

# COVID-19 Public Messaging Among Selected Countries

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## Executive Summary

In partnership with the Department of State's Diplomacy Lab, [we/SIPA/students at SIPA] sought to understand public health messaging across the globe during the first wave of the pandemic. We identified what messages cut through the noise (i), who were the key players involved (ii) and how socio-cultural factors may have affected the effectiveness of the messages communicated (iii). We examined seven countries across three regions - Nepal, Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, Italy, France and Uruguay - a decision based on the students' language skills, knowledge of local cultures and availability of sources. Our findings do not represent to views or policies of the Department of State or the U.S. government.

The findings – among others – include that **Taiwan, Vietnam and Uruguay benefited from lessons learned during recent epidemics** (SARS in Vietnam, measles and dengue fever in Uruguay, in 2003 and 2019 respectively); particularly, in Taiwan, a trauma of the 2003 SARS outbreak and a decades-long isolation from the network of an international health body such as the WHO helped create a strong, “self-help” health mechanism which greatly assisted the country in controlling the pandemic;

**Italy and France, which have strong data privacy laws, were less effective in using digital tools to control the spread of the virus compared to South Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan.**

**Social norms played a role too:** in Nepal and Vietnam the habit of mask-wearing in urban areas was common long before this pandemic due to pollution; in South Korea, Confucian communitarianism and Foucauldian disciplinary techniques helped create an ideal, normalized type of a citizen who adheres to health protocols, and in Vietnam the government's call for national unity against “foreign invaders” contributed to enforcing a strong observance of the measures.

## Methodology

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world have sought to update the public on the spread of the disease and provide information as to how individuals can protect themselves. These communications have occurred in the

context of evolving scientific knowledge, changing policy priorities, and pervasive mis/disinformation from a variety of people and platforms.

To understand these evolving trends in our target countries, we analyzed quantitative (e.g., public polls, social media follower fluctuations, and surveys) as well as qualitative data (e.g., interviews, civil response, and cultural shifts) to determine the key governmental players and *what* as well as *how* were the main health measures communicated to citizens in these countries. For the final socio-cultural assessment, we selected five independent variables: countries’ cultural practices, data protection regulations, government type, experiences with diseases and epidemics as well as demographic data. Looking at these variables helped us understand the effectiveness of public health messaging.

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## **Nepal: Collaboration with International Organizations**

**Lucia Zerner**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- This memo examines public messaging regarding COVID-19 in Nepal driven by the government of Nepal's Ministry of Public Health and Population (MoHP), UN agencies, and INGOs.
- Another important voice includes Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli who has shared contradictory and false information on COVID-19.
- This memo focuses on the early stages of the pandemic during the months of March-June 2020.

### **Key Findings Include:**

- The government of Nepal worked in collaboration and in tandem with UN agencies, organizations, and Nepali telecommunications companies to disseminate COVID-19 related public messaging across the country and address misinformation.
- Yet, this public messaging approach driven by MoHP has been severely hampered by the leader of Nepal, Prime Minister Oli, who spread misinformation.
- In lieu of public opinion surveys, criticism from youth over the government's lack of available testing, quarantine facilities, and action or at least its ability to communicate their efforts.

### **Finding 1 - A Collaborative Approach to Public Messaging**

- MoHP drew on UN WHO Nepal and UNICEF Nepal public health guidance by sharing the agencies' COVID'19 posters and informational video, respectively, on their [website](#).
- Organizations such as Save the Children, Mercy Corps, and World Vision partnered with the government to produce public messages shared throughout the country via digital communications and radio. Save the Children, in coordination with the Nepali government, produced a series of [public service announcements](#) (PSA) on topics like rumor management, mask wearing and hand washing. Messages included the importance of not sharing unverified information about COVID-19 on social media. Similarly, [Mercy Corps](#) produced a number of PSAs on COVID-19 awareness that were broadcast in Kailali, Baitadi and Dedeldhura districts. Save the Children and Mercy Corps produced these PSAs in a variety of local languages including Maithali, Tharu, Ranatharu and Doteli.
- The government of Nepal also worked with its telecommunications service, [Nepal Telecom](#), and the private company, [NCell](#) to provide COVID-19 public messaging. The two companies replaced normal dialing call ringtones with

COVID-19 messages on social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing, and symptoms.

- There have also been efforts to prevent and address misinformation. UNICEF created a platform to [report](#) misinformation. [Accountability Lab Nepal](#) launched the [Coronavirus CivActs Campaign](#) which since late March released [44 bulletins](#) that include a rumor vs. facts section to debunk false claims.

### **Finding 2 - Prime Minister K.P. Oli Contradicts MoHP COVID-19 Messages**

- Following the second COVID-19 case detected on March 23 and subsequent nationwide lockdown, MoHP launched daily press briefings. The briefings updated the public about the number and location of cases in the country and emphasized the importance of safety measures like mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing. The messages were broadcast live on TV, radio, and [Facebook live](#). Press briefings have continued throughout the pandemic and are now bi-weekly.
- In contrast, Prime Minister Oli made a number of false statements regarding COVID-19. In mid-April, Oli spoke to the chief ministers of seven provinces about COVID-19 making numerous inaccurate claims. Among them he referred to COVID-19 as [“a non-living being and its outer fatty layer makes the virus a living organism, and hot water melts its outer fatty layer.”](#) The video captured of this went viral on social media and people were quick to ridicule and mock his statements. The following month, in an address to the National Assembly Prime Minister Oli continued to spread misinformation. Oli stated, [“Corona is like the flu. If contracted, one should sneeze, drink hot water and drive the virus away.”](#) He also noted that Nepalis have “stronger immune systems” arguing that Nepalis’ exposure to fresh air and consumption of ginger, garlic and turmeric creates “better immunity.”

### **Finding 3 - Youth Protesters Criticized the Government’s Handling of COVID-19**

- On March 24, 2020 the government of Nepal announced a national lockdown following the country’s second identified case of Coronavirus, which officially ended July 21, 2020. In response to the government’s mishandling of COVID-19 youth first mobilized on social media and then in the streets. In June, thousands of young people in Kathmandu and other major cities joined in socially distanced protests. It was a call to action for greater government accountability. They [protested](#) for increased government action to provide more testing and enhanced quarantine facilities.
- Public opinion surveys are not available, but the nation-wide protests expressed the desire for providing comprehensive government action beyond telling households to stay home. One protester explained, [“For months we stayed home and gave our support to the government obeying the orders, but during the](#)

[lockdown, we realized the incompetence of the government to handle the coronavirus situation.](#)”

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- The collaboration between the government and other agencies, organizations and telecommunications companies has been instrumental in sharing public information across the country. UN agencies provided important guidance, while organizations reached remote and marginalized communities with messages in local languages, and telecommunications companies disseminated messages to millions of [Nepali mobile subscribers](#). Yet the lack of a cohesive message within the government has weakened the effectiveness of this collaborative approach.
- While the MoHP has been the primary voice providing information and guidance on COVID-19 to Nepali citizens, Prime Minister Oli has contradicted and undermined MoHP’s work by spreading misinformation. This mixed messaging highlights the lack of a singular and cohesive government communications strategy that could provide clarity to its citizens. This is similar to what unfolded in the U.S. following divergent CDC and White House COVID-19 public messaging. Further, Prime Minister Oli’s false comments created potential risk to Nepalis. While some Nepalis may be able to discern the facts about COVID-19, there are many who believed the Prime Minister's claims due to his political authority as leader of the country. His false and dismissive claims about COVID-19 sparked street protests by youth across the country.
- This show of civil engagement by youth protesters highlights the ways Nepalis have held the government accountable to its contradictory public messaging and more broadly mishandling of the pandemic.

## **Vietnam: Blanket Public Health Messaging During COVID-19**

### **Hansol Chung**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Vietnam implemented proactive and aggressive communication strategies to raise awareness, keep the public informed and induce compliance. As a single-party system, the national leadership was able to quickly frame the health crisis as a “fight against foreign invasion” without much political or public pushback.
- Public messaging efforts were most visibly led by the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Health, and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health under the Department of Labor.
- While this memo does not analyze the effectiveness of each public messaging strategy implemented, public surveys indicate that Vietnamese people were highly receptive to their government communications.

#### **Key Findings Include:**

- By late January, the Vietnamese government had begun communicating frequently with the public using social media, mobile apps, and texting.
- Public messaging and popular celebrities consistently encouraged public buy-in through wartime rhetoric and calls for national unity.
- Public messaging was coordinated at different levels of the government through a promptly-established national-level Committee.

#### **Finding 1 - Aggressive Outreach, Warnings to Public in Late January**

- On January 9th, the Ministry of Health [warned](#) the public about the dangers of the illness before the first case was reported in the country on January 23rd. Details of symptoms, protective measures, and testing sites were soon [communicated](#) through mass media, government websites, public grassroot organizations, posters at hospitals, offices, residential buildings and markets, via text messages on mobile phones, and as voice messages before every phone call placed in the country.
- On social media, new information was disseminated frequently and consistently on an [hourly basis](#) as public and private telecom companies have collectively sent [3 billion messages](#) (as of April 30th) about safety measures to mobile phone users. Taking advantage of Vietnam’s widespread use of social media and smartphones, the government [communicated](#) messages directly to users on popular mobile phone apps.
- Multiple government entities, such as the ministries of Health, Education and Training, Information and Communication, and the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee, as well as phone service providers sent [text messages](#) (which did not require individual subscription or accepting terms and conditions) regarding Vietnam’s lockdown multiple times per day.

- In Ho Chi Minh City, households [received leaflets](#) authorized by the Prime Minister, the most senior level of authorization, outlining a checklist of lockdown measures, the reasons why the measures were being taken, the duration of their implementation, and the legal penalty for violation.

### **Finding 2 - Public Buy-In**

- In late February, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health under the Department of Labor released a cover of a well-known pop song with new lyrics about hand washing. The Institute requested a popular dancer to create a dance challenge on TikTok using the song. The animated [music video](#) and the dance challenge, both designed to raise awareness and educate the public on how to wash hands, became globally viral and attracted [millions of views](#).
- To mobilize nationalism and inspire citizens to do their part, government messages featured propaganda-style [wartime imagery and rhetoric](#) using posters, leaflets, and loud speakers with phrases like “Fighting the epidemic is like fighting against the enemy” and “leave nobody behind.”
- Based on the positive public survey results and social media reactions, the Vietnamese public appears to be well-informed of personal protective measures and satisfied with the way the government handled the crisis. For example, the “Global Crisis Perceptions” [index](#) released by Singapore’s social research agency in May ranked Vietnam second with a score of 77, with China (85) topping the list, with the most citizens rating Vietnam’s performance favorably across four key indicators: national political leadership, corporate leadership, community and media. Another [survey](#) done by Nielsen Vietnam, a market research firm, found that the majority of respondents were “highly aware” of COVID-19’s symptoms in March.

### **Finding 3 - Coordinated Public Messaging**

- A week after the first case was confirmed, a National Steering Committee on Epidemic Prevention that convened every two days was established and headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, to coordinate Vietnam’s “whole of government” strategy.
- The Prime Minister [issued](#) directives that included calls for increased cooperation among localities as well as specific tasks for multiple ministries and agencies. The high level of coordination was also visible when hot spots with demonstrated community transmissions were [locked down](#) immediately. The government was able to effectively communicate lock-down measures not only to the public but also to local administrations.
- Despite the coordination, however, experts believe that some ministry’s actions were not in congruence with the national strategy. For example, the National Administration of Tourism’s campaign, aimed to attract foreign tourists on the ground that Vietnam has managed the public health crisis well, likely ended up

contributing to the [second cluster](#) of the outbreak in which 41% of the cases were foreign tourists. Also, the Ministry of Education and Training was responsible for [a lack of clear guidelines](#) for students and indecisive policies regarding school shutdowns which prompted protest from the public.

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- The messaging tools used for aggressive outreach were generally the same tools used to promote political propaganda and intimidate political dissidents. The Vietnamese government had access to sensitive personal data such as travel history, phone records, social media accounts and credit card records with limited legal or parliamentary [oversight](#) for data protection. Also, an extensive security apparatus, consisting of neighborhood wardens, public security officers, and militiamen was at the central government's disposal to engage in low-cost messaging such as distributing leaflets, posters, and door-to-door communications as well as quickly sealing off districts and tracking down infected individuals.
- The fostering of public buy-in, as seen in the positive reception to the government messaging, can be attributed to several factors such as consistency, promptness and transparency of the messaging strategies. More importantly, however, the government has effectively crafted narratives rooted in history to evoke past military conflicts and encourage solidarity and collective action. Once the government successfully framed the health crisis in militaristic terms, the public responded with uncompromised compliance and national unity. This has led to some concerns that calls for overzealous nationalism have resulted in [villainizing](#) repatriating citizens for carrying potential risks for transmission.
- The firm and swift commitment demonstrated by the highest level of leadership enabled subordinate ministries to implement unprecedented measures. Because all levels of government operated and coordinated under a single national committee, various central and local government entities were able to consistently disseminate information to the public and reduce room for confusion and misinformation. However, some measures, particularly those threatening personal liberties and privacy, would have been challenged by an independent judiciary if not for the single-party system of the Vietnamese government.

## **Italy: The Chaos of Going First**

**Eleonora Smeriglio**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Italy was the first European country to undergo a country-wide lockdown in March 2020. President Giuseppe Conte, several governors, and the Ministry of Public Health were the most prominent communicators during the first wave of the pandemic.
- Despite often inconsistent messaging coming from health professionals (virologists, epidemiologists, immunologists, etc.) broadcast via both traditional and social media, the government maintained a fairly consistent communication strategy during the first wave of the pandemic, stressing the importance of staying home and social-distancing.
- Several external factors hampered the effectiveness of the communication strategies, including EU General Data Protection Regulations and a strong no-mask rhetoric from some far-right opposition parties' representatives. Demographic and cultural factors – including average age of the population (the eldest of Europe) and the diffuse presence of multi-generational households – weakened the effectiveness of social-distancing campaigns.

### **Key Findings Include:**

- Since the beginning of the pandemic and especially during the first wave, the government has relied on a reaction-based rather than prevention-driven approach. In his rhetoric, Prime Minister Conte appealed to public buy-in and shared responsibility for lowering infection rates.
- Regional governors in Lombardy and Lazio, as well as the Mayor of Milan, contributed to creating misinformation as they either denied the impact of the pandemic (Governor of Lombardy) or promoted communication campaigns that stressed the importance of supporting local-businesses through social engagements (Mayor of Milan and Governor of Lazio); on the other hand, governors of Campania and Veneto strengthened their consensus rates by relying on frequent briefings and by disincentivizing the population from gathering despite local traditions.
- The digital app for contact-tracing “Immuni” has only been marginally effective, as its download has not been made mandatory for GDPR policies (less than 20% of the overall population downloaded the app).

### **Finding 1 - Prime Minister Conte: “All for One and One for All”**

- Prime Minister Conte was the key government figure from the start of the pandemic. He created an ongoing dialogue with Italian citizens through “fireside chats” - via his personal social media channels - to announce lockdown measures and restrictions in both March and April (phase 1).

- [A semantic analysis](#) of Conte’s speeches highlights the importance of hope and shared responsibility in phase 1. At the end of April, as phase 2 was starting, the messaging relied more heavily on European solidarity and economic measures. Given the shortage of surgical masks in phase 1, his speeches stressed the importance of social-distancing and the limitation of public gatherings.
- After the first public conference on 11th March, Conte’s social media followers’ engagement increased by [150%](#) in a single day. By the end of the month, his approval rating had risen to over 60%, his highest number since the beginning of his second mandate. Unlike usual press conferences or pre-recorded speeches broadcast on TV, Conte’s first conference was broadcast live via all social media channels to maximize outreach.

## **Finding 2 - Regional Governors: “A Story of Pride and Prejudice”**

- [Luca Zaia, governor of Veneto](#) (one of the richest, largest and most populous regions in the North-East) emerged as the most popular regional governor in Italy, winning re-election in September 2020. In his press conferences, Zaia stressed the importance of limiting social contacts and provided regular updates on the status of ICUs and testing availability in the region. His clear and consistent messaging earned him a [92%](#) public approval rating in May 2020.
- [Vincenzo De Luca, governor of Campania](#) (a mildly-hit region in the first wave of the pandemic, but with one of the highest density of population in the South) became known for the decisive tone of his press conferences. In the early phase, he stressed the importance of self-isolation when coming from Northern Italy and the absolute ban of social gatherings and events (despite the low incidence of cases in March and April, the region is known for its festivals).
- [Attilio Fontana, governor of Lombardy](#) (the hardest hit region in Northern Italy) made [a series of contradictory public announcements](#) in February and March, underestimating the pandemic’s impact (i), refusing to take responsibility for the unusually high number of deaths in Lombardy’s hospices (ii) and, later in April, discussing the need to re-open all activities as soon as possible (iii). His clumsy crisis communication strategy resulted in a high drop of his approval rating.
- [Mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala](#) mistakenly launched the “Milano-Non-Si-Ferma” (Milano Does Not Stop) campaign to promote social engagements in late February, before the announcement of a region-wide lockdown (8th March) followed by a country-wide lockdown (9th March). Milan was one of the epicenters of the pandemic in Italy and the campaign contributed to creating confusion and misinformation among Milan citizens in the early phase. Sala publicly admitted his communication failure in March.
- [Governor of Lazio](#) (a very populous region in Central Italy, where Rome is located) [Nicola Zingaretti](#) initially focused on the importance of supporting local businesses by encouraging citizens to attend social events. In early March, he announced on social media platforms that he had contracted the virus. His public

approval rating increased despite the confusion that had sparked from his messages in late February.

### **Finding 3 - The Ministry of Public Health: “Moderation as the Secret to Survival”**

- The Minister of Public Health Roberto Speranza’s communication was consistent with Prime Minister Conte’s measures: in March, messages focused on the importance of staying home, protecting first responders and “acting together.”
- He commissioned a phone app for digital tracing, however its download has not been made mandatory for GDPR policies. As of October 2020, only [9,464,105 downloads](#) (less than 20% of the overall population) have been registered.

### **Finding 4 - “Who Else?: Those Who Did Not Cut through the Noise”**

- The European Union, the Civil Protection (the national body that deals with the prediction, prevention and management of emergency events) and Domenico Arcuri – the Special Commissioner for the COVID-19 Emergency - were also active on public platforms, but their communication strategies resulted weak and less popular.
- Several virologists, immunologists and epidemiologists frequently interacted on the public sphere, especially on TV and social media. Their contradictory messages weakened the effectiveness of the medical community messaging.

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- Italy’s population is the oldest in Europe (with more than [14 million](#) citizens – 22.8% of the overall population – over 65 years of age) and multi-generational households are customary in the country. Grandparents are central to the education of younger generations (over [74%](#) of grandparents are regularly involved in primary activities for their grandchildren, including daycare and baby-sitting). The combination of these two demographic/ social factors lowers the effectiveness of social-distancing campaigns and amplifies the spread of COVID-19 compared to other countries. Furthermore, internal migration varies - as lots of Italian citizens from the Southern regions move to Northern regions for work - which weakened the feasibility of the “Stay-Home” campaigns across different regions when the first lockdown was announced.
- [EU General Data Protection Regulations](#) prevented Italy and other countries from making the download of national apps for contact-tracing mandatory; the inability to enforce the use of digital tools has diminished their effectiveness and the ability to properly tackle the diffusion of the virus.
- The League’s popular leader, [Matteo Salvini](#), promoted misinformation by refusing to wear a surgical mask in public places; his rhetoric is part of a larger movement of COVID-19 deniers and conspiracy theorists who have increasingly gained popularity in Italy since the beginning of the pandemic.

## **Uruguay: Understanding COVID-19 Public Messaging**

**James Leandro**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Although its borders were closed to international travelers on March 17, 2020, Uruguay never declared a general lockdown. Nevertheless, the government's quick response and messaging encouraged approximately 80% of the population to socially distance. The national teamwork helped keep the infection rates at manageable levels that never threatened the Uruguayan health care system.

### **Key Findings Include:**

- Strong public support of government messaging.
- Previous measles outbreak helped the Uruguay healthcare system gain experience.
- Government & International Organizations collaborate to fight the spread of mis/disinformation as well as support national safety efforts.

### **Finding 1 - Strong Public Support of Government Messaging**

- Public messaging regarding COVID-19 in Uruguay was driven by the newly elected President Luis Lacalle Pou and Health Minister Daniel Salinas.
- While most measures were not obligatory, on March 19, 2020 various industry associations and labor unions reached [voluntary agreements](#) with the government to temporarily shut down activities in sectors such as education, construction and retail.
- Opinion polls taken by the Argentinian consulting firm [Trespuntozero](#) during the first three months of the outbreak suggest almost 80% of Uruguayans approved of the government's initial handling of the crisis.
- [Gonzalo Moratorio](#), a professor in the science faculty at the University of the Republic in Uruguay details, "an unprecedented consensus between the country's political decision-makers, scientists and academic sphere, this coordination has limited divisiveness and united the country in the fight against COVID-19."
- According to a public survey conducted by consulting firm Tres Punto Cero, the president's decisive rapid response and consistent leadership is credited for the government's [positive public approval](#).
- Uruguayans have a long history of sharing Mate, the traditional South American caffeine-rich drink that is sipped through a metal straw. This social tradition is a lifestyle staple for people in Uruguay, however once healthcare professionals encouraged Uruguayans to [pause their communal tea-sharing habit](#), most quickly adjusted to individual servings.

## **Finding 2 - Previous Measles Outbreak Helped Uruguay Healthcare System Gain Experience**

- Uruguay had a [measles epidemic as well as a dengue fever outbreak in 2019](#). Combating both outbreaks helped the country's public and private health care professionals gather valuable practice that later served beneficial in combating COVID-19.
- Since the health emergency was declared on March 13, the health ministry processed hundreds of thousands of tests within the first few months of the outbreak.
- A strict epidemiological monitoring program was maintained by the health ministry and the national government.
- Nationally produced COVID-19 testing kits were distributed and used throughout Uruguay.
- A home-based medical system was implemented. Very few people had to travel to the hospital at the start of the pandemic because doctors and testing teams went to people's homes in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus.
- The government has a long history of high levels of investment in education, social infrastructure and medicine.

## **Finding 3 - [Government & International Organizations Collaborate](#) to Fight the Spread of Misinformation/Disinformation as Well as to Support National Efforts:**

- Local government held several webinars to draw attention to the harm being done by the spread of mis/disinformation. Uruguay hosted these social media events together with the governments of Indonesia and Thailand and partnered with the following organizations: WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union, the UN Global Pulse initiative and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- [UNDP Uruguay](#) provided support to Uruguay's National Response and Recovery to Contain the Impact of COVID-19 program in addition to the National Emergency Response System (SINAE).
- [The World Bank](#) provided an emergency loan of \$20 million on May 18, 2020 to support the Uruguayan Government's efforts to minimize the pandemic's effects and also contributed to the procurement of medical supplies and equipment for frontline public health workers. On June 05, 2020 The World Bank proposed a second emergency development loan in the amount of \$400 million specifically for COVID-19 response and the nation's economic recovery.

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- Uruguay's long-standing institutional strengths, a well-educated population, stable democracy with emphasis on welfare economy, social cohesion and individual freedom alongside social responsibility contributed to the strong public support of the government's COVID-19 response.

- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Uruguay had a strong democratic tradition that contributed to its citizens' trust of the public health system and policies, leading to high compliance with voluntary quarantine measures and adherence to social distancing rules.
- The government's decisive, early, transparent, inclusive, and science-based response along with the consensus between the country's political decision-makers, scientists and private sector, added to the already strong public support of the democratic republic.

## **France: Complex Public Health Messaging During COVID-19**

**Dahlia Ezekwonna**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- In the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak (February to April), public messaging efforts were most visibly led by the Prime Minister, the French President and a French physician and controversial microbiologist, Professor Didier Raoult.
- Overall, the messaging was mainly focused on the measures taken by the Government rather than the precautions French people should have followed (such as physical distancing, wearing a mask...).

### **Key Findings Include:**

- The French government public messaging on the virus came late and was ambiguous in the early stage of the virus outbreak. Meanwhile alternative messaging from Professor Didier Raoult, was trusted by thousands of French citizens.
- Evolution in the French government messaging focused on economic measures and revealed geographical inequalities (regions, suburbs).
- Late stage of the French government messaging focused on sanitary measures and revealed socio-economic inequalities (suburbs, minorities).

### **Finding 1 - Ambiguous and Late Messaging from the Government**

- Early February was marked by the lack of action from the French Government and its mixed messages. The Government did not deliver its [first official statement](#) until late February. In its [message](#), the Prime Minister misled the French people by stating that it was “strongly advised” not to “rush” to buy protective masks. Meanwhile, the President and his wife were reportedly seen at the theater, without masks. Important measures taken at this stage regarded the repatriation of French citizens; the creation of a crisis unit to track people who may have been in contact with the virus; the activation of the plan ORSAN which organized the mobilization of the health system; the sending of a practical guide on COVID-19 to health professionals by the Ministry of Solidarity and Health. It’s only in late February that the Government ordered several million of additional FFP2 masks - only for healthcare professionals -; broadcast on radio and television messages about national virus prevention; and banned gatherings of more than 5,000 people. Faced with mixed messages from the government, French citizens grew [anxious](#).

### **Finding 2 - An Alternative Messaging that Attracted Thousands of French**

- French physician and microbiologist Professor Raoult claimed in late February 2020 that he had found a chloroquine treatment against the virus. His predication

back in 2009, in which he [warned](#) the government about a possible inability to manage contamination from a respiratory virus that could mutate, is likely to have increased his credibility, along with several prizes and titles he holds. Following Professor Raoult's statement, and despite criticisms from the health sector (e.g., professionals denounced the lack of protocol, since the treatment had not been tested before being administered to COVID-10 patients), many French believed and trusted the veracity of his declarations. His influence resonated with the Government growing less confident and admitting its limitations with [statements](#) such as, "Our strategy can be defined in (two) simple word(s): cope." [\*Faire face].

### **Finding 3 - The Evolution of the Government's Messaging Focused on Economic and Sanitary Measures (Social Distancing, Lockdown, Testing)**

- In March, the Government focused mostly on [economic measures](#) and collaboration at the Regional and European level. Other important [measures](#) were also taken that month: [25 decrees](#) were adopted in the context of the state of health emergency by the Council of Ministers; the President met with moral and religious authorities; the decree governing the use of chloroquine was published; and a lockdown was declared on March 24. The Government also [collaborated](#) at the European level: a meeting of European Union health ministers was held in Brussels and a couple of European coordination videoconferences on COVID-19 were organized. In April, the Government focused mostly on sanitary measures: only that month a testing operation for the most vulnerable people was organized, and testing projects funded.

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- The French President mandated in June 2020 an [assessment mission](#) of the management of the coronavirus crisis. Early findings suggested "manifest defects in anticipation, preparation and management" in health aspects. In addition, a vast [preliminary investigation](#) was opened by the Paris public prosecutor's office. It suggested that the [poor communication](#) [of the Government] had damaged the confidence of the French in medical, scientific and political authorities, "to the point of being perceived by part of the population as untrue".
- The challenge of the Government in promoting social distancing, advising to wear protective masks and restricting the freedom of movement can be understood in several ways: Physical contact in France and Europe is common. Logistic/cultural issues: the French Government was faced with a [shortage of protective masks](#). Contrary to Asian countries, mask-wearing is uncommon in France. Religious beliefs: while France is a secular country, it is host to a variety of cultures and religions. [59% of the population](#) are religious (Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism...) meanwhile, mask wearing have been raised by some believers as a [religious issue](#). Fear of incidents between a part of the population and the

police during implementation of lockdown measures. [Human Rights Watch](#) reported, since the beginning of the lockdown, accounts of police stops appearing abusive, violent, and discriminatory.

- An [increase](#) of hydroxychloroquine sales was observed in pharmacies everywhere in France in mid- to end of March. [BFMTV](#) covered the long queue of people in front of Professor Raoult's Institute in Marseille in hope of being treated. On November 12, 2020 [legal proceedings](#) were launched against Professor Didier Raoult following a complaint accusing him of confraternity violation, misinformation to the public, and exposure to unjustified risk. The disciplinary chamber of the medical order must determine whether Didier Raoult complied with the code of medical ethics or not.
- The centralization of France may have contributed to the French mismanagement of the COVID-19. [Difficulties of regional health agencies](#) (ARS) in managing the emergency during the COVID-19 crisis were underlined.
- Economic measures by the French Government echoed with the situation in French suburbs. Geographically, suburbs were and continue to be hit harder with an explosion in its [death rate](#).
- The Government used digital tools to track the pandemic and provided a hotline to get more information about the virus. In June 2, 2020, France launched a [coronavirus tracing app](#), 'StopCovid' that was downloaded around 2 million times and only sent out 472 warning notifications in the five months it was active. About the app, the French President declared, "I wouldn't say it's a failure; it didn't work." On October 22, an updated version of the app, 'TousAntiCovid' (everyone against Covid), was launched. So far it has been downloaded around only 2 million times while similar apps in England and Wales and Germany have been downloaded 18 million times and 16 million times respectively.

## **South Korea: Applying Lessons Learned from MERS amid COVID-19**

**Seyoon Jung**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The emergence of COVID-19 infection cases from late January was the first litmus test of the South Korean government's risk communication capacity revamped since the MERS outbreak in 2015.
- Daily confirmed new COVID-19 cases increased rapidly after [the outbreak of a super-spreader event](#) in the country's third largest city, Daegu, in mid-February. By the end of February, daily cases were growing exponentially at a rate of hundreds per day, reaching a peak of 909 daily cases.
- The South Korean government successfully lowered daily infections from [the peak of 909 on February 28th to 22 on April 17](#). This success can be attributed to the government's risk communication practices, including the effective use of posters and text message alerts, and forcible removal of misinformation and disinformation on social media.

### **Key Findings Include:**

- The Korean public authorities used posters to influence public risk perception towards adopting health promoting measures.
- Local governments disclosed contact tracing data of coronavirus patients to help the public adhere to social distancing.
- The government removed misleading and false information on social media to protect the public access to accurate information.

### **Finding 1 - Use of Posters in Inducing Health-related Behavior Change**

- In February and March, the Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) used posters to influence public risk perception towards adopting appropriate protective and preventive measures.
- The posters presented scientific facts and technical information on COVID-19 health risks in an accessible manner through graphs and pictures recommending mask wearing, hand washing and testing.
- Posters with tailored prevention messages targeted at different groups of people with different needs: parents, travelers, self-quarantined individuals, healthcare workers, entrepreneurs, and foreigners.
- In February and March, KDCA distributed [a total of 659 posters](#), in printed and digital forms, to the public through a network of related public agencies, professional medical associations, and the media.
- The survey results of South Koreans' perception of COVID-19 indicate that the posters helped shape their risk perception and encourage them to adopt health-promoting behaviors. According to [Korea Research's survey](#) conducted between 28 February and 2 March, 90 percent of the respondents perceived the severity of

COVID-19 as more than serious. According to the same survey conducted between 13 and 16 March, 96 percent of the respondents said they wore face coverings when going outside; 99 percent said they regularly washed hands; and 93 percent said they avoided public gatherings and eating out.

### **Finding 2 - Disclosure of Contact Tracing Data in Promoting Public Trust**

- During the outbreak of MERS in 2015, the Korean public health authorities held back data about the hospitals where infected patients were treated. Withholding the information led to public distrust of the government, which hindered public participation in the government-led public health campaigns.
- During the COVID-19 outbreak, the local governments were empowered to conduct their own epidemiological investigations on confirmed patients under their jurisdictions and to transmit the patients' movement paths via text message alerts to mobile users in or near places visited by the patients.
- Evidence from public opinion surveys suggests that the information transparency of the South Korean government during the COVID-19 crisis improved public trust and approval of the government's disease control measures.
- According to the [Gyeonggi Research Institute's survey](#) conducted in April, the Korean public's approval rating of the government's handling of a public health crisis improved from 29.0 percent during the 2015 MERS to 74.0 percent during the COVID-19 crisis.
- According to a [similar survey](#) conducted by Korea Research between 11 and 13 February and between 13 and 16 March, the Korean public's approval ratings of the public health authorities and local governments improved markedly; the scores for Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention rose from 73% to 84%, and local governments increased from 48% to 56%.

### **Finding 3 - Coercive Action against Misinformation and Disinformation**

- News consumption patterns in South Korea suggest that the country can be particularly susceptible to the risk of misinformation and disinformation on social media. According to [Reuter's 2019 Digital News Report](#), 70% of the South Korean public consumed news through smartphones.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, the Korea Communications Commission (KCC) led the rumor management effort to address the potential dangers posed by the instant spread of false and/or misleading information on the digital platforms.
- KCC increased the frequency of surveillance and monitoring of mis- and disinformation on digital platforms from once a week to three times a week. It oversaw and enforced corrective actions against domestic digital platform providers to remove mis- and disinformation. When such information was identified circulating on foreign digital platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, KCC blocked the Korean public's access to the content.

- In February and March, KCC enforced [a total of 58 and 102 corrective actions](#) to remove social media posts, comments, and reposts from other social media deemed misleading or verifiably false.

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- South Korea's unitary form of government has proved effective in containing the spread of COVID-19 cases. The Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters headed by the Prime Minister coordinated a unified national response ranging from standard health protocols to healthcare service.
- The government's response would have been ineffectual had it not been for high public compliance with health protocols. The public obedience seems to be the result of Confucian communitarianism reinforced by Foucaultian disciplinary techniques of the government. Faced with COVID-19, the Korean multitude was willing to adopt health protocols, even if they were inconvenient and effortful, for the cause of public health. The mantra was further reinforced by the government's promotion of an ideal citizen who faithfully adheres to health protocols.
- Another key factor behind high public compliance with health campaigns was the government's disclosure of anonymized personal data of coronavirus patients. The disclosure of data helped individuals adhere to social distancing rules by letting them check whether they were co-located with the patients. However, the government's increased authorities to track personal data raises concerns about the derogation of individual freedom and rights as data subjects.

## **Taiwan: Understanding COVID-19 Messaging Approach**

Seongmin Lee

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Taiwan’s government is known for its creative and ingenious COVID-19 communications. Rorry Daniels, the Deputy Project Director of Forum on Asia-Pacific Security at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, calls Taiwan’s approach a “[model of excellence](#).”
- Polls conducted in February and May in Taiwan [showed](#) 91% public approval rating of the President Tsai government’s management of the pandemic, and citizens graded the country’s Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC)’s epidemic response [84 out of 100 points](#).

### **Key Findings Include:**

- Government agencies helped prevent mask hoarding at the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak through a mask rationing system and successfully countered coronavirus misinformation using “humor over rumor” tactics.
- Digital tools and big data were employed extensively in pandemic communication strategies, contact tracing, and self-quarantine enforcement.
- Civil society organizations played an important role in debunking disinformation related to the coronavirus and raising public awareness.

### **Finding 1 - Mask Rationing, Beating Rumor with Humor, and Active Messengers**

- Taiwan’s Digital Minister Audrey Tang, a [key](#) figure in the country’s disease prevention efforts, helped civil society organizations build a “[mask rationing system](#)” and digital [maps](#) in February of roughly 6,000 pharmacies carrying face masks, with information about the number of masks in stock. This timely and accurate information helped prevent hoarding in the early stages of the outbreak when the public demand for masks [surged](#). The Digital Ministry also employed professional comedians as “[engagement officers](#)” to assist with the government’s “[humor over rumor](#)” campaign, aimed at fighting misinformation related to the coronavirus. Within two hours of spotting a post with misinformation, Tang’s team swiftly released a humorous meme each time on social media accompanied by essential facts. This was intended to go viral faster than rumor based on the idea that people tend to share memes on social media and that humor would replace outrage.
- The CECC actively [coordinated](#) efforts across different government agencies as well as academic, medical fields and private sectors. It has been [praised](#) for its proactive communication with the public regarding the outbreak status through televised and live-streamed daily briefings since January.
- In a likely related manner, amid the virus outbreak in February, during which time the Tsai government [received](#) a 91% approval rating for its pandemic

response, citizens who identified themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese surged to 83.2% in the same month, up from the pre-outbreak level of about 70%, according to a [survey](#) by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation.

### **Finding 2 - Smart Use of Digital Tools for Communication and Data for Tracing**

- To allow citizens to report their health status and spread information on the infectious disease, the government operated a [chatbot](#) on LINE, which [90 percent](#) of the population uses in Taiwan. Puma Shen, an assistant professor at the National Taipei University, [noted](#), “It is hard for Taiwanese people to not receive the messages from the CECC when the media...reports the press conference every day and people receive LINE messages.” Using phone locations and the integrated database of the National Health Insurance Administration and its Immigration Agency, Taiwan could also trace contacts, monitor and communicate to those under self-quarantine timely.
- However, there were some fears about the extensive digital tracking. Some worried about the use of mobile [phone-tracking](#) to enforce self-quarantine. Government agencies monitored the locations of cell phones to alert local police if those under in-home quarantine left their home. Noting a potential encroachment on individual liberty, Taiwan Association for Human Rights [cautioned](#), “[A]ny extraordinary measures used to manage specific crises must not become permanent fixtures...[t]here is historical precedent...life-saving programs such as these, and their intrusions on digital liberties...outlive their urgency.”

### **Finding 3 - Civil Society Fought Disinformation and Raised Public Awareness**

- China was reported to have [targeted](#) Taiwan with covid disinformation to “undermin[e]...the island nation’s democratic institutions.” Posts originating from social platforms in China claimed an unknown number of bodies were buried inside the Taipei Dome stadium, and another image showed a city aflame with overlay text claiming that the virus was rampant in Taiwan.
- These misleading posts were quickly debunked. Civil society organizations such as the Taiwan FactCheck Center subsequently demonstrated that the image of the burning city was actually a movie scene from a 2016 South Korean zombie thriller, “Train to Busan,” and the organization also discredited other allegations. An expert familiar with the organization’s work [noted](#) that such “measures have greatly raised public awareness of critical problems brought by disinformation.”

### **Analytical Assessment:**

- It is worth noting that Taiwan has been excluded for decades from international health bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO). As a result, the country doesn’t have membership/observer [status](#) at the WHO. And because of Beijing’s obstruction, Taipei’s ability to timely access the global health information sharing networks has been extremely [limited](#). Accordingly, the

country developed a “[self-reliant](#)” system to make its own assessment of the potential dangers of new infectious diseases. The country carried out a [massive reform](#) in its health and medical systems in the 1990s. Taiwan’s current healthcare system, which is impressively the world’s best according to the 2019 edition of the CEOWORLD magazine [Health Care Index](#), played an instrumental role in Taiwan’s disease prevention efforts.

- This sense of decades-long exclusion and need for self-help was further enhanced by the country’s [devastating experiences](#) of the 2003 SARS outbreak. Taiwan was then reported to be the [third-hardest-hit place](#) after Hong Kong and China, from which the SARS originated. Taiwan’s bitter experiences in this outbreak helped them [gain](#) knowledge of disease prevention measures and policy planning for both government agencies and hospitals. New social norms also emerged. Since the SARS outbreak, wearing a mask has been considered [good practice as in](#) some other Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan. People in Taiwan—especially those with a cold, allergies, or weak immune systems—[began](#) putting on masks throughout the flu season and in crowded public places long before COVID-19. The enhanced public awareness of dangers of infectious diseases and changed public’s health behavior helped Taiwan curtail the spread of the coronavirus early without causing any panics.
- Taiwan, which was deeply sceptical of data provided by the Chinese government because of its [opaque](#) handling of the SARS outbreak in the past, was further alerted when a pneumonia-like infectious disease outbreak was first reported in Wuhan. A sense of international exclusion from the international health network, and the country’s close proximity and the [huge flow](#) of cross-strait travelers to China, made Taiwan take an extraordinary cautious measure. In late December 2019, when most countries across the world might have been busy preparing for New Year, Taiwan [dispatched](#) its health experts to Wuhan to investigate the reported disease on the ground. By December 31, it began screening all inbound flight passengers from Wuhan for fever-like symptoms, which was soon followed by tougher measures such as a ban on travelers from Wuhan, all travelers from China, and a 14-day self-guarantee for all travelers.