

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

COVID-19 and Longitudinal Risk Communication

Working Group Description:

Current practices for communication during public health crises are built around acute onset or singular experience events. This suggests public health risk communicators may be unprepared to think about and cope with the protracted nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. This Working Group will focus on identifying the issues and strategies to balance between steady state and emergent threat communication with COVID-19 communication needs.

Working Group Overview:

Our task is to set an agenda for a way forward, having a protracted event mindset, and recognizing opportunities as well as challenges. Across the five Priority Research Topics presented below, we particularly want to call attention to and emphasize the communication needs of vulnerable and at risk populations, which will vary by race, culture, religion, language, age, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and ability. Risk communicators, public health practitioners, and researchers must recognize their responsibility to include and plan for longitudinal communication with and for individuals, groups, and communities who are routinely marginalized, stigmatized, and lack resources.

The context in which we find ourselves is a sustained crisis with an unstable communication environment where the expertise of science has been devalued as active disinformation shapes perceptions of trust and credibility across all populations. In addition, the challenge of communicating uncertainty and evolving scientific information over time may result in “hard choices,” potentially putting risks to the preservation of physical health and life in tension with risks to other important values and needs. It is also a context marked by mass reactions to systemic, structural, and law enforcement violence perpetrated against the populations who are most vulnerable to the impacts of disease, bringing a heightened awareness of structural inequality and an increased burden for persons of color who are also tasked with communicating risk.

Words that describe our working focus areas are: sustained, longitudinal, protracted, politicized, and uncertain. Public health practitioners and scholars have models to plan for acute onset, short-term disasters that address psychological and physical well-being with a quick resolution. COVID-19 represents an event

that is dramatically different from both acute short-term events and long term public health campaigns requiring scholarship and practice that draws from analogous events such as chronic technological disasters and “creeping crises,” unending earthquake sequences, and global climate change. It requires thoughtful consideration about how to *sustain attention* in an information environment that is filled with distraction and uncertainty, while recapturing attention as conditions change and fatigue settles in. It also requires approaches to *motivation* that extend beyond individual-focused fear-based messaging, to establish routinized behaviors that become normative to protect those who are most vulnerable among us. This is set within an increasingly *polarized communication landscape* that has become fraught with hostility, disinformation, and misinformation, that has led to increased division and mistrust. With the erosion of trust and credibility, *crisis leadership* becomes increasingly problematic and vital for communicating risk with all populations. And finally, we must consider the effects of these sustained efforts on the *capacity of organizational personnel* as they plan communications for the initial wave of the pandemic, as well as future phases, overlapping, and concurrent hazardous events.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
<p>1. Attention – This topic area is focused on the challenges for risk communicators to attract and maintain attention over prolonged time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What are the psychological dimensions of protracted events and how does that affect attention over time? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How might risk communication models be adapted to address long, dynamic, evolving, and protracted disasters? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How do theories about mental noise, information overload, and message fatigue inform strategies to keep attention longitudinally? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What messaging strategies, such as promoted posts on social media, use of social influencers, gamification, stories, and narratives, are the most effective to maintain and recapture attention when fatigue sets in and why? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: How have messages become more or less accessible for vulnerable populations over time?
<p>2. Motivation – This topic area highlights the importance of motivation to comply with public health recommendations over a sustained period of time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What are the factors, dynamics, vulnerabilities, and abilities that shape motivation to comply with public health and safety guidelines and how are embedded value conflicts exacerbated by the protracted nature of events like COVID-19? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: What is the role of political and other non-expert leaders in increasing or decreasing motivation to comply with public health and safety guidelines? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What risk communication strategies can be employed to encourage routinized protective action reinforced by social norms among different populations and subgroups? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What individual and community level factors are associated with long-term adoption of public health recommendations?
<p>3. Fragmented Communications Environment – This topic highlights the importance of the context in which</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What role and impact do culture, community, and identity have on how trust and cognitive heuristics are used to assess information and source credibility?

<p>longitudinal risk communication is taking place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How do societal and political polarization and inter-group dynamics affect cognitive processing of information and misinformation? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What interventions can be developed to correct and curtail misinformation and disinformation on multiple platforms as the pandemic continues to spread?
<p>4. Trust, Connection, and Credibility – This topic highlights the importance of leadership in a protracted disaster.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What existing theories or approaches, such as recreancy and social capital, are sufficient to explain the loss of trust and credibility in a protracted and contentious public health disaster? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: What community sources and opinion leaders can be leveraged to disseminate accurate and culturally relevant risk communication? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How might trust in public health leaders/institutions be re-established longitudinally (with specific attention directed to vulnerable populations)? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What are the roles of crisis communicators in longitudinal and protracted public health events? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: Are there resiliency approaches to longitudinal crisis leadership and messaging that can be developed and applied?
<p>5. Organizing for Communicative Sustainability – This topic highlights the capacity of organizational personnel and resources dedicated to risk and crisis communication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How might organizational preparedness models based on assumptions of relatively short-lived emergency events adapt to contexts of prolonged communicative intensity, scrutiny, and stress? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: What are the implications and organizational communicative needs when successive, synchronous, and overlapping concurrent events occur? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What organizational forms and strategies are conducive to sustaining communicative capacity and effectiveness over extended periods of time for meeting communication needs? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What can risk communicators actually achieve in a low resource environment during a protracted pandemic event?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Disaster researchers, practitioners, and policymakers must always take into consideration principles that govern our behavior. In the time of COVID, when individuals and communities who are frequently the subject of research have been disproportionately impacted by and are vulnerable to multiple events, we suggest the following methodological considerations:

- Employ mixed methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative phenomena, recognizing the key role of narratives, and the trauma embedded in the stories captured, and how that effects future risk communication.
- Draw from historical analogues of protracted disaster to identify parallel threats and impacts on the most vulnerable populations.
- Approach subjects with sensitivity, recognizing the considerable stress that has accumulated due to compounding events, coupled with systematic injustice and potential mental health burdens.
- Research design should reflect the nature of a protracted longitudinal event, noting that individual research inquiries will be limited in generalizing to the larger phenomena.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

<https://www.albany.edu/cehc/cehc-covid-19-response>

Contributors:

DeeDee Bennett, College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity, University at Albany, SUNY

Keri Lubell, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Meghan Bridgid Moran, Department of Health, Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Yonaira Rivera, Department of Communication, School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University New Brunswick

Monica Schoch-Spana Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Tara Kirk Sell, Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Eric Stern, College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity, University at Albany, SUNY

Jeannette Sutton, College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity, University at Albany, SUNY

David Turetsky, College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity, University at Albany, SUNY

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