
Communicating COVID-19 Uncertainty to Public



A group of researchers from Germany has looked into the challenges of communication between healthcare sector and the wider public about COVID-19. The study specifically focused on various approaches to communicating the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic.

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With the accelerated pace of research on the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the last few months, scientists have learned a lot about this illness, which can spread fast due to prevalence of asymptomatic carriers. Still, experts say there remain many unknowns about the disease as countries face new waves of infection.

Amidst scientific uncertainty in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, how do governments and health authorities convince the public to adhere to infection control measures? The findings of a new German study may help policymakers in crafting an effective communication strategy to get the public's cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 (Wegwarth et al. 2020).

Researchers conducted a survey of German residents (n = 2,011) on 13–20 July 2020 to examine their preferences for communications regarding COVID-19. Participants (18 years or older) were shown four scenarios in random order that communicated information about the pandemic (e.g. deaths, reproduction numbers) with varying degrees of scientific uncertainty:

1. Uncertainty is verbally and numerically communicated
2. Uncertainty is only verbally communicated
3. Uncertainty is not mentioned; and
4. Uncertainty is explicitly denied.

For the scenarios, the researchers used the actual numbers of people with positive test results for the coronavirus, COVID-19 related deaths, and the reproduction number in Germany, obtained from the daily reports of the Robert Koch Institut in Berlin. Respondents ranked the scenarios according to (a) which form of communication they would most prefer government and health experts to use regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and (b) their potential to motivate support and compliance with containment measures such as social distancing. The respondents' basic numeracy was measured and was judged to be present if all three questions were answered correctly.

Key findings of the survey study include:

- 650 respondents (32.3%) chose the scenario expressing the highest magnitude of uncertainty (verbal and numerical uncertainty) as their preferred form of communication about the pandemic.
- 501 respondents (24.9%) chose the scenario explicitly denying uncertainty, 435 (21.6%) chose the scenario expressing verbal uncertainty only, and 425 (21.1%) chose the scenario that left uncertainty unmentioned.
- Respondents who deemed current governmental COVID-19 containment strategies to be exaggerated (n = 404) indicated they would be more inclined to comply with containment measures when presented with communication expressing the highest magnitude of uncertainty than those who considered these strategies appropriate (n = 1,431).
- Basic numeracy, belonging to an at-risk age group (≥ 60 years), sex, and educational level were not associated with the preferred form of COVID-19 communication.

It's worth noting that communication expressing uncertainty appeared to be particularly effective in motivating those who were sceptical of infection control measures to comply with those measures. This finding is unexpected, according to the researchers, who noted that research in

other nonmedical and medical domains suggests that the communication of uncertainty prompts avoidance and increased levels of discomfort.

"We speculate that our respondents – and perhaps people worldwide – may be more open to the communication of uncertainty in the context of COVID-19 because the individual and collective experience of the pandemic is one of rapidly changing knowledge and absence of certainty. It may even be that admitting and communicating scientific uncertainty to the public fosters trust," the researchers wrote.

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