

Communication for Coproduction: The Informational Role of Nonprofit Organizations

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Governments and citizens need to coproduce a better response to the coronavirus pandemic. However, the unavailability and inaccessibility of essential information, the information asymmetry between governments and citizens, the misinformation, and the information overload all influence coproduction adversely. NPOs worldwide are making useful information available and accessible to governments and citizens, serving as information intermediaries to reduce the degree of information asymmetry, increasing information credibility to lighten the information overload, and clarifying misinformation. All these informational roles of NPOs are valuable to governments and citizens for fighting against the coronavirus and coproducing better health outcomes.

Keywords: coproduction, nonprofit organization, informational role, information preference, information credibility

INTRODUCTION

To fight against the coronavirus and coproduce better health outcomes, governments and citizens need to work together. The WHO (2020) advises the public to wash hands often, wear masks, maintain social distance (six feet), and stay at home if necessary to fight the coronavirus more effectively. All these useful methods to contain the spread of the coronavirus cannot be effective without citizen coproduction (Li, 2020b).

The coronavirus pandemic is not only a virus pandemic but also an infodemic (Chen & Liu, 2020). Ideally, if the information is available, accessible, and symmetric between the public and governments, and the public trusts governments, citizens would comply with governments' policies to coproduce better responses to fighting the coronavirus. However, in reality, essential information is not always available and accessible; governments and individuals cannot make optimal decisions to fight the coronavirus. Information asymmetry also exists between citizens and governments. Governments do not always know the citizens' different information preferences and needs. Therefore, governments cannot design an

optimal communication strategy to satisfy citizens' heterogeneous information needs. Ineffective communication could influence the coproduction of better public health outcomes adversely (Li, 2020a; Palumbo, 2016). The information asymmetry issue further lowers the already low public trust in government (Alon-Barkat, 2020; Frank & Salkever, 1994). The declining public trust in government, therefore, worsens the fight against the coronavirus (Fukuyama, 2020).

How can essential information on effectively responding to the coronavirus be made available and accessible? How can governments effectively communicate with citizens, regain their trust, and motivate them to coproduce better responses to win the war against the coronavirus? Governments themselves alone may not be the answer. Table 1 summarizes various levels of information credibility and trust across different sectors. In general, government disease control agencies retain authoritative virus information, which has a high level of credibility. However, distrust in governments worldwide limits the use of such authoritative information. The private sector cannot help increase the levels of information credibility and trust because of the public perception

of businesses' profit-maximizing nature. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are perceived as credible and trustworthy because of their non-distribution of profits constraints and social missions, which are not in the line of maximizing profits (Hansmann, 1980).

Table 1. Information Credibility and Trust across Sectors

	Credibility	Trust
Government	Authoritative	Low
Business	Uncertain	Low
Nonprofit	Credible	High
Government + Nonprofit	Credible authoritative	High

Therefore, NPOs can help provide essential information and help governments to improve communication efficiency, public trust, and coproduction performance by serving as credible information intermediaries (Li, 2020b; Tsai et al., 2020).

INCREASING INFORMATION AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

To fight the coronavirus pandemic, governments and citizens also need to fight the infodemic together (Chen & Liu, 2020). The unavailability and inaccessibility of essential information, the information asymmetry between governments and citizens, the misinformation, and the information overload all worsen the infodemic. In addition to their various roles in improving the performance of health crisis management, such as providing funds and services, the informational role of NPOs can help fight the infodemic and thus fight the coronavirus pandemic more effectively.

First, NPOs can make essential useful information available and accessible to the public. When essential information about the coronavirus is not available and accessible, both governments and citizens cannot make deliberative decisions to contain the spread of the virus and save lives. For example, at the early stage of the coronavirus pandemic, even the very necessary information about confirmed cases and death rates

that are essential to government policy-making and individual decisions was not available. It was difficult for any country to decide to close its borders. It was also difficult for countries to collaborate to fight the coronavirus. Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020), a nonprofit research center, is among the first to provide such essential information and made it easy to access. It created an interactive map showing real-time coronavirus information around the world (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d.). Its data soon became one of the most widely used data sources and are still helping organizations and individuals to make decisions on containing and fighting the coronavirus (Dong et al., 2020).

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) in the United States serves as another example of providing essential information to fight the coronavirus. NVOAD is an organization that coordinates a group of NPOs to better respond to natural disasters and other public crises (NVOAD, n.d.-b). During the coronavirus pandemic, NPOs in the U.S. need to know where their charitable resources can be most effectively used. For example, they need to know where to find information on how many sets of personal protective equipment (PPE) should be donated to which hospital. NVOAD serves as an information platform that makes the demand and supply information available and accessible and coordinates resources to be sent to the front line. To fight the coronavirus, NVOAD also used the Disaster Agency Response Technology (DART) to gather and distribute information about volunteers to help match them with the places that need them most (NVOAD, n.d.-a).

Another example is the "Global MediXchange for Combating COVID-19 (GMCC)", a collective initiative launched by the Mayun Foundation, Alibaba Foundation, and The First Affiliated Hospital of College of Medicine, Zhejiang University in China (GMCC, 2020). The GMSS publishes various COVID-19 related manuals (gmcc.alibabadoctor.com/prevention-manual) in eight different languages. For example, the GMCC published and distributed the Handbook of COVID-19 Prevention and Treatment

to 219 countries and districts to help fight the virus (GMCC, 2020). GMCC significantly increases the availability and accessibility of critical information about COVID-19 prevention and treatment.

SERVING AS INFORMATION INTERMEDIARIES

Second, NPOs as information intermediaries can reduce the degree of information asymmetry between governments and citizens. Making information symmetric can enhance public trust, which can improve the performance of citizens' coproducing responses to comply with governments' coronavirus control policies (Li, 2020b). If citizens' information preferences are homogeneous, governments can use an optimal one-size-fits-all communication strategy to satisfy the information needs. However, citizens' information preferences and needs vary. Some individuals need more information than others to make their decisions. Therefore, to fight the coronavirus infodemic, governments need to understand different citizens' heterogeneous information preferences. Based on the theory of System 1 and System 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2013; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), Li (2020a) categorized individuals with different information preferences into Type I and Type II citizens. System 1 uses fast intuitive thinking based on a limited amount of information, even though more information is available and accessible. System 2 requires more information to make a slow and rational decision. Type I citizens mainly use System 1 to make decisions and seek less information that can be consumed with lower material and cognitive costs, while Type II citizens primarily use System 2 when making decisions and seeking more information that requires higher material and cognitive costs (Li, 2017, 2020a, 2020b).

Governments need to strategically communicate with different types of citizens to satisfy their information needs. In general, the availability of essential information will satisfy Type II individuals' needs because they will actively acquire and consume additional information bearing their own costs. Even if governments did not provide such information,

Type II citizens might still be able to find and consume information on the coronavirus from scientific outlets and then take precautions, such as voluntary self-quarantine. However, governments should provide and communicate essential information to Type I citizens to nudge their compliance with policies for fighting the coronavirus. Essential information is sufficient for the Type I individuals because they do not need additional information to make their policy compliance decisions.

However, Type I citizens are less likely to comply with the policies if they distrust governments. When the public distrusts governments, NPOs or voluntary groups can serve as credible information intermediaries that could further help governments to increase Type I citizens' compliance rates. For example, NVOAD uses its existing network to help distribute credible information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). NVOAD also uses CDC guidelines to train volunteers who further disseminate credible information to the communities they serve (NVOAD, n.d.-b).

In China, volunteers established a group called Anti-2019-nCoV (A2N) to help the Chinese government to distribute credible information for fighting the coronavirus (A2N, 2020; Woo, 2020). A2N introduces itself as a voluntary group that is dedicated to communicating real and valuable information. It aims at helping people to understand the real situations of the coronavirus and thus helping them to better fight the virus (A2N, 2020). Nonprofit organizations in Zhejiang Province, China, also served as information intermediaries to increase information credibility and build mutual trust between residents and local governments. For example, community-based organizations in Zhejiang collected and tracked COVID-19 information through health QR codes and connected and mobilized residents to trace the sources of COVID-19 cases and contain the spread of the virus (Cheng et al., 2020). Cheng and colleagues (2020) also suggested that community-based organizations work together with governments to prevent and control COVID-19.

INCREASING INFORMATION CREDIBILITY

NPOs also play an important role in increasing information credibility that can lighten the information overload and clarify misinformation. The coronavirus pandemic is also a pandemic of misinformation. Fake news, conspiracy theories, rumors, and misinformation about the virus are overwhelming in the midst of battling this global health emergency. Health authorities have warned that information overload can make it more difficult for people to obtain credible sources and reliable guidance about the coronavirus pandemic (WHO, 2020). In the U.S., a Pew Research Center survey conducted in the second week of March 2020 found that 48 percent of Americans reported seeing at least some made-up news about the coronavirus outbreak. Three months later, the Pew Research Center found that many people are seeing exaggeration and conspiracy theories. Thirty-eight percent of Americans believed that the coronavirus outbreak had been exaggerated. 71% of Americans reported that they had heard at least “a little” about a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus outbreak was intentionally planned by powerful people, including 19% who had heard “a lot” about this (Mitchell et al., 2020).

In responding to the information overload and misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. National Council of Nonprofits (2020) announced, “first and foremost, we all need to keep open lines of communications with our boards, employees, volunteers, donors, and the people we serve. As part of that, we should continue to share information and resources from credible sources, such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.” The First Draft, a nonprofit that works to empower people with the knowledge, understanding, and tools needed to build resilience against harmful, false, and misleading information, is providing an online resource hub, dedicated training and crisis simulations for reporters covering COVID-19 all over the globe (First Draft, 2020). First Draft is also using its extensive CrossCheck, which is a network dedicated to building a sustainable model of newsroom collaboration, to help newsrooms respond

quickly and address escalating content that is causing confusion and harm. First Draft is empowering journalists to respond to the evolving challenges of digital journalism by working together during the pandemic because accurate and reliable information is needed more than ever before (Mantzaris, 2020).

Misinformation worsens when a nation’s leader delivers confusing information. For example, after suggesting on April 24, 2020, that injecting disinfectants into human bodies would kill the coronavirus, the U.S. President Donald Trump claimed three days later that he was being sarcastic and is not taking responsibility for people ingesting disinfectants (O’Connor, 2020). Such irresponsibility from a leader is dangerous in a pandemic. President Trump further weakens the vulnerable trust in governments by criticizing the CDC and other administration agencies (Acemoglu, 2020; Fukuyama, 2020). The conflict between President Trump and the Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer leaves Trump supporters to discredit “the woman in Michigan” by opposing the Governor’s “stay-at-home” order and ignoring the information about social distancing and wearing masks (Gabriel & Martin, 2020). The political polarization is not helping restore the public’s trust (Fukuyama, 2020) and brings additional challenges to governments in coproducing with citizens to fight the coronavirus (Li, 2020b). However, voluntary associations can help clarify misinformation. For example, the Chinese Association of West Michigan (CAWM) provides reliable information from credible sources such as the CDC to help clarify misinformation and persuade the Chinese communities to comply with the policies in Michigan. The CAWM also utilizes its bilingual advantage to translate information written in English into Chinese to benefit those facing language barriers. In addition, its volunteers also translate information from credible sources written in Chinese to English to clarify misinformation (CAWM, 2020). By increasing information credibility, NPOs such as the First Draft and the CAWM helped and are continuing to help curb the spread of misinformation in tandem with the outbreak of the coronavirus.

CONCLUSION

To fight the coronavirus pandemic, which is also an infodemic, governments and citizens need to coproduce a better response together. However, the unavailability and inaccessibility of essential information, the information asymmetry between governments and citizens, the misinformation, and the information overload all influence the coproduction adversely. The declining public trust in governments worsens the fight against the coronavirus. NPOs all over the world are making useful information available and accessible to both the governmental and individual decision-makers, serving as information intermediaries to reduce the degree of information asymmetry, increasing information credibility to lighten the information overload, and to clarify misinformation. All these informational roles of NPOs are valuable to governments and citizens for fighting against the coronavirus and coproducing better health outcomes.

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