Collaboration, reinvented tools and specialist knowledge: Communication professionals' experiences of global health crisis management

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Abstract
Communication professionals have a paramount role in global crisis. What did they learn during the covid pandemic that could be used in future global crisis? The aim of this article is to identify and analyze strategy changes among communicators in municipalities and how their conceptions of communicated knowledge transformed during the pandemic. Retrospective interviews and textual material are analyzed with a framework of Mediated Discourse Analysis in combination with Legitimation Code Theory. The analysis shows that the work of the communicators was characterized by collaboration with other professional groups and the civil society, and that the complexity and important time aspects during this crisis gave birth to semi-new, reinvented, discursive tools in the shape of text genres. The communicators' conceived relevant knowledge as concept-driven and developed the conception that conveyance of knowledge should be thoroughly planned in a way that takes complexity into account.

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Introduction

During the extensive global crisis posed by the covid 19 pandemic, challenges arose in the work of many of those whose task it was to communicate with citizens. The crisis brought about a highly stressed situation with many deaths, chaotic announcements and intense monitoring of the communicators' work by the media and public. Accordingly, their view of public communication was affected in terms of how knowledge should be conveyed in a crisis. In this article, we take our point of departure in the accounts of communicators employed by Swedish municipalities regarding their experiences of how public communication (Grafström and Rehnberg, 2022) had to be transformed. The study concerns not only the work being carried out, but also new conditions emerging as important in relation to the process of planning, designing and evaluating communication regarding the new and often uncertain knowledge that needs to be conveyed. The increased complexity and dilemmas that come with the overall Swedish strategy of openness is of particular interest.

This study contributes to the quite extensive research on crisis communication during the pandemic, with a close analysis of the very mundane considerations of professional communicators, studied by retrospective interviews. Our research interest is to better understand how the view of societal communication and knowledge positions changed during the pandemic. An analytical starting point is how expert knowledge and other communication is created by and through human actors and their positions. To analyse strategies, decisions and production at the local level, Mediated Discourse Analysis in combination with Legitimation Code Theory are used, thus contributing with an innovative merging of MDA/nexus analysis and LCT/semantic density and legitimation of knowledge objects. The basis for this merge is that these frameworks can show how knowledge positions are related to linguistic/material form, social aspects and time, as well as the agency of concrete persons (see Theoretical and methodological framework below).

The aim of this article is to identify and analyse strategy changes among communicators in municipalities and how their conceptions of communicated knowledge transformed during the pandemic. The ambition is to point to factors and circumstances for communication that may be valuable in future global social crises, based on a minor case study. The study is guided by the following questions:

(1) What appears as particularly important in the communicators' construction of how they worked and what they learned during the pandemic?

(2) How does the communicators' conceptualization of knowledge develop and how should knowledge be conveyed after the pandemic?

Background

The official crisis strategy during the covid 19 pandemic was quite different in Sweden compared to many other countries, leading to a lively debate on the successes and failures of less strict restrictions on public behaviour (Falkheimer et al., 2022; Idevall

Hagren and Bellander, 2023; Johansson et al., 2023). In the beginning of the pandemic, knowledge of the disease and its infection patterns was very limited, and the governmental decisions, the communication strategies and the media debate lacked a common and stable ground. Authorities, such as The Public Health Authority and municipal communication strategists, were strongly criticized by media and the public, especially after a number of casualties leading to death in so-called 'exposed areas' (Nord et al. 2023). The situation was most complex, fluid and uncertain (Johansson and Vigsö, 2021).

In the process of disseminating information during the crisis (cf. Comfort et al., 2020; Drylie-Carey et al. 2020; Piller et al., 2020; Wodak, 2021), communication professionals were forced to make quick decisions about the design of messages. When medical experts' conclusions are changing, communication can be problematic concerning what should be constructed as facts, and target groups may interpret communication alternately as advice, recommendations or directives (Westberg, 2020).

During the spring of 2020, we as researchers on communication invited several Swedish organizations to an online workshop with Stockholm University to discuss the needs of new research in the light of covid communication. One of the emerging topics raised by communication strategists was how the knowledge and competencies of communication specialists had developed through the difficult choices they have been forced to make. Workshop participants raised the question of how 'lessons learned' could be conceptualized and conveyed for future societal crises. Collaborating with authorities involved in the workshop, we found a research focus and participant communicators. As such, this study is an attempt to respond to a need expressed by communication strategists.

Previous research

A good part of research on crisis communication investigates general phenomena on a societal level, such as change of discourses and relationships between social groups, which are often studied through mass communication and performances (Coombs et al. 2008; Piller et al., 2020). The traditional form of crisis communication mainly focuses on strategies made by the sender and their choice of message. Crisis communication must be based on well-thought-out strategies, as the efforts made should improve the situation for all stakeholders (Coombs, 2015). Those strategies have led to decisions on crisis communication at a national level that have been realized in local campaigns, and much of the work has been performed close to the public by communication professionals on, for instance, a municipal level.

Studies on strategies employed by communication specialists show that experience is the main road to communication success (Larsson, 2010). It is, for example, a good idea to process knowledge acquired from previous experience so that it may be recreated in a current situation. Late modern approaches to the work of professional communicators add to the criteria for communication success: improvising, working in networks and decentralized organizations, and focusing on recipients' responses (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010). Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015) distinguish other factors characterizing strategic communication: a critical view of journalism in a digital age, an inner, but shared, compass and the ability to work responsibly with others. This indicates which dynamics are involved in assessing how scientific/medical findings can or should be

transformed into societal information (cf. Demicom, 2021 on the importance of coopera-
tion in crisis communication during the pandemic).

   Regarding the Covid 19 crisis, the national reports CAMM 2021 and Demicom
2021 showed that Swedish authorities aimed at framing their communication as scien-
tifically based, that the pressure from mass media was intense and that written com-
munication strategies were too vague. This points to the need for research on different
types of crisis communication (e.g. Coombs, 2020, Hendrickx et al., 2023; Wodak,
2021). Generally, it has been noted that crisis communication needs a functional distri-
bution of responsibility, good professional network relations, flexibility and trust
(Johansson et al., 2013). A challenge during the pandemic was a lack of experience of
extensive crises, which has affected, for instance, the coordination between different
levels of actors (Demicom, 2021). Crises can also be characterized by great uncer-
tainty, even from an expert perspective (Kjeldsen et al., 2022). The public's perception
of the pandemic needed to be put in relation to the crisis communication carried out at
the time (Malecki et al., 2021). Two key components were the actual danger and public
sentiment, which interact and determine how well the risks communicated externally
are received and reacted to.

   Studies of crisis communication professionals' interaction with vulnerable groups
can confirm the pedagogical effort that may need to permeate information design, an
ambition that is affected by background knowledge and access to relevant expertise
networks (Landqvist, 2012, cf. CAMM, 2021). Different forms of communication
form the framework for different perspectives on information, in which the commu-
nication specialist must consider several sources of information to balance discourses
and design the message (Karlsson and Landqvist, 2019). More generally, linguistic
strategies in crisis communication have been studied only to a limited extent (Jones,
2013), and it has been found that crisis prevention is more abstractly described than
accidents and victims (Borden et al., 2020). This reflects on the ascription of respon-
sibility by the signalling of stability, control and agency, which in turn link psycho-
logical attribution theory with linguistics in a useful way. Another linguistic category
that has been proven constructive to understand the design efforts of crisis commu-
nication specialists is semantic roles (Vieweg, 2011), for example, how actors are
constructed in verbal processes in texts.

Theoretical and methodological framework

This study is based on theories of social aspects of communication, discourse and semi-
otic mediation, stemming from works by Vygotsky (1978), Bernstein (2003) and Hasan
(2004). These theories emphasize the interconnectedness of language, human communi-
cation, knowledge, as well as social aspects such as groups, power and individual agency.
According to these theories, linguistic expressions are not separate from society, but
mutually interrelated with societal and social phenomena. Knowledge is mediated – or
communicated – into linguistic or semiotic form by and to people. From these theories
we focus on concepts from the frameworks of mediated discourse analysis (MDA, also
called nexus analysis, Scollon and Scollon 2004, Norris and Jones 2005, see also Van
Leeuwen, 2009) and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT, Maton et al., 2016), which will
both be presented below.

Mediated discourse analysis

MDA captures issues relevant for this study such as the relationship between the individual, the group and discourse. In this study, (1) *individual* communications specialists speak about their collaboration with (2) the *group* of communications specialists and other professionals in planning and execution of information campaigns when (3) *discourses* about health and risk were changing. The MDA concepts for these three aspects are *habitus* (competencies, knowledge, experiences, agency etc. of individuals), *interaction order* (the social aspects of communication) and *discourses in place* (the discursive, linguistic or semiotic aspects). According to MDA theory, these aspects are always present in human actions, as well as related to each other so that a change in one of them leads to changes in the other aspects. This allows us to look into the conceptions and experiences of the communication specialists when the discourses (and thus knowledge) about health and risk changed.

Concerning development and change, MDA offers concepts for time aspects and how people relate to time. For instance, an individual's or a group's agency is strongly related to how far ahead they can imagine their actions to have an impact and how they anticipate their own future possibilities (de Saint-Georges, 2013). As such, MDA also offers tools for studying *complexity* (Blommaert, 2012). Complex, often abstract factors, such as time and knowledge, are studied by how they are *materialized*, that is, formed semiotically into words, texts, design, routines and objects (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). To zoom in on the semiotic aspects of how knowledge during the pandemic was materialized, we will use LCT (Maton, 2014).

Legitimation code theory

Models of knowledge conceptualization provided by LCT have proven relevant for this study, regarding both semiotic mediation and construction of social and epistemic relations. Accordingly, so called *knowledge objects* are mediated through and produced by language but are not reducible to the situation or interaction. For example, medical issues pertaining to the pandemic must be conveyed with semantic means and in reference to domains of knowers. Knowledge can be objective in a way that it transcends the immediate conditions of production and becomes useful in different contexts, although differently mediated via actors, stakeholders, time/place, style etc. via linguistic codes. Therefore, protection against viral infection can in some respects be depicted as exclusive expert knowledge, and in other respects be part of common-sense behaviour available to many people. However, a knowledge object is not considered as monolithic, but as claimed only through linguistic *codes*. All claims to truth and objectivity are made via the identification of the distinct codes and practices through which they are mediated and produced.

LCT is used in this study to analyse knowledge objects related to contagion, protection, care and vaccines, which are coded within the framework of the production of communication issued by the municipalities studied. The coding establishes different perspectives, including the two kinds featured in this study: specialization and semantics (explained below). They both connect to other perspectives that are interesting for the analysis, such as time and space dimensions, subject relations and positioning.

Specialization codes are based on knowledge being culturally/socially legitimized (Bourdieu, 1993). Power relations are created through reference to ownership and control of the objects of knowledge. The starting point is partly the communicator's way of socially coding the knowledge object as belonging to an institution, a person, a collective of experts, themselves, etc., and partly the communicator's epistemic coding of the knowledge object as fact, self-evident, general advice, etc. With the specialization coding, the basis for practice, structure and context is analyzed and systematized. The coding focuses on the knowledge-sensitive structures whose organizing principles can be explored in terms of epistemic relations to other knowledge, and social relations to knowledge and knowing. Epistemic and social relations are combined into one of four specialization codes: knowledge (general or widespread knowledge), knower (who possesses knowledge), elite (combines specialized knowledge with the right kind of knowing), and relativism (the view that everything can be relevant knowledge).

Semantics is the other dimension of coding used in this article. A knowledge object is semantically coded (Bernstein, 2003), both in gravity, that is, strong or weak anchoring in the context, and density, that is, more or less linguistically compact.

Data and procedure

Participants in the study were recruited by means of the network created after the workshop mentioned above. To ensure data from complex settings, participants were chosen from the two largest cities in Sweden, Stockholm and Gothenburg, and within those cities, participants were drawn from areas with a multilingual population. Remote interviews were conducted and recorded with the Zoom-tool during February and March 2022. The participants gave informed consent, and no sensitive personal information about them was gathered. The retrospective interview (Budach, 2012) questions covered what the communication specialists had performed during the pandemic, and what they had learnt from that period (see Appendix A). After the interviews, which constitute the primary data of this study, the participants shared texts and information products, mainly consisting of information material targeted to the public and to employees, but also internal documents. In Figure 1, the interview data are presented.

The recordings were transcribed (for content) and then read through several times by both the researchers until themes were identified. For the next step in the analysis, these themes were more thoroughly examined and described (see the headings in the Analysis section). Step three applied the specialist (Figure 1) to this description, and in step four the data were re-examined to check the generalizability of the themes and results.

Results

The results of the interviews show significant changes in working methods and routines during the pandemic. A large part of procedures that were previously taken for granted came to be questioned and either developed or replaced. The reasons were a significant increase in the workload, a more intense public focus, and unpredictability and rapid changes in the communication conditions. This in turn influenced communication design, with different semantic and epistemic foci. In this section, the results are presented

Interviewees	Area	Duration
Communication strategist	One of several municipality administrations, Gothenburg area	1 hour
Three communication specialists	One of several municipality administrations, Gothenburg area (the same as above)	Group interview, 1 hour 20 minutes
Communication strategist	One of several municipality administrations, Stockholm area	1 hour

Figure 1. Primary data: Interviews.

regarding themes from the interviews and the LCT framework. After that, the overall findings are described with the MDA concepts.

Increased emphasis on professional status and competence

The pandemic brought about a significantly greater need and demand for communication, leading to the communicators receiving a boost in status. The organization was changed so that the communications department was positioned more centrally, which is standard in major crises, but in Gothenburg the physical location was also changed to a more central one. In addition, the communication department received a greater share of the financial resources from the municipal management.

At the same time as the communication work was upgraded, it moved into the public's focus. Being in the public eye, the communicators had to be more careful with the tone, design information material with more care, and avoid giving information that could be misinterpreted (which created an awareness that everything can be misinterpreted). The choice of illustrative images, for example, was subject to both over- and misinterpretation by the public, who sometimes responded with critical comments. The highly charged situation created by the pandemic meant that seemingly innocent choices of means of communication could receive disproportionate reactions. The communicators realized that increased accuracy in image selection was necessary, which led to an even greater need to plan and anticipate problems, and also to be prepared for unexpected reactions. In sum, the communicator ended up in the middle of the stage, frontstage, instead of in the background as before. Simultaneously, the increased need for information and more work invested in each effort meant that the budget quickly hit the ceiling, despite increased resource allocation. Expensive campaigns, such as films, had to be stopped. This emphasized, once again, the increased need for planning.

Changed status entailed a different agency. The emphasized need for communication entailed partially new tasks, mainly to create and form part of longer communication chains. Chains with different sources of information are in themselves not particularly

new for a communication specialist, who is trained to keep an overview of the information's path from a primary source via press release to newspapers passing it on to the public. The new aspect was an increased responsibility and awareness of the importance of the chain in its totality and complexity. The communication efforts went from being based on clients' instructions and directives to having many stakeholders. Instead of working with single sources, the complexity of the assignments increased with many stakeholders and an assessment of a larger number of sources, which were not always consistent.

The need for information increased explosively, due to changes in the context for communicative efforts. Now, the communicators' strategy included general social anxiety and concrete instances of increased risks of contagion. For example, due to travel bans, a risk of crowded local beaches was identified. A communicator in Gothenburg explains:

> The first summer the municipality invested in activities that could counteract a social concern (. . .) that too many people were at home and there should be things to do and so on. It's crowded at every swimming area and places like that (. . .) and I remember working with that, and I had an idea: can you find out something like a red light system for beaches, like, if it's full at this one (. . .) It's going to be a completely different development stuff than what you're used to, so it's so much. Because it's going to be chaos at all swimming areas, and it was kind of dangerous because the lifeguards couldn't get there.

The quote shows how the new and complex situation called for entirely innovative thinking and that the communicators' widened agency included phenomena that would not be considered communication in normal circumstances. (However, there was no red light system installed.)

The increased need to call for calm, to inform about the risk of infection and to reduce the pressure in well-visited locations affected the way information was designed. Classic norms for communicators to express themselves briefly and simply became more relevant than ever, at the expense of creative ways of presenting information, which affected time consumption. There was no time for feedback via impact or user analyses that could regulate the communicators' work, and so these tools were replaced by self-reflection. The communicators stopped and reflected much more in order to be able to prevent problems with, for instance, sharper messages. The tradeoff was that sharpness in messages and reflection were not enough to meet the increased complexity. A complex situation requires a heightened sense of the situation, and it can be argued that intuition and improvisation skills were favourable resources in the work.

Much praise flowed in for the work done by the communicators. The praise was about them listening and following developments well, using the right channel/material, using clear templates, not just working top-down (i.e. only conveying information), working closely with the business/unions, but also closely with the politicians. Overall, the complexity of the situation called for a work effort that, in addition to being clear, also had to be planned and well structured.

Networking and collaboration

Previously, communicators as a group were fairly independent actors in their projects and assignments, and did most of the work on their own. In this case, however, they passed on

assignments to others, for example, engaging civil society or other communication agencies, and taking on more the role of coordinator of communications efforts. The change in organization transformed the communication department organically from a separate unit to a hub where communicators came in contact with important actors, internally and externally, in relation to the municipality. As mentioned above, the role included greater time-affecting elements of planning, strategic thinking, management and proactivity. This could mean that the work was distributed among the group in a well-designed way as other organizations were hired, and civil society and businesses were involved. Not least, civil society NGO organizations could transfer information to the citizens in different languages on site, for example in laundry facilities, as well as transfer needs and tendencies back to the communicators. In addition, the communicators applied for special funds for communication work, which they also received. This also changed the view of the importance of communicators and the need for structuring:

> You get energy from having a colleague in such a situation, and if there are two of you, you have to structure, that's the difference to being alone. (Interview, Stockholm)

The increased collaboration seems to be what have remained strongest in the memory of the interviewees, and was conceived of as the most central part of the change. This may be because the covid crisis was unique and huge, and that it forced a collaboration that was not relevant before. Panic around deaths in nursing homes, lack of protective equipment and heavy media coverage contributed to this development. The existing competence could be questioned and supplemented by making communication plans in a way that included collaborations and contact with other actors. The importance of cooperation between various central authorities and other actors was obvious.

An example of how several experts and stakeholders could be involved in a communication chain were vaccination hubs, that is, a physical location in the municipality where different professions were gathered and where vaccination was offered. There the messages were based on decisions from authorities, passed on via administration and communicators to medical staff and interpreters who could communicate at those physical locations. Instead of the various links in the chain working in isolation and in parallel, an interaction was created between the various actors, which made communication more efficient and coordinated. A similar effect of increased communication was due to the communicators not being able to perform everything themselves and consequently was delegated to others. The communicators' agency expanded to acting within a more complex knowledge transfer and take a leadership role when the importance of initiating collaborations was underscored.

However, the interviews do not tell about any real coordination between the municipality's communication work and national authorities such as Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency or the National Board of Health and Welfare. Consequently, the communicators worked more autonomously than their new experiential knowledge told them. On the other hand, they adhered to what the authorities themselves communicated. An example was the national work environment agency's statements about the importance of ventilation for the spread of infection, which was communicated to the staff at elderly care centres run by the municipality.

A new epistemic landscape

A more complex view of knowledge created the need to structure and plan increasingly during the crisis. This also affected the temporal approach. It became clear that the situation was changing, constantly and at a high rate, which required new perspectives in order to work smarter. When the communicators strived to simplify information from different sources and to bring out the most important content, they discovered that those aspects which were most important varied over time. This created a need for a clearer structure, which in turn prompted them to work on an overview of what needed to be done, for example, in weekly charts or e-mails, where the week's activities were listed and work groups were established.

During the Gothenburg interview, so called Thursday emails are stressed:

> The Thursday email was a way to keep track of what was done and keep everything together and that everyone knew what was there . . . we had different intranets, social media, there were so many different media and no one really knew how to keep an eye on them. So the Thursday email explained 'this is new, this is ongoing' (Interview Gothenburg)

The coordination was materialized in this weekly email as well as in a new communication plan. This established genre was developed with several new features, greater detail and more complexity. Figure 3 shows a communication plan for external communication with a focus on coordination, a part where tasks, target groups and sources are related to each other in a precise time schedule. Thus, a need for review applies to the temporal order linked to those who are involved and who need to be coordinated.

The text in Figure 2 lists participants of the collective communication effort. The plan shows how communicators can ensure a coordinated response to the crisis, while illustrating a complex structure. One type of phrase is used repeatedly in the third column, 'så VERB vi' [the way we VERB]. This refers to certain information material], which shows that the planned information efforts are action-based with high gravity, that is, they are anchored in a 'we' which signals the local context, the municipality. This in turn indicates that the general public would perceive the municipality's agency and thus responsibility for the infection control work. Thus, from a LCT perspective, epistemic and social legitimation (specialization) is used to anchor infection prevention work at the local level.

Concerning epistemic landscape, three specialization codings in the working methods of the communicators can be identified in the interviews: (1) 'elite' (medical experts must be invoked to achieve credibility), (2) 'knower' (local leading actors are presented as credible in the protection work) and (3) 'knowledge' (reference to widely distributed knowledge about how one protects oneself against ill health). In some medical issues (such as vaccination) it became increasingly difficult to remain credible as a communicator regardless of the communication network, as the argument had to come directly from medical experts and not rephrased by someone else. During the interviews it appears that one wanted to free oneself from the medical issues and let experts be responsible for them. Thus, the experts became part of the collaboration and division of labour, which resulted in the legitimization of knowledge moving from seeing medical knowledge as

Sep 30	Questions and answers Designated spokespersons in SDFs respectively Possibly: news item in intranet and Our Gothenburg	Commentary KPMG assessment	Media, public	Spokespersons
Sep 30	Question answer – about how we judge which assignments we can distribute.		Managers	Lawyer SLK, lawyer SDF, communication specialist
Sep 15	Check and restructuring of intranet for better manager support		Managers Co-workers	Communication specialist
Sep 30	News item intranet	The way we manage and monitor covid work	Managers Co-workers	SDD+ communication specialist
		and the way we collaborate		
On-going	New and support material (posters, news letters etc.) in case of new rules or new needs in the functions		Managers Co-workers Residents Relatives	Preparation group and communication specialist
On-going	Our Gothenburg-articles (about 5)	The way we work to limit infection	Public Managers Co-workers	

Figure 2. Excerpt from communication plan (Gothenburg).

something socially available, and thus coded as 'elite', that is, that only people with expert competence should communicate. Legitimation thus applied to the epistemic coding, but socially the knowledge objects were re-coded to optimal credibility when the right person was in charge of the communication. For the communicators, it meant increased credibility when they designed communication within what could be perceived as their area of expertise. All in all, this means that the communicators related to three different types of knowledge legitimation, depending on the object of knowledge. It is possible to say that one type is absent in the communicators' construction of knowledge in the interviews, namely knowledge that is presented as widely spread and based on public education or common sense.

Figure 3 shows an example of external communication aimed at civil society, in this case a district in Stockholm. The message is to show the collective power among various local organizations.

The text in Figure 3 is coded epistemically and socially with an emphasis on the collective, the latter throughout with words such as 'we', 'all of us', 'together', 'gathered behind'. The knowledge object, how to fight against the coronavirus, is clearly anchored among those who engage locally, and also in an intimate interaction, and not attributed to a smaller expert group. Here, the readers learn that the knowledge is locally available in the area where they live rather than being complicated, specialized or difficult to access. Semantically, locally engaged organizations are emphasized as essential through positive linguistic markers—mainly through active verbs (help, reach out, encourage). This means that the knowledge object is coded as spread among the local community and an everyday activity. Coding consists of partly high gravity (by contextual anchoring, as expressed with a list of local authorities and communities responsible for infection control), partly low semantic density (created with mainly informal and concrete words). Thus, in the text in Figure 4, linguistic choices testify to a knowledge object that is communicated informally, personally, concretely and positively.

Similar strategies can be found in the Thursday email mentioned above:

Semantically, the email in Figure 4 has high density (e.g. 'clarifying instruction', 'visit restriction'), which contributes to objectivity and a focus on products. Quotations indicate which main messages are to be conveyed. The structure and time aspects are also emphasized through the categories 'done' and 'in progress'.

Time aspects and work pace

Through new structures and the semi-new textual genres mentioned above, it was possible for the communicators to monitor their work. Among other things, they realized that they should have been more honest and transparent with information about the dead. They also saw the need for better and more principled strategies overall, such as The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) being able to hold press conferences once a week. Thus, the time perspective grew both forward and in retrospect, so that the communicators related to both the past and the future in a significantly more tangible way. Increased reflection, a broader time perspective and more planning became the parameters that created a developed communicator's competence. This in turn led to a new kind of legitimation for the communicators.

Figure 3. External communication, Stockholm. Translation by authors, in appendix B.

Generally, the communication profession may be associated with a certain speed. However, it was discovered that some information pumped out initially during the pandemic was not fully planned or thought through. Information in mass media was closely scrutinized, and, to a great extent, this tendency dictated the communication efforts. Information sources were not always coordinated. This led to conflicting information being disclosed and communication appearing fragmented in the early stage of the pandemic. The fast pace meant that there was no time to synchronize different sources, which had the effect of making the communication department appear ignorant and confused. Consequently, the lesson learned was to think twice before taking action and avoid acting too quickly. Instead, an ideal started to develop to stop and reflect – even when the situation was hectic. The investment of time in reflecting upon the here and now (even in a fairly long perspective) and on the various choices of action and anticipating possible effects proved to be a good strategy.

Complexity management

Routine knowledge is challenged in chaotic situations. Constantly new messages, contradictions and potential crises of confidence create complexity, which has to be dealt

Hello!

Here is a summary of what has just been completed and what is underway in the covid-19 coordination group on communication. I do this compilation every Thursday. You will be notified. Thanks to everyone who contributes! I have written the name of the communicator working on the issue in brackets.

Information package just finished or in progress

DONE: Clarifying instructions to managers about confidentiality vs. public regarding covid-19. (name).

DONE: The ban on visitors to Säbo until the end of August. (name)

DONE: Safe meeting place with plexiglass – internally ready, externally coming. (name)

DONE: This is how we purchase and distribute protective equipment. (name)

DONE: Thanks to volunteers and donors for help with protective equipment. Internally done, externally Monday. (name)

IN PROGRESS: Visitor restrictions at BMSS – what applies?

IN PROGRESS: The self-tests get many people back to work. (name)

Miscellaneous

1   DONE: Information about protective equipment is ready 'Right protective equipment at the right time'. We have also conducted a team meeting with workshop participants and a team meeting with communicators where we showed the material.

2   We are currently improving the pages on the intranet about protective equipment – the links are the same.

3   Next week, I will send out a survey to com-managers and communicators in the SDF/SRF to check what worked well/less well in the coordination of communication and what we should think about before a new wave of the spread of infection this autumn.

4   We are now planning communications for phase 2 where we focus on approximately: 'maintain basic hygiene routines', 'we learn from what didn't go so well' and 'we are proud of all the hard work that has been done'. You get the chance to think more about this in the future.

Sincerely

Figure 4. Example of Thursday email (Gothenburg).

with. The very basis of the work, to inform and translate expert information to a wider target group, was transformed into new kinds of mediation, something more than recipient-adapted. New strategies were borrowed from neighboring areas, such as the construction industry, which was considered good at informing about protective equipment in the workplace. In this line of action, a cardboard doll was created for elder care staff that could be equipped with a face mask and vizor:

> So we also thought it could be the same way, to remind staff to use protective equipment. Then there was a sign saying: This is what you should wear if you enter here. (Interview, Gothenburg)

However, the staff complained that the doll was conveying conflicting messages, and the news reached the media. That is, the communicators and their efforts were in focus for the news in themselves, which was quite stressful. The communicators reflected on this in the group interview:

> It went very, very wrong, of course it wasn't what we wanted. So today I wouldn't put a message like that, it's derogatory, I can understand that.

Another effect of the requirements to convey general information was that technical terms, concepts and specialized expressions specific for the pandemic came into focus. For example, one must understand the exact meaning of concepts such as 'suspected infection', 'care facility' or 'source control' and deal with both varying meanings and deeper specialization:

> 'Care facility' or what are you supposed to say? (. . .) Should activity centres for the disabled be regarded as care facilities? Is the kitchen in a retirement home a care facility?

> There was 'confirmed infected' and 'suspected infection' (. . .) We kind of didn't really have full control of the meaning internally and then it looked bad externally.

> Or 'source control' (. . .) Frankly, there is no good Swedish word for it (. . .) No, so it means 'exhalation', so it's a mouth guard (. . .) or it can be a vizor. (Interview, Gothenburg)

Our interpretation of these interview excerpts indicate that information was re-coded from being everyday and experiential to being specialized and conceptual, and that the way of designing messages needed to be more thoroughly considered. It was manifested in communication to the public that followed up and related to previous information that dealt with concepts thus having greater prerequisites for anticipation. Overall, this was considered to be able to inspire hope through the security provided by specialization, well-grounded information and extrapolation of the situation's development. This new framing of the messages was a positive result of a context which was complex and difficult to understand. So instead of regarding simplicity as a communication ideal, complexity and concept-driven knowledge increased.

In conclusion, the ideals and work codes that were developed were based on simplicity, structure and cooperation that could complement existing ideals of creativity,

ambition for change and effectiveness. This was made possible by the fact that the communicators took a place in the crisis management which manifested, among other things, in the dual direction in which information travelled, from citizens and civil society to the communicators to authorities and then back to the citizens. The insight was that the performance requirements could be turned down a bit and that communication is not the same thing as advertising, but rather, give way for a more conceptual mediation of knowledge. Increased planning meant that they did not have time to produce communication material in the same way as before and that certain media, such as posters, were no longer as relevant as before.

Interaction order, habitus and discourses in place

Several of the findings presented above can be seen in the light of the concept of *interaction order*: when the balance of interaction order on the societal level tipped over so that the influence of experts was emphasized (compared to politicians), the local interaction orders of the communicator specialists also changed. The interviews showed how their work was rooted in information from medical experts and how they worked more intensely with different actors such as local NGOs and translators. Media is naturally a constant factor in communication, but now there was a focus on *how media would react* to campaigns, stressing the anticipatory force in planning. Internally, organizational changes were a materialization of the important role of communicators.

In turn, these organizational changes were materialized by new facilities, closer to the municipality management. Another factor concerning the *discourses in place* was the role of communication plans – a key tool in communicators' work generally, but now professionals had to acknowledge that there was not always time for setting up a new plan when collaboration became a more important tool in its own right. The existing but developed textual genre of the communication plan included more functions/actors, and semi-new written tools that were put into action, such as the Thursday email, which coordinated collaboration when several factors were in flux. Beside the aforementioned aspects, all of them concerned materialization in some sense. The discourses in place in terms of sources for information changed, as medical and governmental information was paramount. New or reinvented concepts ('suspected infection', 'care facility', 'source control') acted as objects to learn about, to discuss and try to understand together with other occupations. They did not always look like specialist words or technical terms, but definitions of them were most important to get the correct actions to prevent infection: for example, did rules for staff behaviour in 'care facility' include the kitchens or not? Moreover, ideals, rules and routines can be regarded as discourses in place, as they are materialized human actions. Here, existing ideals such as simplicity in communication and planning-execution-evaluation as a routine were challenged and materialized in a partly new way. When having to deal with new objects of knowledge, the communicators also had to mediate information in new ways. Generally, several discourses in place, known and used before the pandemic, were 'reinvented', used and understood in new ways.

Concerning *habitus*, the communicators changed their conception of time, so that they related to longer timelines backwards, but especially forward in time. They learnt to

anticipate the actions of others – citizens' and employees' interpretation of information and subsequent actions, as well as media's critique – more neatly before publishing. Additionally, they learnt to be sensitive and adjust to factors such as the need to reflect *and* the need to quickly inform in life saving matters. Beside this time-related complexity, they also learnt to handle complexity of societal roles and of knowledge forms. From regarding medical information as general and accessible, they came to regard it as elite-coded. The interview data has also revealed how the collaboration as a power in itself stayed in their memories, that is their habitus. Over all, the agency of the communication specialists was widened.

Clearly, several of these findings have to do with *time* aspects. Our study can show *how time was related to persons/habitus, to interaction order and to discourses in place*. The communicator specialists ca be said to have internalized the temporal aspects which remained in their memories and were materialized into the practices of both stopping to reflect more deeply before acting, and looking further ahead to the consequences of these actions. The interaction order was changed partly due to a new speed and complex processes. And related to discourses in place, the time related complexity formed a basis for communicative tools such as the Thursday email and a more developed communication plan.

Conclusion and implications for practice

This small case study, performed at the very end of the global pandemic, in relation to the two research questions, has shown:

(1)

(a) that collaboration with other professional groups and the civil society characterized the work of the communicators,

(b) that the complexity and important temporal aspects during this severe crisis gave birth to semi-new, reinvented, discursive tools in the shape of text genres,

(2) that the communicators conceived of relevant knowledge as being concept-driven and developed the conception that conveyance of knowledge should be thoroughly planned in a way that takes complexity into account.

By this, we have contributed to research on communication professionals' experiences and knowledge (cf. Rasmussen, 2017). The results imply that professional communicators choose among several possible strategies to convey pertinent knowledge that needs to be conveyed during a global crisis. Communicators need to be vigilant about what knowledge is (or should be) presented as widely spread, self-evident or based on common sense, because this might lead to the crisis being perceived as too vague and uncertain. There is a limit to how much responsibility can be left to the audience and while maintaining credibility (Kjeldsen et al 2022; Poortvliet et al., 2020). Instead, our study shows that a successful strategy is to mediate knowledge as collective or potentially collective, for example, a joint project where a collective commitment is emphasized. This

is done by referring to community-based local involvement at the grassroots level and using collective pronouns and other similar linguistic expressions. Epistemically, it is about locally shared knowledge, rather than distant expert knowledge.

How the information should be designed seems to depend on other factors than those of a crisis, especially, a more intensive monitoring by the public, a significantly greater workload, and more sources of information. An important strategy is to preserve and optimize credibility by having the right persons in charge of the communication. Professional communicators should prefer to design information that can be perceived as being within their area of expertise. Otherwise, information should be labelled with the appropriate other source, that is, a very clear framing of knowledge. By calling on experts, credibility is achieved. However, other leading actors can also be used to maintain credibility and compliance. At the same time, the main role of the communicator should be to tune in so that the experts' communication is designed according to the audience's sense of the seriousness of the crisis and the actual danger, as Malecki et al. (2021) emphasize.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

1. What is you responsibility and title? Tell me about what you do. How long have you had this responsibility?
2. What has been your role during the pandemic? Tell me about your experiences, how you work as a group and contacts with other organizations concerning communication to and with the public.
3. How would you summarize the most important lesson learned during the pandemic? What have you as a group and you in your professional role learnt about work procedures, the public's ability to understand information etc.?
4. Is there any limited campaign or text that you could share? Anything especially successful or problematic?
5. Is there anything important concerning the communication during the pandemic that we have not touched upon?

Appendix B

Translations of figures

Figure B1.

Rinkeby-Kista [municipality administration] **gathering energy!**
Communities, associations and authorities in Rinkeby-Kista are gathered behind the urge to keep a distance and to protect the elderly and risk groups.
All of us help out and use our networks for breaking isolation, easing worries and reaching out with support and service to those in need.
The virus causes concern but we don't let the fear of corona take over and move outdoors in a safe way.
We encourage our children and young ones to continue flourishing by participating in pre-school, school and leisure activities.
Together we are strong!
[different local religious and secular associations incl. sport, municipal, culture]
Contact for collaboration xxx@xxx