The significant amount of misinformation about COVID-19 has led to what many have termed an "infodemic." It has put a spotlight on one of the most difficult challenges that face governments in communicating: **how to break through the noise and deliver trusted information to citizens that penetrates when there is an over-abundance of information and misinformation,** whether from official sources, the media or online. This challenge is particularly heightened when people are isolated, relying heavily on information from the multitude of communications outlets at their fingertips.

The consequences of low trust in government communications can be seen the most starkly during a crisis and particularly in a public health crisis that relies on broad citizen mobilization to follow health guidance, restrictions and orders of their government officials to ensure the health and safety of the entire community. While the public health response is the critical focus, it can also be an [opportunity for governments](#) to earn, and in many cases earn back, the trust of citizens. Some governments have risen to this challenge, while others have floundered in the water muddied with disinformation.

This is not the first, nor will it be the last time, that effective government communications will be critical to ensuring the safety and health of thousands, even millions, of citizens. Communicating with this level of gravity can feel unprecedented and overwhelming for leaders, but an infodemic can present an opportunity **to identify and adapt new preparedness and response tools, learn from past and current responses and return to the key fundamentals of communicating effectively.**

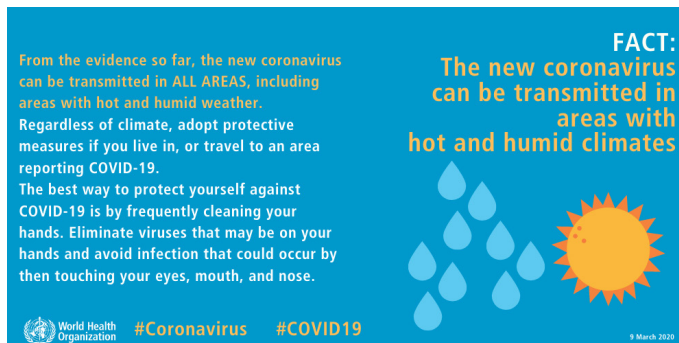
🗣️ **Speak the truth. Speak it clearly. Speak it with compassion. Speak it with empathy for what folks are going through. The biggest mistake any of us can make in these situations is to misinform, particularly when we're requiring people to make sacrifices and take actions that might not be their natural inclination.** 🗣️

- **President Barack Obama** addressing mayors, local leaders, and members of response teams at a virtual gathering on COVID-19 local response initiatives hosted by [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#).

The Message

Effective messages have common traits that can be applied to COVID-19 messaging:

- **Transparent:** Public officials must ensure on a daily basis that their communications are transparent, clear and accurate as developments unfold. Officials who understand the importance of this communications trinity, particularly during a public health crisis, build trust and their capacity to rally the public to take necessary actions. Public officials with effective transparent messaging provide context to decision-making, provide facts and give them in a way people can understand. A good example would be the announcement by a public official on the difficult decision to put into place a stay-at-home order: the message should begin with an explanation of the decision-making framework, including the expert sources used to come to the decision, followed by details on what the order will mean for the daily life of citizens.
- **Credible:** Citizens need to believe that the information they are receiving from their governments is based on factual scientific data and credible sources. In a pandemic, when the majority of facts are health-related, communications should be based on sources of information and platforms provided by experts in public health, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and local public health authorities. Officials should be careful to not speculate or share unqualified commentary, but instead stay focused on public health messages backed by science and evidence.

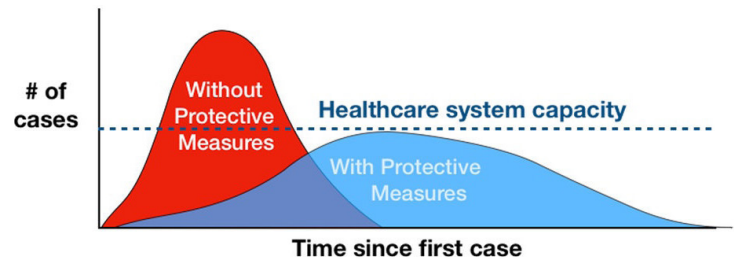


Access to timely, accurate, and easy-to-understand advice and information from trusted sources on public health events and outbreaks, including “mythbusters” such as this one created by the WHO, help dispel misinformation. During a public health crisis, governments don’t always need to create messages from scratch, see RESOURCES below.

- **Clear:** Messages must clearly convey information to assure the public’s understanding and to limit the chances for misinformation and uncertainty. Clear messages contain as few technical, scientific and bureaucratic terms as possible, and often use tools such as infographics to get across complex data and eliminate information that the audience does not need.
- **Consistent:** Communications during a crisis ideally are unified in messaging from the highest level of governments down to local officials - and in a pandemic, globally. This not only requires coordination at the local and national level, but also international

coordination with the sharing of data between countries to inform national communications and on basic issues such as terminology. The U.S. response has faced criticism for a lack of consistency, from the early stages with the federal administration minimizing the risk of the pandemic, while states and other countries expressed much greater concern about the pandemic, to mixed messages around the reopening of businesses and the easing of stay-at-home orders.

- **Timely:** The timely translation of evidence into trusted messages is critical to fighting misinformation and uncertainty and saving lives during a pandemic. Government communications from all levels must adhere to a regular cadence of messaging to not allow for a vacuum that misinformation can fill.



Adapted from CDC / The Economist

Visualizing Data: the “flatten the curve” diagram is good example of how powerful clear visualizations can be. [This diagram](#) is a staple communications tool from White House press conferences to social media feeds around the world and has introduced a phrase that is now a part of our lexicon needing no explanation: “flatten the curve.” The graphic’s power exists in the simplicity and clarity of the message, demonstrating how protective measures and citizen actions have a collective impact.

Tone and appeal: Crisis messages have to strike the right balance of reassurance and alarm, of optimism and realism. Attempting to achieve the inconsistent goals of communicating bad news and inspiring confidence is a difficult task for even the most seasoned public official. A few key principles can help strike the right tone:

Communicate both what you know and what you do not know. Share the information you have and promise to provide updates when you know more. Avoid ambiguity and room for speculation.

- Translate evidence-based, scientific knowledge into actionable, behavior-changing messages, such as simplifying the complexity of how the virus spreads to an uncomplicated message asking individuals to stay six feet from one another.
- Present information in ways that are accessible and show empathy to all sectors of all societies.
- Acknowledge issues followed with a decision-making framework on how you will solve them.

Tone and Consistency: New Zealand's PM Jacinda Ardern has been applauded for her response and firmly sticking to an 'elimination' of the virus message, striking the right tone of empathy and giving directions ("stay home save lives"), with firm and consistent communications. Her press conferences clearly frame the issues and allow significant time for questions. The government developed an [alert level framework](#) as a transparent way to showcase the decisions being made and the thought process behind those the decisions. In addition, there was coordination between all levels of the political spectrum, and across parties, to be united on message. The result: a [poll](#) showed 88% of New Zealanders surveyed "trust the government to make the right decision around the response to COVID-19."

Segment Your Audience: Communications of any kind are only effective if they resonate with their intended audiences. For a message to break through during an infodemic, messages should be consistent yet tailored based on what the target audience perceives as most important to them, what impacts their lives, how they need to act to protect themselves, their families and their communities. Public officials should reach out to key communities to understand their concerns and information needs and then tailor their messages to sectors of the communities, such as individual citizens, vulnerable groups, the private sector, etc. For example, South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn and Senator Lindsey Graham, held a joint tele-town hall with the AARP to answer questions on COVID-19 and the CARES act, reaching an at-risk population to explain the often-confusing qualifications to receive benefits.

Messaging also needs to be adapted for the tools at the disposal of different audience segments of society. For example, more vulnerable groups or those with lower literacy rates may not have access to sources such as web portals and televised press conferences, requiring printed materials with visuals to be placed in strategic locations (see more below in Message Platforms).

The Messengers: A Whole-of-Society Approach

The spread of the COVID-19 highlights one of a senior elected official's most important roles: calling the public to action to respond to a crisis. And every leader, no matter the level, has a role to play. Public officials, from presidents, governors and mayors to public health directors and public safety executives, will need to be visible with continuous and clear communications for an extensive period of time. **They will also need to call on multiple voices to strengthen and deliver messages.**

The highest level in a government, whether that is a president, prime minister, emir, etc., needs to focus on providing the big picture of the crisis and how to move forward, including potential solutions.

But they should also rely heavily on a variety of spokespeople that deliver messages on their given expertise to create a mosaic of voices that results in a broader picture of credibility and capacity:

- In a rapidly changing communications environment, the capacity of the state and the judgement of those in charge is critical to citizen trust. Citizens must believe that their government has the capacity, including number of responders, expertise and technical ability and impartiality to make the best available judgments. Governments should balance their decision-making messages such as quarantines, closures and economic measures, with the voices of their frontline workers, from health providers to police.
- Especially in a pandemic, politicians need to elevate the voices of public health officials and scientists to deliver accurate information on both the health situation and the actions that citizens need to take.
- Strategic partnerships can also be formed between government officials and whole-of-society stakeholders, to broaden the voices of those trusted in communities, including in academia and civil society.

Joint crisis-communication task forces: The sharing of information and collaboration of stakeholders can be facilitated by establishing joint information centers or communications task forces. These can be critical operational tools at the local and regional level to help bring representatives across sectors of a community to coordinate on messages, identify appropriate messengers and agree on how and when to disseminate information. Since these centers and teams are comprised of a cross-section of society, they can be vital in determining the different informational needs of audience segments such as testing facilities, suicide prevention hotlines, unemployment centers or unions.

Speaking Candidly (and with Creativity): Officials have leveraged their increased and relative levels of trustworthiness, especially at the local level, to speak candidly to citizens in new ways. Michigan Governor [Gretchen Whitmer](#) appeared on a remote Daily Show to talk about her efforts to combat the virus. [Governors](#) Andy Beshear of Kentucky, Mike DeWine of Ohio, Jay Inslee of Washington and Larry Hogan of Maryland all received favorable media attention for their press conferences and many public appearances, where they have been applauded for their honesty and factual approach (although often offering a different narrative than the federal government). Angela Merkel spoke with somber candor, announcing calmly that the corona virus would infect 70% of the population in Germany. Justin Trudeau shared a [#MondayMotivation Twitter thread](#) of good news. Several mayors in Italy, which imposed strict quarantine orders, have posted videos of them directly (and sometimes obscenely) repudiating citizens for venturing outside for non-essential activities. These types of statements and appearances have been praised for conveying a heightened level of emotional intelligence which empathize with what citizens are experiencing and talking about.

The city of [Mountain View, CA](#) established a joint crisis comms teams consisting of members from across the city government, not just from the mayor's office or press team, which most crisis comms teams are centered around. This allowed the team to engage multiple audiences, sped up the approval process for statements and made sure messaging was consistent across departments. The joint crisis comms team also established a mobile-optimized newsletter called [The Briefing](#) with an easy, text message-based signup which acted as a central point of information for citizens and employees of the city.

Message Platforms

Never before have governments had so many channels at their disposal to disseminate messages. A single mode of communicating to citizens cannot be relied upon to reach the broadest-possible populace during a pandemic. Governments have to be more adaptive when it comes to releasing information, using multiple platforms to reach the largest number of citizens quickly and ensure broad mobilization. Innovation in messaging platforms during crises is important, but it is equally important to use those avenues that have worked well in the past with different communities. Governments that start to apply this methodology will not only strengthen their response during COVID-19, but also be in a better position to quickly adapt to communicate with their citizens amidst future mass emergency situations. It is worth highlighting some of the platforms and tools for message delivery that have been used in the COVID-19 response, both traditional and innovative:

Offline - hotlines and printed materials: Telephone hotlines are a quick and easy solution for governments to enable two-way communications with the public, but will become limited in their

Trusted Messengers: During a crisis, it is important for governments to recognize who has the trust of citizens to ensure critical information both reaches and is trusted by citizens:

- During the 2014 Ebola crisis, the government of Liberia found that citizens largely did not trust the state and that its mass media campaign was failing. In response, the government identified intermediaries within villages themselves to convey information to the community members. They were clearly identified as working on the Ebola information campaign with badges, T-shirts, etc. and went door to door to advise citizens on control and mitigation measures. A [post-outbreak survey](#) found that citizens in these communities were 26% more likely to allow government workers to bury the deceased and 15% more likely to support general disease control measures.
- In Finland, Sanna Marin, who became the world's youngest serving prime minister when she was elected in December 2019 at the age of 34, asked social media influencers of all ages to disseminate fact-based information in response to the corona virus, recognizing the power they had as trusted communicators to a large population base.

Defeating the Enemy: Wartime communications can be a good comparable when looking at appropriate messengers in a pandemic. In a pandemic, just as in wartime, the government has exclusive access to information from the "frontlines," information that then must be messaged from the top in order for citizens to feel safe and to ease anxiety during a time of confusion and uncertainty. And just as generals are key spokespeople on the complexities of the battle and the realities on the ground during daily briefings in wartime, public health experts should be given prominence at the podium during a pandemic.

functionality as a pandemic progresses. In the first stages of the spread of the virus, Washington and Massachusetts set up phone hotlines that were quickly overwhelmed, necessitating their moving to more robust communications tools. Printed materials such as posters are also a traditional method of communicating during a crisis and maintain their significant role in a pandemic as a way to provide critical information to community members who do not have access to the internet or other platforms.

Press conferences: Although not a new communication approach, televised press conferences from government officials have become the go-to source for information about the pandemic.

- In the US, aside from the evening task force briefings held at the White House, governors such as Andrew Cuomo, Gretchen Whitmer, and Mike DeWine and Mayors such as Chicago's Lori Lightfoot and Los Angeles' Eric Garcetti have become staples in local and national television news, holding briefings at a constant cadence, often forecasting the conversations for federal officials later in the day.
- Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg brought a new approach to the traditional press conference by holding a [dedicated press conference](#) for kids where no adults were allowed. She responded to questions from kids around Norway, taking the time to explain complex issues and why it was okay to be frightened. The press conference for kids model has been replicated by local U.S. politicians including Rhode Island [Governor Gina Raimondo](#) and a Facebook Live press conference for kids by Amarillo, TX [Mayor Ginger Nelson](#).

Centralized web portals: This is a common approach in multiple countries and local jurisdictions, including good examples in [Canada](#) and [Bangladesh](#). South Korea also created individual portals for information on key topics, such as face masks and open hospital beds. Government dashboards have also been used effectively at the local level and in countries like [Italy](#), showcasing real time data and evolving public health information.

Apps: Government apps have become a common tool in the kit to reach audiences. During COVID-19, governments have begun to develop apps as a means to track cases of COVID-19. For example, the Government Technology Agency of Singapore (GovTech), the in-house IT agency of the Singapore public service, and the Ministry of Health launched a mobile app called [TraceTogether](#), enabling community-driven contact tracing in an effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19. In South Korea, the Corona 100m (Co100) app was

launched using government data to alert users when they come within 100 meters of a location visited by an infected person and reportedly had a million downloads in its first ten days after launch. The UK's National Health Service is also working on a smartphone app, developed with academics and industry partners, that instantly traces close contacts of people carrying the coronavirus and advises them to self-isolate. These apps have also raised important privacy/surveillance conversations that will certainly continue in the months to come.

SMS, voice and email notifications: Multiple governments have relied on event management software platforms to quickly send out information via SMS, voice and email, often including the capability for the public to send in questions and queries for help.

IVR, chatbots and AI: Citizens do not want to wait for answers to questions regarding health issues, especially when there is a lot of uncertainty and conflicting information. Some governments have addressed this issue by using interactive voice response (IVR) technology, chatbots and artificial intelligence to help share public information and evaluate the necessary response to a question or request from a citizen – be it an automated reply or a more involved response by a specialist to address a complex or emergency situation. This helps put the right information in the hands of citizens faster and more efficiently, while freeing specialists to tackle the requests only they can handle. WhatsApp bots that answer questions, give guidance, and dispel misinformation have also been used by WHO, Australia, Argentina and South Africa, among others.

Crowdsourcing: The use of crowdsourcing technology and applications has emerged as key platforms for communications and decision-making during the pandemic. These include social distancing apps, such as [mContain](#) in Memphis and [Crowdless](#) in London, which monitor the crowd levels of public spaces, and [OurStreets](#) in Washington, D.C., which allows users to give real-time updates on the availability of staple grocery items in stores across the city. Other crowdsourced applications are geared toward providing timely information to medical professionals and policymakers, such as [COVID Near You](#), which seeks to geographically track the status of COVID-19 outbreaks across the U.S., and [Ipsos's partnership with G-MED](#), which is tracking the online conversations of doctors around COVID-19 to analyze emerging trends, such as the availability of PPE and testing supplies and the ethics of off-label trial drugs to treat patients.

Additionally, a significant level of crowdsourcing is happening behind the scenes – Unacast, a tech company that analyzes phone location data for marketing, has produced a [social distancing scoreboard](#) that gives grades to U.S. states and counties. Governments around the world, such as China and South Korea, are [already using such data](#)

to inform their COVID-19 tracking efforts. While the use of crowd-sourced information flows is increasing, governments will need to weigh their effectiveness for communication and response with broader debates on the privacy of citizens.



Andrew Belanger
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... Oh there ain't no rest for the wicked; PSA's don't grow on trees; We got posts to write; We got trolls to tame; There ain't nothing in this world we can't change; Oh no, we can't slow down; We can't hold back; Though you know, we wish we could... #SocialGov #Anthem twitter.com/mkobach/status...

Matthew Kobach @mkobach

Shout out to all social media people who seamlessly switched gears from marketing to crisis comms overnight. We are required to wear many hats, and have the added pressure of being an organization's most public facing form of communication.

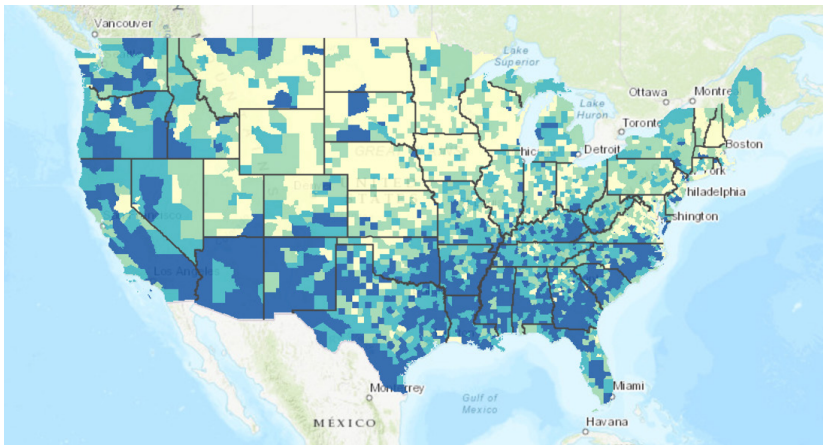
Rest up this weekend, you earned it.

Based in Lansing, Michigan, Belanger is the state's Social Media Director and Digital Content Administrator.

Social Media: Social media is a critical communications tool on multiple levels for governments and has been institutionalized across the globe. The COVID-19 response has seen governments rely heavily on existing social media content creators in their government offices to start developing public health content that resonates with the audiences they already know well. For example, multiple cities have begun including TikTok videos in their social media communications targeting Gen Z audiences, where misinformation has been particularly rampant.

Hackathons: Hackathons are a relatively new approach for governments that are essentially mass collaborations that bridge sectors and connect the government and technology communities with a shared challenge to encourage problem solving. The government of Switzerland hosted multi-day virtual hackathons – complete with live music and morning yoga – to address challenges and mentor practitioners on a variety of subjects, from protecting at-risk groups to data dissemination and telework options.

Maps: In an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, governments can use maps to visualize data, highlighting a community's interconnectivity and the importance for collective action. Maps have been used effectively on many government web portals and dashboards. A good example of a map that not only visualizes data, but also makes the data relevant to individuals in a community is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) map. This map was intended to help emergency responders identify areas with higher levels of vulnerability to disasters based on four themes: socioeconomic status, household composition, race/ethnicity/language and housing/transportation.



Local leaders during COVID-19 have used the SVI map to generate maps of their local areas to create a shared sense of responsibility and collective action by physically placing residents in reference to their most vulnerable neighbors. See more on vulnerability mapping in ISE's report on [Mapping and Targeting Vulnerable Groups for Development and Relief Interventions](#). Local leaders during COVID-19 have used the SVI map to generate maps of their local areas to create a shared sense of responsibility and collective action by physically placing residents in reference to their most vulnerable neighbors. See more on vulnerability mapping in ISE's report on [Mapping and Targeting Vulnerable Groups for Development and Relief Interventions](#).

In Summary

Governments responding during COVID-19 will need to learn from past pandemic responses and current successes and failures as they continue to communicate to citizens. A return to the key fundamentals of effective communications can help mobilize citizens and penetrate a saturated message environment, including: i) ensuring messages are transparent, credible, clear, consistent and timely with the right balance of tone and appeal; ii) tailoring those messages for audience segments; iii) understanding the role of different messengers, the importance of coordination and disseminating messages through a variety of credible messengers; and iv) using innovative and traditional messaging platforms to deliver communications quickly to multiple audiences. Taken together, these fundamental approaches can: promote citizen trust; lay the foundations for leaders to communicate effectively during a time of crisis and uncertainty; and most importantly, protect public health.

Resources

- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued [guidance](#) for the coordination of Federal web and social media communications.
- The primary U.S. portal for public information curated by the White House's Task Force in conjunction with the CDC, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and other agency stakeholders, links to the appropriate Federal agency website as the authoritative source for that information as necessary: [coronavirus.gov](#)
- The CDC offers many free [resources](#) including videos, fact sheets, and posters for the coronavirus. The CDC's also provides [American Sign Language](#) (ASL) videos on COVID-19.
- The World Health Organization provides [graphics and videos](#) that can be downloaded and posted on public health communication priorities, such on proper hand washing.
- [SafeGraph](#) is providing government agencies at the local, state and federal level access to their large datasets and dashboards, including location-based data for developing tailored communications to reinforce social distancing and stay-at-home measures within communities.
- A [project](#) by the Southeast Health District, a 16-county Public Health district located in Southeast Georgia, provides risk communication tools designed specifically for rural areas.
- GovTech has collected a [list of resources](#) to connect leaders with useful tools to aid in response efforts, including government dashboards and companies providing COVID-19 tech solutions.
- Texas Health & Human Services posted [general communications tools](#) including a social media toolkit, printable materials and multimedia that helped in the consistency of messages and coordination among all those communicating to the public.
- [Unacast](#) is using their data from users mobile applications to grade U.S. states and counties on their social distancing.
- Google and Stanford University developed an embeddable, customizable online [COVID-19 map](#) using data from the New York Times. While the project was developed for journalists and local news, the tool also allows for free and easy sharing of up to date data for government officials to feature on web posts and messages where technology capacity may be limited.
- [Carnegie Mellon University](#) has developed a series of interactive maps that display data on doctor visits, Google search trends, Facebook and Google surveys and flu testing at the U.S. county and metropolitan level. This data can be used by local authorities to "survey" their citizens and detect heightened COVID-19 activity.

Example of a communications matrix with messenger, audience and sample messaging and platforms

Communicator	Primary Audience	Messaging	Platforms
National/federal (president, prime minister, emir, etc.)	General public, international	Nation-wide closures/restrictions; actions being undertaken to slow the spread of the virus at the national level; global status of pandemic including numbers infected/deaths; national and global economic status, resources and plans ; national efforts to increase access to health care including supplies, testing, treatments and vaccines; decision-making frameworks and sources	Televised press conferences, government social media channels, web portals and dashboards , specific federal/national government agency platforms
Local (governor, mayor)	Public in jurisdiction, local businesses, vulnerable populations in communities	State and city-wide closures/restrictions such as schools and local businesses; local data on spread and containment of virus; access to testing and health care such as hospital capacity and test locations; local economic impacts and measures being taken	Televised press conferences, local government social media channels, web portals, virtual town halls, local media networks , newsletters and hotlines, SMS and email notifications
Public health officials	National, local, global	Health guidance and recommendations; articulation of the health concern and level of threat of the virus; status of testing, treatments and vaccines; data on the local, national and global spread of the virus	Spokespeople as part of national/local televised press conferences and virtual townhalls ; social media channels (with reliance on data visualizations and mapping) ; interactive chats with citizens to answer questions
Other community actors including the private sector and civil society	Targeted local communities where they are trusted experts/messengers	Reinforce national and local messaging; targeted messaging for what impacts their communities, for example: academic community on schools' closures, student loans, sports, etc. OR banking sector on how to access loans, financial remediation OR social workers on mental health and domestic abuse hotlines/resources	Local news outlets; owned social media channels ; email to existing community networks