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Short communication

Covid-19 Crisis Communications: The Challenge for Environmental Organizations

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ABSTRACT

During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, U.S. environmental organizations and U.S. chapters of international environmental organizations grappled with a broad set of challenges, including when and what to communicate to supporters. In the winter and early spring of 2020, environmental organizations became crisis communicators, confronted by time pressures and the limited attention spans of audiences beset by the pandemic. Crafting communications that are concise and factual, compassionate, that instill confidence, and that evince organizational competence are important facets of crisis communications. However, environmental organizations faced the additional challenge of ensuring that their own priorities were presented clearly and persuasively amidst the flood of pandemic-related information. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and preparation for future pandemics, force environmental organizations to amend their crisis communications to underscore their relevance to crises and their role in problem-solving.

1. Introduction

As of the time of this writing, the Covid-19 global confirmed caseload exceeds 38 million with more than 1 million deaths worldwide. In the winter and spring of 2020, organizations in every sector, across the world, were forced to suspend, diminish, or restructure operations and services for weeks or months, with far-reaching economic and societal impacts. Turmoil and uncertainty for government agencies, corporations and small businesses, colleges, charities, and families alike may persist until effective, widely available, and affordable vaccines are developed and distributed worldwide.

Environmental organizations (EOs), like many nonprofit organizations, have grappled with the challenge of deploying a workforce from home, with the cancellation of important meetings, suspension of programs and events, and disruption of fundraising operations. The pandemic poses both grave risks as well as opportunities for these organizations. As Ulmer et al. note (2015:13), the Mandarin characters for “crisis” translate as “dangerous opportunity”. For many EOs, there is an opportunity to emphasize keywords and core symbols of organizational mission that align with the pandemic. Consider that the novel coronavirus has zoonotic origins. Warnings about zoonotic pathogens and their association with habitat destruction, poaching, and illegal trade of wildlife long predate Covid-19 (Wolfe et al., 2005).

This communications “opportunity” is simultaneously a risk if the major, motivational symbols that define the organization fail to resonate with the public imagination. Policy agendas, public support, and charitable giving practices may be radically altered by the “new normal” of “living with Covid-19” or with other pandemics, and EOs will need to adjust to these new realities. Whether and to what extent EOs recognized this challenge in their early-stage Covid-19 crisis communications is the subject of the present inquiry. This article applies criteria from the crisis communications literature to the contexts of environmental organizations responding to the pandemic in the winter and spring of 2020.

2. Covid-19 and the new landscape for organizational crisis communications

Crisis communications is a broad and somewhat fragmented literature, much of it grounded in practical applications meant to guide organizational leaders (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Fink, 2013). The concept of “crisis” also deeply informs the environmental communications literature. The inaugural issue of the journal, *Environmental Communication*, considers whether crisis and moral purpose are first order considerations for contributors to this field of study. In his keynote essay, Robert Cox posits that, because the natural environment is gravely threatened, expertise in environmental communication is inexorably bound to ethical

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duty (Cox, 2007).¹ Among many (though certainly not all) environmental organizations, Cox's assertion that experts should adopt an ethical orientation toward their discipline would seem uncontroversial considering the normative standpoint and advocacy roles of many EOs.²

Ethical imperatives notwithstanding, the Covid-19 pandemic engages a different type of crisis communications for EOs. These communications are high stakes: there is time pressure and a heightened need to "get the message right." An additional challenge is that regular citizens typically do not see the reality of organizations managing crises. Instead, their understanding of crisis management is perceptual – shaped by words, symbols, and emotions relayed by the organizations themselves or by other sources.³

In the Covid-19 context, the communications challenge for EOs is heightened further still by communication channels clogged with unremitting news, commentary, posts, and imagery of the pandemic. Organizations run the risk of declining public interest and support as organizational goals are eclipsed by the urgency of the pandemic and its far reaching consequences for health and economic security. The pandemic's potential displacement of climate change as a major public concern, for example, has been raised (Price, 2020).

Painstaking decisions about finances also inform EOs' crisis communication strategies during emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic. EOs, to varying degrees, rely on a donor base and member subscribers. Covid-19 disrupted fundraising and stewardship work as organizations considered when – or whether – to transmit appeals for support. "As nonprofits assess how the spread of Covid-19 is affecting their mission and their finances," the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* observed in April 2020, "many are facing a difficult decision: to mail or not to mail" (Haynes, 2020).

3. Crisis Communications Lessons and Their Limitations

The need to communicate early and persuasively (among other things, so as to reassure anxious or distracted donors) is one facet of a Covid-19 crisis communications plan for EOs. But conventional "how to" advice from the crisis communications literature is imperfectly aligned with EO leaders' needs. Frequently, crisis management case material – and the principles derived from these cases – attend to disasters with comparatively well-defined durations, with clear beginnings and ends. Examples include relatively short-lived, enterprise-specific emergencies, including, for example fatal airline accidents, industrial accidents, contamination and product tampering scandals, and natural disasters (Coleman, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2020; Ray, 1999; Coombs, 2019). The boundaries between each stage of the typical crisis – the precipitating moment of disaster, the rush to respond, the stabilization of the response, and the aftermath, are sufficiently clear and well-delineated that formal definitions of each stage are often never presented by the authors. Consider, for example, Jaques's (2007) oft-cited, four-part "issue and crisis management relational model" which consists of "crisis preparedness," "crisis prevention," "crisis incident management," and "post-crisis management". The author provides only an indirect definition of these terms, instead focusing on the managerial decisions and activities that are common to each stage of the

¹ This view was contested from the outset, including by critics who worried that the "ecological crisis" framing would crowd out "constitutive and structural communication issues" in this emerging field (Schwarze, 2007:93; see also Peterson et al., 2007).

² Cox's perspective is no doubt shaped by his own professional experience, having served as president of the Sierra Club.

³ This perception versus reality dualism and the mediating role played by communications are also core tenets of the environmental communications literature. What defines environmental problems, Cox notes (2013:1), is how we communicate about those problems: "...our language, visual images, and modes of interacting with others influence our most basic perceptions of the world and what we understand to be a problem itself."

model. Similarly, Ndlela's taxonomy (2019:8–9) adapts Jaques's model, but like Jaques, does not clearly define when, for example, "crisis response" ends and "post-crisis" begins.

The recurring nature of Covid-19 deviates from the comparatively straightforward, temporally-bounded incidents found in the standard lesson plans for crisis communications. Consider that the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to be ebbing in many parts of the United States in mid-April 2020 only to surge in the first month of the summer with states like Florida, Texas, and Arizona (that had been prematurely opened by their governors), experiencing galloping rates of new infections. The conventional crisis communications script does not apply readily to a resurgent, global-scale crisis like Covid-19. The pandemic's persistence and recurrence underscore the need for a more nimble communications strategy. For EOs, pre-pandemic messages about priorities and programs are unlikely to prove serviceable in the long-run because the long-run necessitates continuous preparations for and responses to new waves of Covid-19 or to future pandemics.

4. Criteria and Cases

Covid-19 forces the amending of otherwise helpful guidance in crisis communications handbooks and instructional texts. There are essential, widely-embraced criteria for crisis communications designed to fit the needs of all organizations, including environmental organizations. Considering the frequency with which these criteria are presented in the extant literature, they are adopted here as fundamental for EO crisis communications. They include:

- 4 **Leadership voice:** expressions of resolve, confidence, and reassurance by the organizational head.⁴ "Own the crisis and demonstrate progress and necessary change," as one expert frames this task (Modzelewski, 2019:59).
- 5 **Empathy:** connecting with audiences' own experiential and emotional contexts amidst the crisis. Hyer and Covelto (2007:annex) observe, "Be aware that people want to know that you care before they care what you know."
- 6 **Forward momentum:** a commitment to the continuing work of the organization.

This essay urges that the leader's compassionate and determined voice are constructive for crisis communications, but not sufficient for navigating the particular communications challenge of a worldwide pandemic. Considering the risks of being drowned out by persistent, urgent Covid-19 communications, environmental organizations must position themselves in the stream of communications and draw attention to their distinctive problem-solving role. Specifically, EOs' crisis communications must demonstrate:

- **Relevance:** relating organizational mission to the crisis at hand and doing so succinctly. The CDC (2004:22) urges, "Cut to the chase... Don't spend a lot of time establishing yourself or your organization". Yet, if the exigencies of the pandemic swamp public interest in and support for environmental protection, it is vital work for the EO to find the right words and symbols to align the organization's mission with the present crisis response.
- **Direct impact:** clear articulation of the problem-solving impact of the organization's work. What is the organization doing *now* to address the crisis?

Early-stage Covid-19 crisis communications by environmental

⁴ For an alternate view concerning the suitability of chief executives as crisis communicators, see Jordan-Meier (2012). Other crisis spokespersons should perform the crisis communications role if the organizational leader is less than "compelling, compassionate, and credible."

organizations were examined with reference to these five categories of pandemic-prompted communications: leadership voice, empathy, forward momentum, relevance, and direct impact. The Nonprofit Times’s and Forbes’s lists of the ten largest environmental charities, measured by total annual revenue, and Charity Navigator’s list of the top U.S. environmental nonprofit organizations, ranked by total annual expenses, composed the population of organizations selected for analysis (Charity Navigator, 2020; Nonprofit Times, 2019; Forbes, 2020). Titles and URLs of the webpages examined are shown in Table 1 and are on file with the author.

The purpose here is to examine the singular, early stage communications from each organization. The population of statements is necessarily limited, capturing a moment in time, albeit an important moment for the organizations and their audiences (Table 2).

The author, alone, performed the content analysis by assigning each organization’s communication narratives to the five categories. JPEGs, GIFs, logos, embedded images, and non-narrative objects in the communications were not examined, though they could serve as important

Table 1
Crisis communications by environmental organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Name of organization	Title of communication	Communication date in 2020	URL
Conservation Fund	Conservation in a time of coronavirus	March 13	https://www.conservationfund.org/news/press-releases/2205-conservation-in-a-time-of-coronavirus
Conservation International	An open letter from our CEO, Dr. M. Sanjayan	March 24	https://www.conservation.org/blog/an-open-letter-from-our-ceo-dr-m-sanjayan
Environmental Defense Fund	A message to our supporters and partners	March 17	https://www.edf.org/covid-19-message
National Wildlife Federation	The National Wildlife Federation helping families through the Covid-19 outbreak	March 19	https://blog.nwf.org/2020/03/the-national-wildlife-federation-helping-families-through-the-covid-19-outbreak/
Nature Conservancy	A message on the Covid-19 pandemic	March 25	https://www.nature.org/en-us/newsroom/commitment-during-covid-19/
National Resources Defense Council	A note from NRDC on Covid-19	March 16	https://www.nrdc.org/experts/gina-mccarthy/note-nrdc-covid-19
Sierra Club	How the Sierra Club is responding to the Covid-19 pandemic	March 13	https://www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/03/sierra-club-covid-19-pandemic
Trust for Public Land	The Trust for Public Land is committed to our communities during coronavirus	March 12	https://www.tpl.org/blog/covid-19-response
World Conservation Society	We need you	March 17	https://www.wcs.org/get-involved/updates/we-need-you
World Wildlife Fund	During these difficult times, WWF cares about you	March 19	https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/during-these-difficult-times-wwf-cares-about-you

elements for persuading audiences (Cox, 2013). Multiple investigators assigned to the coding effort could potentially improve the validity of the results, as inter-coder reliability scores would be generated (see, e.g., Gulliver et al., 2019). However, with only one statement to code per organization, the categorization exercise is intended as a heuristic, and the list of URLs in Table 1 invites students to perform the same exercise using the same primary source material.

All of the communications examined were posted during the early, hectic weeks of the crisis in the United States, in March 2020. Statements were comparatively brief (mean length: 444 words; min: 172 words; max: 762 words), consistent with crisis communications handbooks calling for succinct messages that are relayed early (CDC, 2004:20). The organizational leader’s voice was pronounced in the majority of the communications, with messages adopting a first-person voice and/or with the CEO’s byline. Compassion and empathy were evident in virtually all communications. Almost all messages addressed internal measures taken by organizations to adjust their business operations. Nine of the ten messages declared unambiguously that the organization’s operations were continuing, and the expression, “moving forward” or a variation of those words was mentioned in three messages.

Of the ten communications, seven made clear connections between the current crisis and the organization’s own mission and programs. Conservation-oriented EOs were comparatively well-positioned to associate their cause with the pandemic, considering the zoonotic origins of Covid-19. The World Conservation Society (WCS), for example, noted that two-thirds of human infectious diseases originate from wildlife, and hence, the organization’s mission to protect wildlife was timely and vital. In contrast, WCS’s allusion to its direct impact on the present crisis is not fully formed, earning an open circle score. The organization’s CEO declared, “We will not stop until we have won a comprehensive global ban on the wildlife trade.” Measures for achieving that aim were not mentioned. Most of the ten statements lacked any reference to direct impact, whatsoever. The closest approximation of direct impact were references by some organizations to branded publications, videos, and other resources that supporters were invited to access for educational and entertainment purposes.

Table 2
Characteristics of Covid-19 crisis communications by major environmental organizations.

	Leader’s Voice	Empathy	Forward Momentum	Relevance	Direct Impact
Conservation Fund	•	•	•	•	
Conservation International	•	•	•	•	
Environmental Defense Fund		•	•		
National Wildlife Federation	•	•	•	•	◦
Nature Conservancy	•	•	•	◦	
Natural Resources Defense Council	•	•	•	•	
Sierra Club	•	•	•	•	◦
Trust for Public Land		◦	•	•	
World Conservation Society	•	•	•	•	◦
World Wildlife Fund		•	◦	◦	

• = complete communication.
◦ = incomplete communication.

5. Discussion

In early-stage messages from ten, prominent environmental organizations, leaders' voices were emphasized, as were expressions of empathy and organizational resolve. The ten organizations generally succeeded in associating their missions to the present crisis (relevance) but were imprecise about their direct role in problem-solving. At best, these data provide only a sketch of the organizations' crisis communications during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are limitations to comparing solitary organizational communications mounted on a single platform (in this case, the internet).⁵ Subsequent communications by these organizations, across different media (e.g., blog posts, microblog posts (e.g., Twitter), podcast interviews, archived video), can and do reveal the evolution and honing of organizational communication strategies during the first two months of the pandemic. For example, while the "Message to our supporters and partners" from the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) lacked a leadership voice and did not address EDF's relevance to the pandemic (Table 2), the organization and its leader subsequently posted messages on their respective Twitter accounts that aligned EDF's traditional concerns with the Covid-19 crisis – namely, by associating the Trump administration's efforts to weaken air pollution standards with heightened Covid-19 mortality risk among people with underlying respiratory conditions. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) posted a video by its president encouraging supporters to add their names to a letter addressed to President Trump and the EPA administrator, demanding the promulgation of equitable economic stimulus measures and the cessation of environmental regulatory rollbacks. NRDC's communications, in this case, demonstrate "relevance" but also, "direct impact" through advocacy and political pressure. Less than one week after WWF mounted a crisis communications message on its home page lacking references to the organization's pandemic-related work (see Table 2), the president and CEO of the organization published a more ample statement on a third party blog (Roberts, 2020) that satisfied all five of the crisis communications criteria. The CEO's message offered a clear enunciation of "direct impact," mentioning WWF's partnership with public and zoonotic health experts advocating for closing illegal wildlife markets in Asia, among other measures.

These subsequent communications point to a pivot away from crisis to "post-crisis communications". Messaging evolved from assurances of continuity of operations to specific efforts to address present and future risks. Not merely "moving forward," the organizations signaled they were adjusting or adding resources to the work of crisis problem-solving. Herein lies the key challenge for EOs in the age of pandemics: if waves of crises (borne by Covid-19 or future pandemics) are pending, there is inherent risk in waiting to transmit messages of organizational relevance and direct impact. Expressions of compassion and resolve – the typical fare of crisis communications – will prove lacking. And EOs may hastily conclude that a crisis is "over" (i.e., that they are safely in a "post-crisis stage") when, in fact, there may simply be a lull in the action.

It is conceivable that over the long-term, societies "learn to live" with pandemics. However, coping with pandemics does not mean that each pandemic is recognized as anything less than a crisis. Public priorities may shift to a "pandemic first, pandemic always" mentality, and EOs that fail to recognize the new landscape will be flat-footed. In the age of pandemics (or in the age of perpetual fear of pandemics), it will be essential for these organizations to incorporate references to relevance and direct impact, vividly, if only briefly, into *during*-crisis communications.

⁵ There are also limitations to an analysis of crisis communications from U.S. EO leaders, exclusively. A more diverse set of statements from a more diverse population of environmental organizations could yield different results.

6. Conclusion

This essay affirms a basic principle of crisis management: early-stage crisis communication is an obligatory, but high stakes, endeavor. Several studies point to how bungled communications, early in crises, caused lasting damage to organizations' reputations and undermined public confidence in both crisis and post-crisis organizational responses (Fink, 2013; Modzelewski, 2019). The early communications of the ten major EOs examined here check many of the boxes in checklists for crisis communication. However, given the risk that public fixation on Covid-19 or future pandemics could eclipse public support for the missions and priorities of EOs, it is incumbent for these organizations to connect, in compelling ways, with broader efforts to redress risks from pandemics. More than merely a "focusing event" (Kingdon, 1984), the Covid-19 pandemic is all-consuming – profound enough to not only jump the queue of priorities on the policy agenda list, but to radically reframe or blot out those priorities as pandemic problem-solving competes for scarce resources and monopolizes public attention. EOs will need to develop nuanced communication strategies that align preferred organizational goals with pandemic prevention, planning, and response.

If pandemics lead to a long-term reordering of public priorities, some EOs will not merely need to realign their aims – they will need to redefine their organizational missions. Mission transformation will involve more than articulating the relevance to and direct impact of present activities on pandemic management. It will require pandemic planning and response as primary organizational concerns. This is, at once, an *opportunity* and a *risk*, per the "dangerous opportunity" conception of "crisis" mentioned at the outset of this article. EOs that redefine their missions may unsettle traditionalists, including some longtime supporters. This risk must be weighed against another hazard: that pandemics, with their huge resource demands – and grip on public attention – may leave behind EOs that fail to adapt. More optimistically: there is an opportunity for risk-takers to be leaders in defining the "pandemic and environment" space, with prevention, preparation, and response to pandemics made essential to the overall goal of planetary health.

This essay refines what EOs need to "get right" in crisis communications in a prospective age of pandemics. Perceptions of organizational commitment, competence, and that EOs care for their supporters' health and safety: these are necessary but not sufficient criteria for effective crisis communications. If the Covid-19 pandemic leads to a reordering of public policy priorities, including concerns about climate change, conservation, sustainability, and other enduring environmental and societal concerns, EOs must find ways to align their goals and purposes with the "new reality" and to effectively communicate their essential role in protecting public and planetary health. Since public and planetary health are, arguably, one and the same, this should be a manageable task for EOs, all of which are skillful at communication, and for generations, have had "direct impact."

Author Statement

Matthew Auer is the sole author of this article, inclusive of all sections of the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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