



CHALLENGE 4: CONVEYING CREDIBILITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

HOW TO DEAL WITH MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION
DURING PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To familiarize with the concept of **source credibility** and its **importance for persuasion** during public health emergencies
2. To get acquainted with the **main challenges to communicating credibility** in the information age
3. To learn **possible strategies** that institutions can implement to be persuasive on social media during public health emergencies

SOURCE CREDIBILITY: WHAT IS IT?

- **Source credibility** is broadly defined as «a communicator's **positive characteristics** that **affect** the receiver's **acceptance of a message**»
- Has **three main dimensions**: competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness

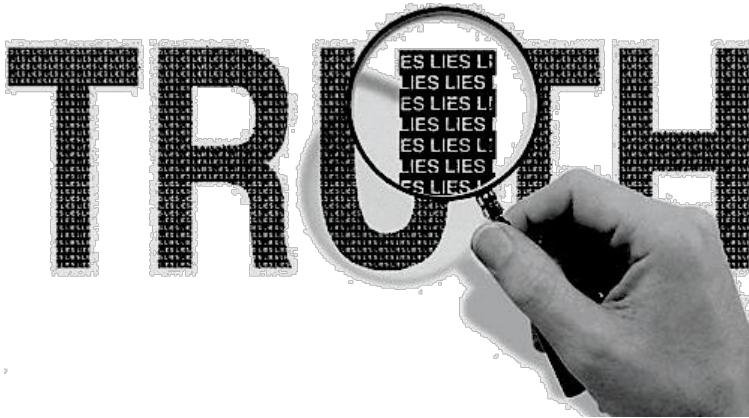
COMPETENCE

«*Knowledge of the truth*»

Is qualified? Has extensive experience in a field?



TRUSTWORTHINESS



«Predisposition towards telling the truth»

Does s/he have conflicts of interest or a hidden agenda?

ATTRACTIVENESS



«Easily and immediately visible characteristics»

Does s/he presents well?
Does s/he know how to speak in public?

SOURCE CREDIBILITY: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION?

Since the first empirical studies by Hovland et al. at Yale in the '40s, source credibility has been consistently proven as a **major determinant of our evaluation of information.**

Classical example:

- J. Robert Oppenheimer vs. Pravda on atomic submarines

Greater persuasion comes with more credible sources!



SOURCE CREDIBILITY: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION?

- Studies have also shown that often a positive evaluation on **one of the dimensions** is enough to determine an overall positive evaluation of the source (the so-called *Halo effect*)
- Sources that present themselves well might be perceived as competent, no matter their qualifications (i.e., knowledge of the truth) and their intentions (i.e., willingness to tell the truth)
- **Great potential for manipulation!**



THREE MAIN CHALLENGES TO COMMUNICATING CREDIBILITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

1. The death of traditional expertise
2. The illusion of knowledge
3. The changing nature of credibility in social media



THE DEATH OF TRADITIONAL EXPERTISE

Generalized distrust towards experts and science

Main reasons:

- Expertise is very specific and takes time (vs. knowledge available online)
- Experts and scientists have for a long time only communicated among themselves through scientific publications and conferences (and still do!)
- Being an expert is perceived as being “far from reality”



THE ILLUSION OF KNOWLEDGE

- **“Expert citizen”** = someone who, without competence or qualifications, thinks to know everything about a subject and feels entitled to express his/her point of view publicly
- Intrinsic in the concept of democracy, but **exacerbated by the amount of available information** and by the **possibility to reach broad audiences** via social media
- Those who perceive themselves as experts will **not accept or challenge everything that does not fit their view**



THE CHANGING NATURE OF CREDIBILITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media have **profoundly changed how we communicate credibility** and, therefore, how the public evaluates it.

COMPETENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- Not a requisite for expression anymore
- Lack of space to convey expertise
- **When evaluating credibility, users put more emphasis on other aspects** (e.g., technological ability) which are not related to the truth



TRUSTWORTHINESS ON SOCIAL MEDIA



- Similarly to what happens with competence, it is **difficult to judge trustworthiness by reading a few words or by looking at a picture**
- **New ways to convey trustworthiness**, e.g., communicating familiarity and accessibility by showing excerpts or real life and appearing as “someone like me”

ATTRACTIVENESS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- Is a **central aspect** in social media
- Availability of countless **tools to convey attractiveness** (use of filters, interactive features, likes, etc.)
- Is the **main dimension on which we rely for the evaluation of the credibility of a source**, although attractiveness has **no link with the truth**

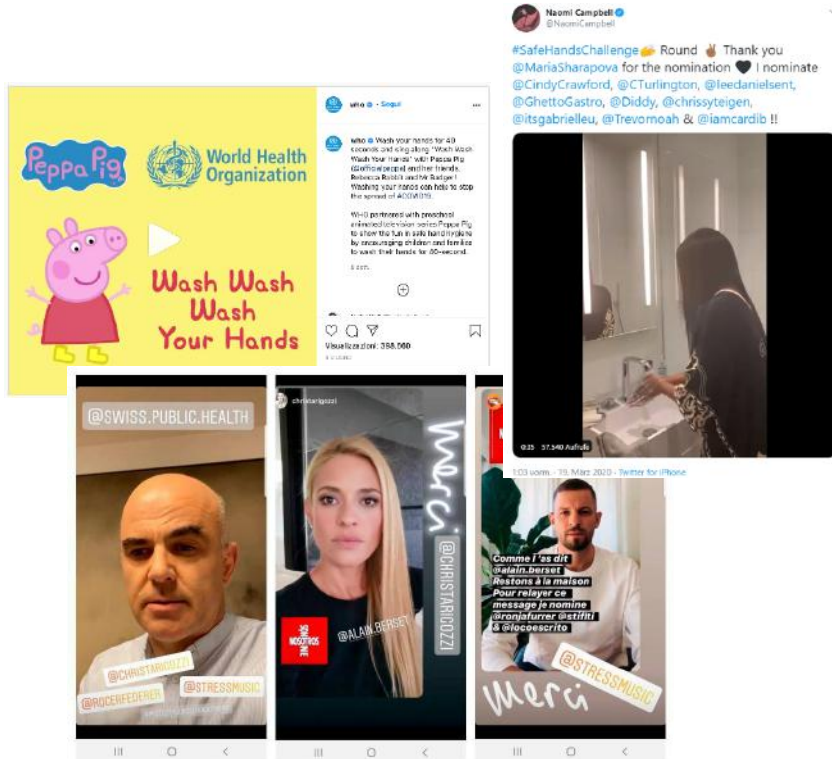


WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS?

- If institutions want to be heard, they must be present in the online world and **play according to the rules of the social media world**
- This means a **change of paradigm** in traditional institutional communication: *from a one-way communication with the population (information provision) to a two way-communication (interaction)*
- You need to engage with people, to attract and retain their attention, otherwise they will listen to someone else (who has less to say!)



1. HOW TO EXPLOIT THE “HALO EFFECT” (POPULARITY = COMPETENCE)



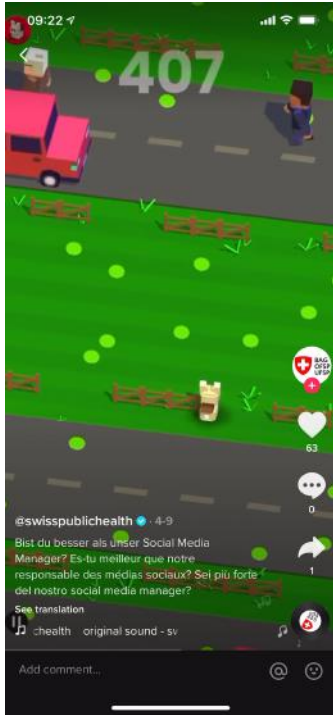
- Engaging with influencers to **increase the reach** of messaging
- Ideally, **institutions should invest in spokespersons who become influencers** (globally, for international institutions; locally, for local institutions)

2. HOW TO BE TECH-SAVVY (<COMPETENCE)



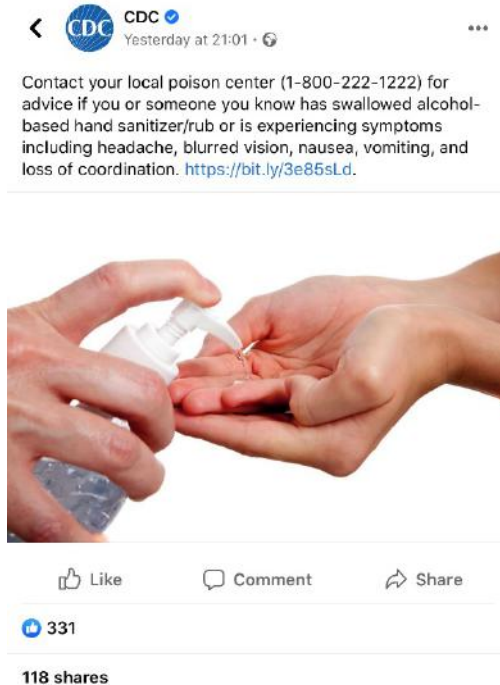
- Be **consistent with the channel**. In general, prefer pictures with short comment and videos.
- **Use creatively the opportunities offered by social media:** hashtags, stories, polls, games, filters

3. HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THE AUDIENCE (<TRUSTWORTHINESS)



- Create online opportunities for **engagement**
- Solicit **user-generated content** (e.g. ask a question or run quick survey, ask to submit photos related to a health campaign)

4. HOW TO JUST BE THERE (<TRUSTWORTHINESS)



- Be **timely** in posting content
- If health institutions do not communicate, **people are likely to become anxious and will get information from other sources**
- **Respond** timely to questions and comments

TAKE HOME MESSAGE/1

- A main goal of institutional communication during public health emergencies is to **persuade people to act in a certain way** (e.g., practicing social distancing, wearing a mask)
- **Conveying credibility is a central part** of delivering a persuasive message

TAKE HOME MESSAGE/2

- Following the recent changes in the information landscape, **being an expert is not enough to be considered credible anymore** (or could even be detrimental)
- **Studying and taking inspiration from the communication strategies of social media influencers can help institutions in building credibility and delivering persuasive messages.**

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