

# Digital public communication in the pandemic

A corpus-based analysis of Covid-19 local government  
social media posts

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# Context: public Covid communications

- Communication has played a critical role during the response to and management of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Communicators have had a particularly hard task persuading different types of audiences to comply with ever-changing regulations
- There has been lots of attention paid to how politicians and national governments have communicated with the public, but local governments not so much
- **What linguistic strategies do local government organisations use to engage the public in a time of crisis?**

- Love, R., Darics, E., & Palmieri, R. (in review). Engaging the public: local government organisations' communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Applied Corpus Linguistics*.



# Context: national messaging strategies

Since the beginning of the pandemic, research has identified several communicative strategies that governments around the world have used in public discourse to encourage the public to comply with Covid regulations:

- tailoring messages to the various publics and fostering relatedness
- empathic, compassionate communication
- acknowledging uncertainty
- fostering autonomy
- cutting through the 'infodemic'
  - “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak” (World Health Organisation, 2022)



Bui et al. (2021)

Finset et al. (2020)

Habersaat et al. (2020)

Malecki et al. (2021)

Porat (2020)

Ratzan et al. (2020)

Stolow et al. (2020)

Wong & Jensen (2020)

Zhang et al. (2020)

# Context: cutting through the infodemic

“Infodemic management aims to enable good health practices through 4 types of activities:

- Listening to community concerns and questions
- Promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice
- Building resilience to misinformation
- **Engaging and empowering communities to take positive action”**



# Context: local government organisations (LGOs)

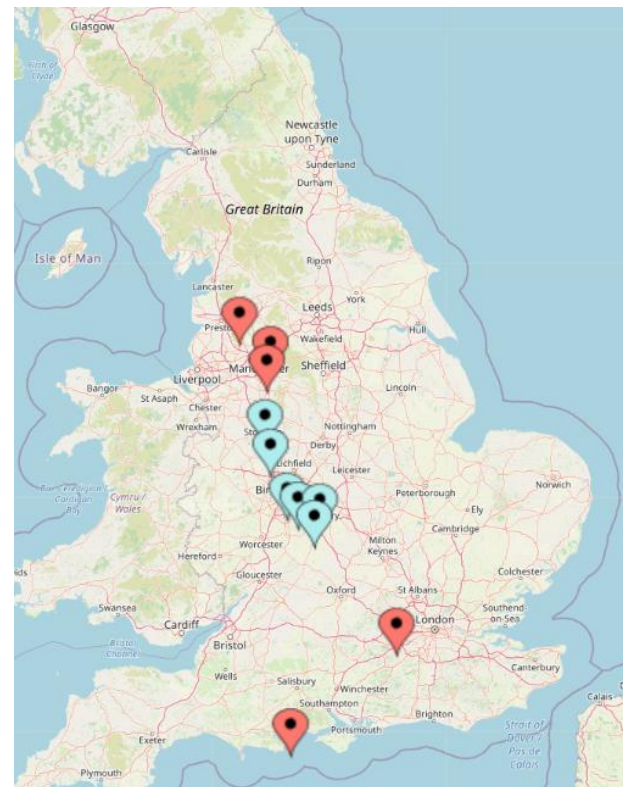
- Local government organisations play a crucial role in **recontextualising the national messaging** for a local audience and **encouraging the public to comply with regulations**
  - They are more trusted than national governments (Coleman et al., 2020)
    - In England, public trust in local councils rose during the first lockdown (LGA, 2020)
  - LGOs address a wide diversity of audiences in very diverse geopolitical and cultural circumstances
  - They report to be overlooked in comparison to national governments
  - They relied heavily upon social media for immediate and wide-reaching communications
- 
- Coleman, S., Konstantinova, N., & Moss, G. (2020). The pandemic and its publics: how people receive, interpret and act upon official guidance. University of Leeds. [https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/download/downloads/id/635/the\\_pandemic\\_and\\_its\\_publics\\_how\\_people\\_receive\\_interpret\\_and\\_act\\_upon\\_official\\_guidance.pdf](https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/download/downloads/id/635/the_pandemic_and_its_publics_how_people_receive_interpret_and_act_upon_official_guidance.pdf)
  - Local Government Association. (2020). Polling on resident satisfaction with councils: June 2020. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/polling-resident-satisfaction-councils-june-2020>

# Framework: engagement in discourse

- Which linguistic strategies did English LGOs use to communicate with the public about Covid-19 using social media?
- Metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005)
  - Language that writers use to help readers interpret the intended function of the message
  - Links a text to its context by using language designed for readers' needs, understandings, existing knowledge and prior experiences with texts
  - Resources that encourage interaction between writers and their audiences, and encompass ways in which writers connect with, express concern for, and direct the attention of, their readers
- **Interactive metadiscourse:** How are readers 'involved' in the text?
  - Personal pronouns
  - Possessive determiners
  - Questions
  - Hashtags
  - Emoji

# Data and method

- Pilot study: Facebook and Twitter posts  
05 November - 02 December 2020 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> UK national lockdown)
  - Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
  - Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
  - Oldham Council
  - Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
  - Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- Posts contain explicit or implicit reference to the Covid-19 pandemic
  - Facebook: 260 posts; 18,651 words
  - Twitter: 327 posts; 14,424 words
- Corpus-assisted discourse analysis using *AntConc* and *Sketch Engine*



# Analysis: agentivity

The second person pronoun *you* is the most frequently-occurring pronoun, mostly featuring in orders/prescriptions

- **You must not** meet socially indoors with family or friends unless they are part of your household or support bubble. (Stockport, 02 Dec 2020)
  - [You + deontic modal] is used almost exclusively when referring to government mandates

Recurrent pattern: conditional

- **If you** have symptoms get tested ➦ <http://bit.ly/2PO6xyg> (Blackburn with Darwen, 13 Nov 2020)

Reminders of the freedoms that still remain

- **You can** still go out into the fresh air and get some exercise - whether that's a walk, run or riding a bike 🚲 (Stockport, 14 Nov 2020)



# Analysis: inclusivity

The first person plural pronoun *we* is the second most frequently-occurring pronoun:

60% inclusive

- Let's get there safely so **we** can enjoy spending time with **our** loved ones this Christmas 🎄 (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, 02 Dec 2020)

40% exclusive

- We** know bubbles can be confusing but **we** hope this animation helps 😊 (Blackburn with Darwen, 01 Dec 2020)

Pseudo-second person

- As **we** spend more time indoors **we** need to do whatever **we** can to protect each other. We need to make sure to Wash **our** hands (Oldham, 22 Nov 2020)



# Analysis: ambiguity

Facebook post by Blackburn with Darwen Council (05 Nov 2020)

- 1) ...so **we** urge **residents** to continue to work with **us** and do everything **they** can to
- 2) help stop the spread of the virus. Please stay at home as much as possible and
- 3) don't mix with people **you** don't live with. This awful situation will only go on longer
- 4) if **people** break the rules, risking further spread of the virus and causing more
- 5) illness and economic pain. Please **we all** need to work together and help **each**
- 6) **other**. The basics of washing hands, wearing a face covering, keeping 2m from
- 7) others, getting a test if **you** have symptoms and self-isolating when told to do so,
- 8) are simple steps and need to be adhered to. Together **we** believe **we** can do this
- 9) and make progress to moving towards more pleasant times.

# Analysis: questions and engagement

## Request for information

- How will you be remembering this year? (Blackburn with Darwen, 07 Nov 2020)

## Preamble

- Want to help your loved ones stay connected during the coronavirus crisis? (Stockport, 12 Nov 2020)

## Conditional

- Got Coronavirus symptoms? 😷 OR Tested positive? 🦠 You must self-isolate for 10 days. (Blackburn with Darwen, 24 Nov 2020)


## Mock Q+A

- Q: My Favourite pastime is going to the gym. How am I supposed to stay fit and healthy during national lockdown?  
A: The gym might be closed but you can still take unlimited exercise outdoors with your household (Stockport, 27 Nov 2020)

# Analysis: hashtags

Hashtags are metadiscourse resources typical of microblogging and other social media platforms

Independent hashtags used mostly for orders:

- Want to understand more about the vital role that vaccines have on our lives? Check out these key facts on vaccines  **#DoYourBit** (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, 30 Nov 2020)

Syntactically embedded hashtags used mostly for topic-marking:

- It is easier than ever before to get a **#coronavirus** test  
Tests are available seven days a week at locations across Greater Manchester. (Stockport, 15 Nov 2020)

Other examples of imperative / command hashtags:

- **#StayAtHome**, **#StaySafe**, **#StopTheSpread**, **#HandsFaceSpace**, **#ShopLocal**



# Analysis: emoji

- Tagged as SYM in Sketch Engine – searchable as tokens

		Word	Frequency	Relative <sup>?</sup>		
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	👉	65	1,862.57	<div><div></div></div>	...
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	/	57	1,633.33	<div><div></div></div>	...
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	i	48	1,375.44	<div><div></div></div>	...
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	➡	34	974.27	<div><div></div></div>	...
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	⚠	30	859.65	<div><div></div></div>	...
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	&	29	830.99	<div><div></div></div>	...
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	👇	27	773.68	<div><div></div></div>	...
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	😓	23	659.06	<div><div></div></div>	...
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	↔	22	630.41	<div><div></div></div>	...
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	✖	17	487.13	<div><div></div></div>	...

# Analysis: emoji

- 58 out of 65 📌 pointing to a URL for further information

1	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 until Mon, Dec 14th to enter – GOOD-LUCK! 🍀 Read more here	👉 bit.ly/3fxGzLI Full Ts&Cs can be found here	👉 bit.ly/37gTiP1 For	
2	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 Read more here 👉 bit.ly/3fxGzLI Full Ts&Cs can be found here	👉 bit.ly/37gTiP1 For info on help available to businesses during the		
3	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 for info on help available to businesses during the pandemic visit	👉 bit.ly/3foRp6t #SmallBizSatUK #smallbusinesses" "IMPORTANT:		
4	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 with Read more about Keeley's personal experience of Covid-19	👉 bit.ly/2U7e7G5" "Brighten someone's day - send a Christmas car		
5	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 📌 This all helps to protect your loved ones 😊 For more info visit	👉 bit.ly/3l3KXmx" "Coronavirus: Christmas testing centre opening ti		
6	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 t go to 👉 gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test For more information go to	👉 bit.ly/3g1JuMp" "Does your child use school transport services in		
7	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 days! 🏠 You can find out more information on self-isolation here	👉 bit.ly/3pVJu5b" "Happy 1st of December 🎅❄️ Worried about yo		
8	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 here in the borough our cases are and who is most affected here	👉 bit.ly/2lPbsP1 A full range of coronavirus information can be foun		
9	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 here in the borough our cases are and who is most affected here	👉 bit.ly/2lPbsP1 A full range of coronavirus information can be foun		
10	<input type="checkbox"/> ⓘ doc#0 elf-isolate 😊 You can find out everything you need to know here	👉 bit.ly/33uefoo" "LOCKDOWN: Which businesses should be open		

# Discussion

Local government communicators play a crucial role in helping central government to engage the public in times of crisis

- Autonomy-supporting strategies
  - Readers are invited to **verify themselves** whether they belong to the category at issue and, if so, to follow the advocated prescription or instructions
  - Readers are encouraged to be **responsible and interested**, while allowing the writers to maintain an image consistent with the ethos of a **public authority**
  - Writers solicit the public to take **personal responsibility** through the construction of the voice of the reader
- Ambiguity of linguistic resources
  - Ambiguity of pronoun usage arguably an advantage, used to **amplify the sense of inclusion** and shared experiences. This can serve to address the public's crisis response, mitigating emotional extremes
- Standing out in the infodemic
  - Writers used strategies to create a visual markedness to **attract readers' attention** and perhaps to **reinforce connotations** related to the overall message.

# Ongoing work with LGO communicators

Participating LGO communicators reported:

- Value in reflecting on practice and, especially, comparing their practice to other LGOs
  - We have not yet offered a rigorous comparison between LGOs but we plan to do so with more data
- Feeling overlooked and undervalued during the pandemic response
  - LGOs often received decisions about national restrictions at the same time as the general public with no advance warning
  - One LGO noted that much of their COVID-related communication was produced “**intuitively**...at speed”
  - Therefore, being shown by researchers how linguistic patterns can be ascribed to specific communicative strategies made them realise that their work “actually is **hugely skilful and valuable**”
- Competing identities as messenger and patient of Covid measures
  - “it's a reminder really that comms doesn't affect our audiences; **it affects us too**. So staying in the mindset of this for future campaigns is really important.”

# Next steps and challenges

- Collection of more data from more LGOs and periods in the Covid timeline: how did these strategies develop over time? e.g. does variability decrease over time as we got more 'used' to the pandemic?
- Multimodal analysis: e.g. emojis, images are clearly crucial to engagement
- User responses and replies from LGOs: from interactive metadiscourse to actual interaction
- Comparing our data/findings to:
  - Non-Covid posts from the same accounts
  - Existing Local Government Association comms advice

## Some challenges

- Avoiding essentialising these strategies to the Covid context – translating Covid-specific observations to present/future crises
- Exploring the relationship between language, trust and compliance



### COVID-19 communications

Following the initial response phase, councils are now adjusting to life with COVID-19. Effective communications and engagement is key to supporting and protecting residents, adjusting to new ways of living and working, rebuilding economies and managing local outbreaks

This practical resource is intended to support councils to plan for and think strategically about communications and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides practical guidance and advice, building on the lessons learned since March 2020.

Here, you'll find materials covering a wide range of topics – from developing a plan internally and prioritising activity, to planning for local outbreaks. We consider how councils have come to the fore as leaders of place with increasing levels of trust in local authorities, how we can capitalise on a revitalised relationship with residents and engage them in planning for what our communities might look like in the future.

**Coronavirus (COVID-19)  
communications support  
and templates**

# Thank you

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