

»» Communication management for epidemics of the 21st century

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A NEW MODEL THAT TAKES ADVANTAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS TO CONTROL OUTBREAKS SUCH AS ZIKA

Hardly anything in this world terrorizes human beings more than an epidemic. Since the beginning of time, epidemics have caused massive panic because of their unpredictability, lack of an immediate remedy or vaccine, and their inability to be controlled by health institutions. The result has led to the death of millions of human beings and impactful socio-economic changes such as those triggered by the black plague in Europe in the middle of the 14th century.

Uncertainty, social confusion and a sense of urgency come with the growth of an epidemic, which, if not properly handled can result in the removal of the political structure of the country and the affected region. Simply imagine what would happen to the touristic areas of Colombia and Brazil, as well as their economic structure, if the Zika virus continues to progress and is not controlled or prevented.

Communication media have helped reduce the amount of contagions and avoid panic. However, if they are not under constant coordination through messages led by the health authorities (regional, national and local), they can cause delays in the control of an epidemic and undermine the people's confidence in the institutions responsible for the public health of the country.

Throughout time, governments and global organizations have generated a series of protocols in the subject that have allowed the alignment between the media, national governments and organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). This three-way conjunction

would seem sufficient to keep an anxious and preoccupied population informed, change behaviors and control the outbreaks.

However, in the epidemics of the 21st century, the recently created protocols are almost obsolete. Not only have they increased the risk for the generation of the viruses, they have also complicated the management of the communication efforts. It is no longer sufficient to provide informational brochures or advertisements in traditional media, to cite just two examples.

Nowadays, the digital citizen should be added to the alliance between the media, government, and global organizations. This person, who could be a patient, a relative, a medical professional or a regular user, is redefining the standards of the relationship. It is part of the digital transformation we are experiencing.

A clear example is the state of emergency emitted by the WHO and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Colombia following the Zika virus. The emergency has also permeated digital media. Information about the virus, its symptoms and possible cases of malformation during pregnancy, has generated the most searches on Google during the months of January and February. Zika's interest implied a 3000% increase in searches made by digital citizens.¹

Twitter is another area where the virus has taken the lead – both as source of information and topic of conversation-. Between January and March of this year, there were approximately 6.8 million registered tweets containing the word 'Zika'; 1.8 million of them came from Brazil, Mexico and Colombia -some of the countries affected by the epidemic-. The conversation on the platform has gravitated around detected cases, the risk for pregnant women and rumors about the effects of the virus, among others.

Diverse sources, including public entities such as the Ministry of Health in Colombia and international organizations like UNICEF, have contributed to promote informative campaigns to guide the population. For example, about 11 thousand tweets with the hashtag #ControlAlZika (Zika Control), promoted by the Ministry (@MinSaludCol), were registered in February and March of this year. During the same period there were 48 thousand tweets with the hashtag #zikazero, that is part of the Brazilian government's campaign to eradicate the epidemic.

¹ Google Blog, Providing support to combat Zika in Brazil and beyond, <https://googleblog.blogspot.com.co/2016/03/providing-support-to-combat-zika-in.html>



The contributions of governments and multilateral organizations attempt to respond to a challenge: **epidemics, besides being a public health problem, are a problem of communication in society.** In the digital age, any health emergency translates into thousands of voices that interact with each other, interpreting information, debating and becoming media themselves. There is a risk, however, that this interaction may intensify the emergency to the extent of creating social panic. Adequate intervention from governments, civil society organizations and the media should be able to digitally mobilize the population in order to achieve the general interest objectives.

The first step is to understand today's citizen, whose communication model collides with the traditional approach that health organizations have grown accustomed to. If we attempt to generate confidence in the population and lead the conversation on the Internet, we must keep in mind some key aspects in order to effectively manage communication and face epidemics in times of digital transformation:

- **The population demands precise and adequate information.** The user faces an overload of information due to the profusion of contents on the Internet called infoxication. This phenomenon requires a solid intervention from health authorities, allowing them to officialize sources and distinguish them amongst the thousands of contents that filter inaccurate data, rumors and conspiracy theories about the virus that only generate confusion and distrust in the population.

Civil society organizations are also vital in this task: by acting as intermediaries and 'curators' of information, they not only give credibility to the official message but strengthen their own voice.

- **The control and prevention of an epidemic outbreak is also managed from the digital environment.** If people don't take preventative measures, the virus will continue to advance. Health organizations should use the Internet to interact and promote a flow of information that sensitizes the population about possible preventive measures. To achieve this result we need innovative relationship strategies that respond to the users' expectations.

An interesting example is that of Hurricane Patricia in Mexico last year. While it was not an epidemic but a possible natural disaster -which fortunately did not have the impact we expected- the digital strategy of the government had a very clear objective: communicate, organize and connect. Possible limitations of penetration of social networks in areas with poor connectivity were not an issue: Mexico's Ministry of the Interior used the Internet as a constant source of information for radios and local political leaders. That way it managed to spread its message across the country. In the two key days of the emergency, there were 820 thousand tweets about the hurricane.

- **The digital conversation of users is made available to centralize the efforts in controlling the epidemics.** It is time to take advantage of big data, a phenomenon associated with the thousands of pieces of data available on the Internet that generate knowledge for companies and governments. In the case of epidemics, this chunk of information can be used to track the spread of outbreaks and identify where there is a need for information in order to better focus the government's prevention campaigns -physical and digital-.

HOW TO EVOLVE FROM THE ERA OF BROCHURES TO ONE OF NETWORKS

When facing an epidemic outbreak in the 21st century, we need to adopt a new communication model and not just rely on new tools. This is what differentiates those organizations that are undergoing a digital transformation.

What does it mean to adapt to a new communication model?

“Nowadays, the digital citizen should be added to the alliance between the media, government, and global organizations”

To lead the conversation, we must understand the community. Ancient Greek historian Plutarch once said, in order to know how to talk we must know how to listen. Thousands of years later, that phrase comes into effect in the era of digital transformation. In order to build a tale of prevention against the Zika virus we must first need to understand how the communities that inhabit this territory, and who are generating hundreds of digital contents, function.

To understand the territory of Zika or of any epidemic, we require a digital listening of risks in order to identify conversation nodes, the propagation of outbreaks, the critical subjects and the impact of the authorities' messages. A good listening management on the networks allows communication leaders to provide transparency and set the tone

of the conversation based on the interests of the communities (patients, health professionals, journalists, opinion leaders and citizens in general).

Relationship strategies with key communities. In March 2016, Google's corporate communication director, Florencia Bianco, mentioned that the company had invited various YouTube content creators to generate preventive material against Zika from their own channels. This initiative, which attempts to take advantage of the reach of these well-known network figures in order to enable communities, can be of great help, particularly if it is managed from a strategic point of view that understands the topic of conversation and information needs. The combination of these processes could result in a powerful relationship strategy.

An initiative of digital ambassadors done by Colombia's most popular video bloggers or "vloggers" such as Daniel Patiño (of PaisaVlogs), Juan Pablo Jaramillo, Sebastian Villalobos and other digital influencers, could contribute to the prevention campaign launched by the government. Because the population's health is at stake, this initiative requires planning, training, aligning of messages and supervision.

Brazil's government is introducing new relationship formats and models. For example, they seek to get closer to the affected communities and generate an emotional link through the partnership with celebrities that have a presence on the networks, ranging from actresses to national sport stars as well as doctors that have great credibility, allowing them to sensitize the population with the prevention task to control the virus.

Another important community that should contribute to the conversation about the Zika virus are health organizations and professionals. It is a great opportunity to align efforts with health authorities towards stopping the virus.

Platforms and contents that allow the mobilization of the population. Brazil, the country most affected by the Zika virus, understands the need of generating engaging communication materials to be placed in the digital environment. The government implemented the website zikazero.mec.gov.br, where official up-to-date infor-



Federico Mançuello, the Flamengo football player, invites to prevent zika virus.

mation is published, along with multimedia content, printable downloads and transmedia content on social networks in order to keep the population informed. Just look for the hashtag #zika-zero -already referenced- on Facebook and Twitter to find out how the government leads the conversation.

In order to promote a single message about the control and prevention of epidemics, governments need spaces and contents containing accurate information, segmented by public, with messages that are sincere, simple and true to the facts so they are able to respond to the need for information and conversation by the affected communities. The proximity and transparency of these formats will encourage a relationship between those in charge of managing the communication efforts and the population; that way, the communities can <<observe>> the data collection process, evaluate the risks and make decisions associated to the control of the virus.

A recent example of the excellent use of digital platforms in the case of epidemics, occurred during the outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa. WhatsApp was used by the BBC in the fight against the epidemic. Through a service that only issued three messages a day, more than 19,000 subscribers received key information on their cell phones. They did not need to access a web page or download heavy archives. The information provided through texts, images and audio was simple and direct.

The immediacy of WhatsApp was also used in Spain as an effective communication channel between health journalists who covered the news on Ebola and official sources. Groups were created to immediately inform about the latest news and developments for attacking the virus.

Digital Identity to build trust among the communities. In this new environment in which the individual has more power than ever and where people believe mostly in what they can see, touch and tweet, the digital identities of those leading health organizations are more relevant than ever. It is not only the leaders that play an important role, but all of the involved groups as well.

In Brazil, from President Dilma Rousseff to local health organizations, they manage a single line of messages as well as an operation that seeks to guide the communities towards communication assets and materials.

In the case of Colombia's Minister of Health and Social Protection, Alejandro Gaviria, his digital identity is mostly represented by his Twitter account, which, although it has less followers than the Ministry's account, it is more influential due to the number of retweets that his posts generate. His ability to reach and build trust among the communities is greater than the institution itself.

The health authorities are the first ambassadors of the prevention campaigns that the State has undertaken and, as such, they require powerful channels and appropriate messages, adapted to the new generation's consumption of information. The presence of the leaders is not only based on a Twitter account, but on the need of a powerful structure that supports the Institution's communication strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

The communication process in epidemic cases has radically changed. The users-empowered thanks to the new technologies-obtain information, comment and create waves of opinion. But if these people spread misleading information, they can jeopardize the health situation of an entire country or region. Adopting that communication model is a challenge that health authorities must overcome.

The epidemics of the 21st century present a great opportunity for health authorities that not only lies in taking advantage of the digital environment as an effective tool in the prevention and control of epidemics. Communication management that responds to the expectations and contributes to stop the virus and safeguard the health of thousands of people generates a better reputation for all of the organizations involved.



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