Roundtable Summary – Science Communication and the Role(s) of Experts

Date: Friday 12 July 2024

Hosts: Professor Catherine Bennett, Panel Member and Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together communication experts, including some directly involved in communicating complex science and risk messages to the public during the pandemic to discuss their experiences and suggestions.

Purpose of this roundtable

- Effective communication during a health emergency is vital in supporting health objectives. It is challenging to deliver a consistent, simple, and actionable message in rapidly changing, uncertain and complex circumstances.
- Scientific sources and experts are some of the best trusted sources of information and can play an integral role in explaining and communicating complex information to the community.
- This roundtable provided a range of subject matter and health communication experts with the opportunity to share their thoughts on what the Australian Government did well and what could be improved for a future crisis.

What we heard at the roundtable

- The Australian public takes science for granted until it's needed.
- Media, governments, academics, community organisations and community connectors (helpers, influencers, or champions) played a significant role in responding to a massive demand for information from a worried public. Much of this work was voluntary and not coordinated by government.
- The Australian response to the pandemic was heavily informed by complex scientific evidence about the disease and the best way to respond to it.
- Communication needs changed through the different pandemic phases and the science itself also changed constantly. Because science is not black and white, sometimes technical experts disagreed on how to interpret and apply evidence.
- Media often focussed more on areas of scientific disagreement than consensus, and were often not able to represent the weighting that should be given to different types of expertise, whether a contrary expert opinion was an individual or minority stance, or a more common scientific view.

- This representation of disagreement contributed to public confusion, polarization, frustration and concern, but also presented an opportunity to build the public's trust in science by diving deeper to explain the nuance of the topic and enhance transparency and trust.
- Australia relied heavily on experts to help the public to understand and follow advice, but this should really be an ongoing conversation between experts and the public. Behavioural expertise should be featured more in science communicators.
- Tailored communication, informed by strong relationships with community-led organisations, can increase the reach and impact of messaging.
- The importance of neutral spokespeople without political affiliations was highlighted. The joint media session wherein the Australian Government's Chief Medical Officer, provided key health advice to support the Prime Minister, broader policy announcements was discussed as an example of this working effectively early in the pandemic.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty was weaponised by bad actors who were able to manipulate information by removing context and nuance, leading to misunderstandings and confusion.
- Misinformation led to harm and polarisation in the community and was difficult and resource-intensive to address.
- We heard that delivering scientific information in the age of social media presents unique challenges that will only increase with greater use of artificial intelligence and deep fakes.
- We need to actively, constantly and relentlessly elevate understanding of scientific concepts and the scientific process in the community. We can improve by:
    - Recognise effective communication is based on two-way trust and understanding.
    - Constantly engaging on scientific concepts and scaling up existing efforts in an emergency, rather than completely switching on and off.
    - Acknowledging gaps in current knowledge and decision-making, for example following traditional risk communication principles: "this is what we know, this is what we don't, and this is what we're trying to find out"
    - Resourcing credible experts to explain unclear evidence or contrary views.
    - Carefully adopting an empathetic and respectful tone in communications to promote unity and help lead the community to navigate disagreements.
    - Creating layers of communications, building up from a base of readable plain English to highly technical information and advice for those who need it (such as advice for health professionals or other experts).
    - Sharing data and evidence openly, including with journalists and experts outside of government.

    - Improve trust and effectiveness of communications from advisory committees like AHPPC and ATAGI by increasing transparency of evidence considered while developing advice; enabling committee chairs to present advice and answer questions; and clarifying when the Chief Medical Officer is speaking on behalf of a technical committee or providing their own professional advice.
    - The Australian Centre for Disease Control (CDC) should play a role in developing and communicating independent scientific advice. Ideally, external experts would be embedded into and funded by the CDC.

- During a health emergency, it is important to have consistent, simple, and actionable communication which can be improved by:
    - Partnering with academic organisations and experts to build risk communication capability.
    - Developing structures that enable a two-way conversation with the public.
    - Utilising public spaces such as libraries where people can engage, understand, and learn.
    - Expanding programs that promote science literacy and ability to critically engage and assess information sources.
    - Avoiding information vacuums which lead people to seek information from unreliable or less relevant sources.
    - Not taking people's digital connectedness for granted.
    - Develop robust and flexible strategies to combat misinformation, drawing on the knowledge and experience of misinformation and risk communication experts.
    - Avoiding politics in communicating emergency response measures.