

Deciphering crisis communication

Unprecedented situations require difficult decisions: The international research project DECIPHER (“Deciphering the pandemic public sphere”), which is being conducted by the University of Ilmenau and the BfR, investigates how communication can be effective in future crises. Dr Robin Janzik, project head at the BfR, provides more details in the following interview.

Mr Janzik, the COVID-19 pandemic had the world holding its breath for around three years. How is DECIPHER approaching this?

We are investigating how the population in seven countries – in Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands and the USA – perceived government communication during the pandemic. We first collected views and opinions on government communication in interviews. To examine their prevalence in the general population, representative surveys were conducted in each country.

By analysing the interview data you discovered that science is perceived as a more trustworthy source than the government. How can this be explained?

There are many factors that influence trust and credibility. Competence, benevolence and integrity are just as important as transparency, honesty and the ability to be clear and specific. Results

of earlier studies show that these characteristics are often associated with people working in science. This can also be the case for politicians, but the picture here is often more mixed.

Do the results between the countries vary greatly from each other?

First, we see that people are similar in their assessment of government communication, despite different political systems and state measures. The devil is in the details. In the UK, for example, politicians’ behaviour played an essential role. And we found that there were differences in perceptions of communication on federal and state level in the USA. Particularly in

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Head at the BfR

Germany, the offers of the public broadcasting service were perceived as if they were direct information from the government.

What role did social media play for the general public?

We saw that people in all seven countries got their information from social media as well as via traditional channels and government portals. At the same time, interviewees showed a pronounced awareness of misinformation. In fact, they had purposefully used mechanisms to identify misinformation in order to either no longer deal with it or to produce counterarguments.

How were government communication and the measures perceived in general?

One negative assessment was that communication was not fast enough in some cases, for example. At the same time, people expressed an understanding for the fact that it was an exceptional situation in which mistakes could happen.



Which aspects are particularly important for government communication?

For most interviewees, a wide range of information sources, as well as clarity and concreteness, were important. They want to understand why something is being communicated, why a decision has been made, and how relevant the information is for them. In addition, the perceived competence and integrity of the people communicating plays a big role – expertise is very important to people and can contribute to a higher level of trust. —

📄 More information



DECIPHER project
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