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# Leadership Crisis Communication During the Pandemic of 2020

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*COVID-19 provided a unique opportunity to examine leadership communication strategies during an extended crisis. The authors used political discourse analysis to review the crisis communication of President Donald Trump and seven U.S. governors using the U.S. Center for Disease Control crisis communication framework. The findings demonstrated that U.S. governors typically used effective communication strategies during their press briefings. President Trump often did not use effective crisis communication. The governors' crisis communication styles were consistent with the CDC's guidelines. The governors' communication styles demonstrate that they are "in the arena," while President Trump has attempted to remove himself from the arena.*

*Keywords: crisis communications, COVID-19, pandemic leadership, political leadership, political discourse analysis*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On December 31, 2019, the Chinese government in Wuhan, China reported dozens of cases of a novel virus (Taylor, 2020). Within weeks, the virus spread to countries outside mainland China, including the United States (Taylor, 2020). By the month of March, 2020, leadership across the United States began to understand the severity of this dangerous and unprecedented crisis. On March 12, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom clamped down on gatherings of people of 250 or more within the state (Rosenhall & Ibarra, 2020), and only days following decided to take decisive action and issue a stay-at-home order across the state, even as the legality of the decision hung over his head (Litman, 2020). "This is a moment where we need some straight talk," Newsom told reporters at the time. "As individuals and as a community, we need to do more to meet this moment" (Sanchez, Simon, & Selva, 2020, para. 38).

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the world into a recession. For 2020 it will be worse than the global financial crisis. The economic damage is mounting across all countries, tracking the sharp rise in new infections and containment measures put in place by governments. (Bluedorn, Gopinath, & Sandri, 2020, para. 1)

The final weeks of March 2020 ended up being the bloodiest days on Wall Street in history to date and saw jobless claims reach historic levels. On March 16, 2020 the Dow Jones Industrial Average tanked 2,997

points, or 12.9%. Two days later, on March 18, 2020, the Dow Jones shed an additional 6.3% or 1,338 points (Domm, 2020). The final two weeks in March and the first week of April saw jobless claims reach over 16 million – for reference, the worst month during the Great Recession saw jobless claims reach 800,000 in a month.

In response, the United States federal government reacted to the crisis under the leadership of President Donald Trump. Congress passed the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act, the coronavirus economic relief package on Friday, March 27, with the intent to stabilize the markets and hold the economy above water during the pandemic crisis.

A crisis is defined as a threat to an entity's well-being that allows for little time to respond as the entity under attack also faces the lack of appropriate resources specific to the situation at hand (Kramer & Tyler, 1995). During the onset of these kinds of events, people look to their leaders to guide them through trying times in attempts to understand and recover (Lacerda, 2019). Crisis leadership is a more strategic approach than crisis management, in that crisis leadership looks to provide understanding and meaning throughout the crisis, as opposed to crisis management which is more simply a method of disseminating information (Lacerda, 2019).

Crisis leadership is also considered actions taken by a leader to bring immediate change in the behavior, beliefs, and outcomes of people (Keller, 2000). Kielkowski (2013) added that leadership communication with the team is essential for crisis leadership and response. The purpose of this paper is to use the pandemic and economic crisis experienced during the Pandemic Recession of 2020 to address the topic of crisis leadership communication through the speeches of government leaders. Using a qualitative approach, the author will explore the leaders' communication during the pandemic and economic crisis to further understand the concept of crisis leadership.

Pandemics threaten the well-being of society as the pandemic spreads through communities as an invisible adversary claiming the lives of many (Gallagher, 2020). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has been no different, as citizens and scientists work to flatten the curve of the number of cases across the globe (Gallagher, 2020). Parker (2020) stated that leadership has been, and will continue to be, critical in the face of this pandemic. Additionally, they claim successful leaders during this crisis have been able to adapt to the situation and execute changes in real time, while effectively communicating updates as they unfold (Parker et.al, 2020).

The purpose of the current research is to identify crisis and pandemic leadership themes from COVID-19 press briefings of U.S. presidential and gubernatorial leaders, driven by the following research questions:

***RQ1. What themes did President Trump use in his COVID-19 press briefings?***

***RQ2. What themes did the sample of Governors use in their COVID-19 press briefings?***

***RQ3. Do RQ1 and RQ2 themes map to the literature on crisis and pandemic leadership and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framework for successful communication during a crisis (CDC, 2007, p. 12)?***

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework answers why a research topic matters and why the methods and research design are applicable to explore the topic (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The conceptual framework for the current study is as follows:

Firstly, a pandemic represents an existential crisis for humans (CDC, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic is reported to have come from the transfer of the coronavirus from a bat to a human in Wuhan, China (Taylor, 2020).

Additionally, this study argues that effective relief of the global effects of pandemics rests on the crisis leadership and communication used by political leaders to calm the public, define the threats, explain the response, and keep the public updated.

This study also understands that U.S. political leadership is sufficiently divided in that public health norms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have become politicized. The current U.S. election cycle further exacerbates this point. The politicization of the pandemic response endangers the public and has cost lives.

Since effective leadership is essential during crisis; it is crucial to examine how our political leaders are leading the pandemic response. One effective way to study pandemic response is through rhetorical, discourse, or narrative analysis (Wesley, 2014, p. 137).

Because COVID-19 has transpired during a U.S. presidential election cycle, contextual factors appear to play a large part in how some politicians have shaped their response to the pandemic (e.g., masks are mandatory, masks are not mandatory). Thus, political discourse analysis is appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of presidential and gubernatorial leadership during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

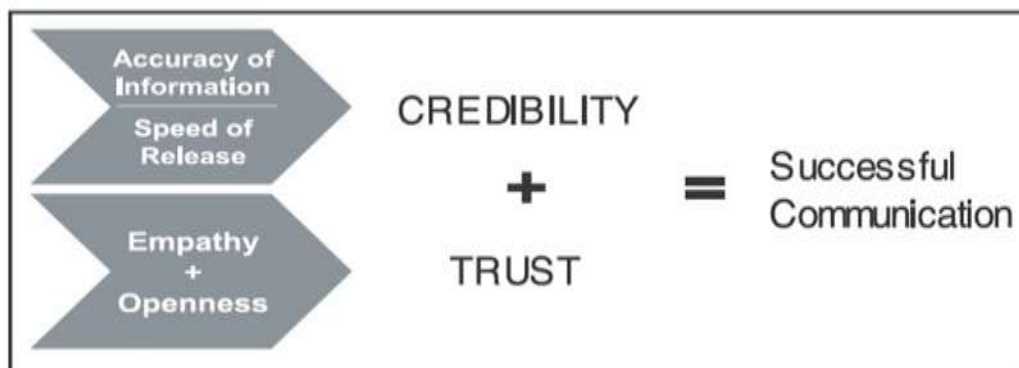
Political Discourse Analysis was used to analyze 66 transcripts from the press briefings of President Trump and seven governors to establish the extent to which the research subjects used successful crisis leadership and communication as mapped to the CDC (2007) theoretical framework for successful communication.

### Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framework for successful communication during a crisis (CDC, 2007, p. 12). This framework by the CDC contends that understanding how individuals both absorb and act on information during a crisis is vital crisis survival. Touching on research conducted by Reynolds (2002), the CDC notes how crisis situations can cause “flight or fight” responses in individuals, which makes the communication process that much more important and delicate to maneuver.

In order to make sure this communication process is handled effectively, the CDC framework (that can be viewed in figure 1.1) outlines several key elements based off the research of Mitroff (2004), Reynolds (2006), and Seeger (2006), which stress that “successful communication, especially during crisis, requires the following five steps: execute a solid communication plan, be the first source of information, express empathy early, show competence and expertise, and remain honest and open” (CDC, 2007, p. 12).

**FIGURE 1**  
**CDC FRAMEWORK - ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION**



CDC, 2007, P. 12

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A crisis is a “breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimating the pre-existing socio-political order” (t’ Hart as cited in Boin et al., 2010). Boin et al. (2010) suggested that leaders must recognize the emerging threat, start to mitigate the problem, and then deal with the consequences. Leaders must make

important decisions that will necessarily affect lives, and they must communicate their decisions to a frightened and vulnerable public. Destabilizing events increasingly bring about intense politicization of the events and the responses (Boin et al., 2010).

As indicated, crisis leadership refers to actions taken by a leader to bring immediate change in the behavior, beliefs, and outcomes of people (Keller, 2000). Given the critical role that government leaders perform during an organizational crisis, and certainly the importance of events such as natural disasters and terrorist attacks and, in this instance, a global economic collapse, it is important to analyze leadership communication to major crises to further the understanding of crisis leadership.

According to Haddon, Laughlin, and McNally (2015), the act of leading through crisis is determined by the context or situation, where adjustments may need to be made. As the environment we live and work in evolves, the context of where and how leadership is exercised is essential in moving forward (Haddon, Laughlin, & McNally, 2015). Context is made up of external and internal factors that have an effect on the organization, including processes ways of working and risks the environment poses on the system (Geier, 2016). Leadership communication and overall style becomes important in extreme contexts where the well-being of employees may be at stake (Geier, 2016).

In addition, leadership crisis communication is a vital piece of public health and emergency response (CDC, 2007). Successful crisis communication has the ability to prevent further illness and death, maintain calm, and create confidence in the response (CDC, 2007, p. 1). In order for leaders to avoid confusion early in a crisis, “accurate, relevant, simple, fast, and consistent messages are best” (CDC, 2007, p. 5).

### **Crisis Leadership**

Leaders in all fields have been tasked with responding to various crises in a positive way for their followers. Over time, the focus has shifted from just managing the crisis effects to strategically leading through those difficult periods (Thach, 2012). One important aspect of crisis leadership is outlined by the tactical communication, which includes identifying these scenarios, create plans for how to respond, making sure the information is accurate and factual, and relaying this information to stakeholders as quickly as possible (Thach, 2012). With the increase in technology and the ability to send out and receive information quicker, the focus of how to react to a crisis has changed for leaders. Crisis leadership places a large emphasis on the leader’s followers that helps build trust and credibility that is sustainable (Thach, 2012). Additionally, crisis leadership calls for a response to the human needs and emotions of their followers as crises can affect morale, trust in relationships, productivity, and stress (Klann, 2003). An effective leader in crisis will analyze the situation and look for opportunities that will benefit their followers in an open and empathetic way (Klann, 2003).

During the 2007-2008 global financial crisis and economic recession, leaders faced a significant shock to the economy. The change in economic and political landscape as well as new technology placed additional emphasis on leadership communication during crisis (deClercy & Ferguson, 2016). One key finding of positive leadership communication during crisis that came out of research centered on the Great Recession of 2008 was that leaders that shared timely updates based on facts while at the same time maintaining a level of credibility that reinforced trust were able to make it through the crisis successfully (Lacerda, 2019; Walker et al., 2016).

In a study completed by Lacerda (2019), leaders of organizations were interviewed to compare their observations of their organizations’ CEOs’ behavior during the economic recession of 2008. Results showed effective leaders act as “blocking agents” against negative economic impacts on their followers that consist of lack of trust in the organization and fear of the unknown future (Lacerda, 2019). To successfully aid in this distrust, successful leaders worked to foster a collaborative environment while maintaining accurate communication that could be circulated quickly (Lacerda, 2019; Walker et al., 2016). Additionally, in order to maintain or increase trust, leaders worked to build strong relationships with their team to block out the impacts of distrust from the economic landscape (Walker et al., 2016). Results also showed successful leaders solicited ideas and opinions from their team and relied on the organizations’ member to find solutions for problems and meet their collective goals in a supportive manner (Lacerda, 2019).

In a similar study completed by Haddon et al. (2015), results confirmed that the needs of followers shift in times of crisis and behaviors deemed successful can vary. Results from this particular study found that followers do expect quick communication while the leader maintains a sense of community, credibility, and trust (Haddon, et al., 2015). Regardless of organization industry and culture, communication and preparedness were seen as essential in crisis situations (Karalekas, 2018).

Kielkowski (2013) contended crisis leadership communication should include accurate communication between leaders and followers, peers, and external and internal stakeholders. In addition, Boin and t' Hart (2003) argued the public has several expectations of leaders during a crisis and what they communicate. Those communication expectations include being prepared, warning others of the crisis, providing direction, showing empathy and striving to learn and implement lessons. These characteristics can serve a leader well and help create a post-crisis prosperous event (Boin & Hart, 2003). Also important to the role of the leader during a crisis is the notion that the leader needs to communicate that they grasp that a crisis exists and severity of it. In other words, leaders should acknowledge that the worst-case scenario has materialized and that action and engaging instantly in the crisis is critical (Thach, 2012; t' Hart, Tindell & Brown, 2009, Wooten & James, 2008).

Additionally, Walker et al (2016) concluded in their study of crisis leadership during the Great Recession of 2008, that

The role of open and honest communication is important to not only understanding the complex nature of a crisis, but helping the leader form a mindset to navigate the organization through the crisis and, in some way, frame the experience of the crisis. (p. 11)

Similarly, Linton and Farrell (2009), in a study of crisis leadership within an adult intensive care unit, mentioned the importance of not only communication, but the relationships ICU leaders had fostered beforehand that helped make the communication more trustworthy. Similarly, Cantrell (2016) argued for the vitality of communication during crisis, noticing the importance of creating positive relationships with stakeholders beforehand will help strengthen connections and response once crisis hits. Cantrell also mentioned the important aspect of listening during the communication process, providing as much information and being as transparent as possible, as well as making sure to curtail any false information so that stakeholders understand that the information they are being given is accurate.

Veil and Husted (2012) studied best practices needed in crisis communication and came up with the following conclusions. First, is the important element of a quick and decisive response (p. 136). Second, establishing a communication network both internally and externally is vital (p. 137). Third, a leader must accept the uncertainty of the situation (p. 137). Fourth, leaders must form partnerships and relationships with other entities to help with the crisis response (p. 138). Fifth, leaders need to listen to the public concerns and fears in order to foster empathy (p. 138). Sixth, leaders must communicate the truth of the situation with openness and candor (p. 138). Seventh, meeting the needs of the media and being available and transparent with the media (p. 139). Eighth, during the crisis, leaders must communicate with compassion (p. 139). Ninth, leaders must provide suggestions for self-efficacy and self-care to the public (p. 139). And finally, leaders during a crisis must continuously communicate updates to the public (p. 139).

In a similar study by Ucelli (2002), it was argued that leadership must be front and center during a crisis and that responding quickly and communicating decisive action is vital. Ucelli also concluded that communication during a crisis must direct and truthful, and not speculative and misleading. Two other findings from Ucelli's work were the importance of the leadership team to speak with one voice, and what a leader communicates must be demonstrated by their own actions.

## **Method**

Political discourse analysis was applied to discover the range of "values, norms, ideologies, and other contextual factors" (p. 137) transmitted through presidential and gubernatorial press briefings. This form of discourse analysis was appropriate to evaluate whether the press briefings were consistent with expected communication styles based on the crisis leadership framework.

## **Research Protocol**

COVID-19 official press briefing transcripts were downloaded from Rev.com and press briefing or official remarks from Whitehouse.gov for each research subject covering the period from February 27, 2020, to July 27, 2020. President Trump's transcripts included his remarks on COVID-19 from Coronavirus taskforce meetings, remarks in transit (such as after arriving on Marine 1), and public remarks to various constituents (e.g., Republican members of Congress, automobile industry executives, health insurers). This process resulted in 65 raw transcripts for the eight subjects. The transcripts ranged in number from four for Governor Ducey to 14 for President Trump.

Transcripts were downloaded using an NVivo feature to capture a PDF version of the website and imported the transcripts into NVivo 12, coding each document to a case for each subject. Text that was not spoken by the subject was deselected. At the end of this step, there were eight cases that contained only the references from each document that represented each of the subjects' spoken words.

NVivo's automatic features were used to identify themes, sentiment, and word frequency for all cases, collectively and for individual subjects. Theme identification and sentiment analysis at the paragraph level was conducted, instead of the sentence level, because it is sometimes difficult to discern the context of a single sentence. Context is much easier to understand when considering a paragraph. For the word frequency query, we included stem words (e.g., talk, talking, talked) with at least four characters, deselecting the name and location (e.g., Governor, Andrew, Cuomo, York).

## **Addressing Researcher Bias**

Political discourse analysis can suffer from bias. To address the potential for bias in this study, we (a) incorporated manual and automatic coding to ascertain themes, (b) manually coded items against a theoretical framework grounded in the crisis communication literature, and (c) triangulated and normalized our coding to promote consistency. It was assumed that NVivo programmers did not introduce bias into the software program through their coding practices that affected the research findings.

## **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework answers why a research topic matters and why the methods and research design are appropriate to explore the topic (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The conceptual framework for the current study is as follows:

1. A pandemic, by definition, is an existential crisis for humans.
2. Effective mitigation of a pandemic rests on the crisis leadership and communication used by political leaders to calm the public, define the threats, explain the response, and keep the public updated.
3. U.S. political leadership is sufficiently fragmented that public health norms have become politicized. The U.S. election cycle further exacerbates issues. The politicization of the pandemic response endangers the public and has cost lives.
4. Effective leadership is essential; thus, it is crucial to examine how politicians lead the pandemic response.
5. Because COVID-19 occurred during the U.S. presidential election cycle, contextual factors appear to disproportionately affect the political response to the pandemic (e.g., masks are mandatory, masks are not mandatory).
6. Political scholars typically use rhetorical, discourse, or narrative analysis to analyze political speeches.
7. Thus, political discourse analysis was appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of presidential and gubernatorial leadership during the COVID-19 global pandemic.
8. We analyzed 65 transcripts from the press briefings and public remarks of President Trump and seven governors to determine the extent to which the research subjects used effective crisis leadership and communication.

## RESULTS

### Auto-Coded Themes

Automatic feature of NVivo was used to create nodes for common themes across all subjects (see Tables 1-3) and, separately, for each subject (see Table 4). The feature uses an internal heuristic to discover common words and their associations. For example, across all subjects, the theme *testing* was coded 183 times (references) in 51 transcripts. NVivo identified the top 15 themes listed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**TOP 15 COMMON THEMES CODED ACROSS ALL SUBJECTS**

Themes	Transcripts	References
testing	51	183
health	49	165
state	48	124
hospital	39	112
system	46	100
public	34	98
work	41	93
school	29	92
today	44	92
capacity	42	83
good	41	83
home	43	82
community	36	82
care	35	79
rate	41	79

Every node also contains subnodes, which provide additional context to the node. For example, the node *rate* contained 34 subnodes, with the most prominent being *positivity rate*, *hospitalization rate*, *mortality rate*, *infection rate*, and *death rate*. NVivo's automatic subnode categorization does not take subtleties into account. For example, *positivity rate* and *infection rate* may mean the same thing, and *mortality rate* and *death rate* are likely the same. Table 2 shows subnodes (sub-themes) with at least ten references.

**TABLE 2**  
**SUB-THEMES WITH AT LEAST TEN REFERENCES**

Name	Files	References
little bit	29	45
social distancing	25	39
nursing home	15	25
hospital system	11	14
executive order	11	14
positivity rate	8	14
wearing masks	10	13



Name	Files	References
home order	9	13
physical distancing	9	13
hospital capacity	11	12
task force	9	12
protective equipment	8	12

Table 3 shows the number of automatically coded references for each node, by case. Table 3 shows the most prevalent themes across all subjects, with the number of occurrences for each subject. For example, NVivo coded the theme health 31 times in Governor DeWine’s four transcripts, compared with only four times in President Trump’s 14 transcripts. NVivo coded the health theme a total of 123 times across the 65 transcripts.

**TABLE 3  
CROSSTABULATION OF THE NUMBER OF TIMES COMMON THEMES OCCURRED FOR  
EACH SUBJECT**

Theme	Cuomo	DeSantis	DeWine	Ducey	Ivey	Newsom	Trump	Whitmer	Total
health	14	12	31	14	16	17	4	15	123
testing	14	28	18	6	8	9	20	7	110
state	14	7	15	7	6	20	10	16	95
hospital	18	16	15	10	8	18	3	4	92
system	11	13	13	5	1	26	6	14	89
today	11	12	16	11	6	13	4	9	82
home	7	9	16	5	10	10	10	6	73
good	6	21	9	6	11	6	9	3	71
work	3	14	13	9	6	16	3	7	71

### Manually Coded Themes

The following process was used to code the transcripts manually. Four to nine transcripts were selected from each subject, attempting to get the first two press briefings and then a briefing around the middle of each month through July if available. President Trump stopped giving coronavirus briefings on April 27, 2020, resuming on May 22, and then again on July 21. Therefore, a combination of press briefings and transcripts from President Trump’s meetings with government, industry, and other officials were used. Governors Ducey gave four coronavirus press conferences during the period of the study.

Each transcript was read twice from start to finish to develop context and understanding of the interactions. Words, phrases, sentences, or passages were then assigned to the predetermined nodes from the theoretical framework, starting with the earliest and working through the latest. Table 5 shows the number of times each theme for each subject was coded.

**TABLE 5**  
**NUMBER OF THEMES MANUALLY CODED TO THE CDC CRISIS LEADERSHIP**  
**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EACH SUBJECT**

	Cuomo	DeSantis	DeWine	Ducey	Ivey	Newsom	Trump	Whitmer
Builds Credibility								
Information								
Accurate	15	9	10	8	4	21	2	15
Inaccurate	0	16	2	2	0	0	61	0
Speed of Release								
Fast	8	4	5	4	3	5	6	7
Slow	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Develops Trust								
Empathy								
+Empathy	8	7	6	2	1	10	2	10
-Empathy	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0
Openness								
+Openness	32	12	24	7	9	32	0	24
-Openness	0	2	0	9	0	0	12	0

*Builds Credibility*

**Accurate Information.** Passages were coded where the subject referenced facts or detailed statistics or described a credible selection process as *Accurate Information*. Claims or unverifiable information were excluded. There were 84 references coded at *Accurate Information* from 40 transcripts. For example, the following is a representative passage from Governor Newsom from March 19, 2020, that demonstrated *Accurate Information* that would help to build credibility:

*Newsom:* Now, why is it important that I advance this new order? It's for the following reasons. We've been doing pandemic planning in the State of California for over a decade. Now we're moving into application implementation, and that includes the latest technology and data collection. The ability to work with artificial intelligence to match that data up, to really look at trend lines before they become headlines. What we're seeing, not only on the ground, but we're seeing through the data, is this spread continues at a pace that we had anticipated in a number of our models. Let me be precise, it's a number that we have been using for the purposes of guiding our resource delivery and guiding our decision making. (Newsom, 2020)

**Inaccurate Information.** Passages were coded that contained errors, lies, deception, gaslighting, or misleading information as *Inaccurate Information*. Eighty-one passages from twenty-four transcripts were coded as *Inaccurate Information*. For example, the following passage from President Trump recorded during the Coronavirus Task Force press briefing on April 23, 2020, demonstrated *Inaccurate Information* that damaged the president's credibility:

*Trump:* Thank you very much. So I asked Bill a question that probably some of you are thinking of, if you're totally into that world, which I find to be very interesting. So, supposing we hit the body with a tremendous — whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light — and I think you said that that hasn't been checked, but you're going to test it. And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way, and I think you said you're going to test that too. It sounds interesting.

*Acting Undersecretary Bryan:* We'll get to the right folks who could.

*Trump:* Right. And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? Because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs. So it would be interesting to check that. So, that, you're going to have to use medical doctors with. But it sounds — it sounds interesting to me. (Trump, 2020b)

### *Speed of Release*

***Fast Release.*** Information that provided a preview of impending or recently changed policy was coded to *Fast Release*. Many of the governors provided daily Coronavirus briefings with daily updates to statistics. Thus, entire transcripts could have been coded under fast release (we did not). Instead, passages that referred to specific or discrete events were coded to *Fast Release*. Forty-two passages from twenty-nine files were coded as *Fast Release*. For example, the following is a representative passage of building credibility through fast release from Governor Cuomo from March 3, 2020:

*Cuomo:* Any bar or restaurant closes at 8:00 tonight. However, there is a silver lining for these establishments, because we're also very aware of the economic consequences for these establishments. So the state liquor authority is going to change its rules. They'll have guidance up by 5:00 PM this evening that will allow bars, restaurants, distilleries to sell their products off-premises. (Cuomo, 2020)

***Slow Release.*** Because of the daily Coronavirus briefings, only one instance mapped to the *Slow Release* of information. On June 30, 2020, Governor Ivey had the following interchange with a reporter:

*Reporter:* Governor, it's been about a month since we last heard from you speak to the people of Alabama in this setting. Since then, as you noted, the cases have increased, thousands are still without work, and the death toll has risen. Why has it been so long since the people have heard from you?

*Ivey:* Well, this disease goes in stages, and so once you make an order, you need to at least wait at least two weeks to see the effect and the outcome and see where you are at the end of that time. We just had our stay-at-home order, and this one lasted longer than most. And it ends Friday, so we extended it to July 31.

*Reporter:* Do you think if the people heard more from you in these you think they'd adhere to the warnings and the cautions that you're offering?

*Ivey:* I hope everybody's listening, and I hope everybody's following them. I'm proud to see more face masks in this room today than I've seen on previous days. That's a good sign. (Ivey, 2020)

### *Building Trust*

***+Empathy.*** Passages that demonstrated a genuine understanding of the suffering from the people's perspective were coded as *+Empathy*. Forty-two passages from thirty-two transcripts were coded as *+Empathy*. For example, the following is a representative passage from Governor Whitmer from March 23, 2020, that demonstrated the *+Empathy* that would help to build credibility:

*Whitmer:* I know this is hard, I know this is going to be disruptive and it's certainly going to be hard on our economy as well, but our action will save lives. I'm sorry, in the long run doing this now shortens the time our economy suffers. When we look back at this, we've

got to be able to say we did everything we could. On a personal note, I know that the lack of control can be disorienting, so I urge you to focus on what you can control. This crisis can take a toll on our mental health. Check in with family, call your loved ones, go for a walk, read those books on your list or even go outside and put your holiday lights back up. We must keep our wits about us. That means all of us. Be sensitive to how our kids are feeling. They are not immune from the stress that is going on in this environment. Check in with them and help them understand, and give them the reassurance they need. (Whitmer, 2020)

**-Empathy.** Passages that demonstrated a lack of care for how the public might be feeling about the crisis were coded under *-Empathy*. We coded four passages from four transcripts at *-Empathy*. For example, President Trump's response to a reporter on April 23, 2020, demonstrated a lack of empathy that might have diminished public trust:

*Trump:* But now we have a country that we had to close because of this. And, frankly, if we didn't close it, we would have lost millions of people possibly, but certainly we would have lost a million people. You take the high number and cut it in half, cut it in half again. But whether it would have been 600, 700, 800, you take a look at the travesty that there is. You take a look at this horrible, horrible scene of hospitals with bodies in black body bags, right? Multiply that times 10, 15, or even 20, because that would have happened. (Trump, 2020b)

### *Openness*

**+Openness.** Passages that demonstrated transparency and straight talk were coded to *+Openness*. One hundred and thirty nine passages from forty-seven transcripts were coded as *+Openness*. For example, the following passage from Governor Cuomo dated March 16, 2020, demonstrated *+Openness* of information that would help to build credibility:

*Cuomo:* This preempts what any mayor anywhere or county executive anywhere in the state set. The same point I make about the national government is even more true on the state level. You can't close bars in Manhattan but leave them open in Nassau because now everybody drives to Nassau for the bar. You have to have one set of rules that are uniform and that's why in an emergency situation, there's actually a protocol that makes sense. Local governments can set rules, the state can override those rules, and the federal government can override state rules because it's not a situation where you can allow all these disparate policies. They are actually counter not only to common sense, but they're counter to public safety and they're counter to public health. (Cuomo, 2020)

**-Openness.** Passages that demonstrated opaqueness or a lack of transparency were coded to *-Openness*. Twenty four passages from ten transcripts were coded as *-Openness*. For example, the following is a representative passage from President Trump from May 11, 2020, that demonstrated a lack of transparency that would diminish trust in the president's words:

*Trump:* Well, the models haven't been exactly accurate. These are models done by a lot of think tanks, a lot of universities. If you look at some of the models, they have been way off. Few of the models have been accurate.

But as far as the models are concerned, if you go by the model, we were going to lose 2.2 million people. And because we took — we mitigated — we did things that were very tough for our country to do, frankly. We had to turn off our whole magnificent economy. We had to turn down the whole country. We're at the lowest of all of the models.

I mean, if you look at, I guess, 120- — 100 to 120 thousand people would be at the low side. And we're at — there's nothing low. Look, nothing low. One is too many people.

And I say it all the time: One person to lose for this is too many people. It's a disgrace what happened. (Trump, 2020a)

## **DISCUSSION**

The research examined three questions:

***RQ1.** What themes did President Trump use in his COVID-19 press briefings?*

***RQ2.** What themes did the sample of Governors use in their COVID-19 press briefings?*

***RQ3.** Did RQ1 and RQ2 themes map to the literature on crisis and pandemic leadership and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framework for successful communication during a crisis (CDC, 2007, p. 12)?*

### **Automatic Coding**

President Trump's Coronavirus press briefings and remarks were very different from the other subjects. NVivo coded President Trump's most common phrases at the nodes testing, tremendous, health, state, and thing. Drilling in on these words capture revealed that President Trump attempts to promote an optimistic outlook in which he: a) downplays the importance of testing; b) promotes his and others' actions (e.g., tremendous success, tremendous progress, tremendous energy); c) refers to health experts; d) displaces responsibility for addressing the coronavirus to the states; and, e) uses the word thing to capture complex ideas.

NVivo's automatic coding demonstrated that the governors' were more focused on mitigation strategies and systems to combat the coronavirus (e.g., executive orders, hospitals, essential workers, protective equipment, budgets) and reporting the statistics for daily cases, hospitalization rates, positivity rates, and deaths.

The automatic coding differences illustrate that President Trump implemented a communication strategy of downplaying the threat, deflecting blame to China, passing responsibility for mitigation to the states, and promoting his administration's response to the virus. Thus, President Trump's communication did not reflect crisis communication best practices. The governors provided situation updates and disseminated policy. The Governors appeared to use appropriate communication styles based on the automatic coding

### **Manual Coding**

Each subject's briefings were coded to the crisis communication model from the literature. Each of the governors created credibility by quickly sharing accurate information. Each developed trust by demonstrating empathy for their constituents and communicating with openness and transparency. The exceptions were that Governor DeSantis presented inaccurate information 16 times, and Governor Ducey demonstrated a lack of openness nine times. President Trump presented inaccurate information 61 times and demonstrated a lack of openness 12 times. Therefore, these findings were consistent with the results of the automatic coding. Generally, the governors used effective crisis communication techniques that may have built credibility and trust, while President Trump's communication was more likely to destroy credibility and trust.

### **Limitations**

The small sample and potential researcher bias limit the current research. The researchers examined select press briefings of seven governors due to the time required to download, clean, code, and record results from each briefing. The research would benefit by expanding the sample to include all governors' press briefings. We chose governors to create representation across different demographics (e.g., political party, sex, state population). We also chose to code a subset of briefings across the study's time horizon

(i.e., eight briefings out of the 150 available daily briefings were coded). Decisions to limit the briefings may have affected the results because excluded briefings might have provided different results.

Reduction in bias was attempted by comparing automatic and manual coding and using multiple researchers to code and review the results. These techniques can be effective; however, personal beliefs and mental models may have affected the choice of research subjects and the coding results.

### Implications

The current research demonstrated the difference in presidential and gubernatorial crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump's crisis communication style was not consistent with the CDC's recommendations for crisis communication. President Trump's political aspirations and his relative inexperience in crisis communication may have contributed to his ineffective style. Furthermore, it is not clear if President Trump's lack of empathy demonstrates that he has no empathy or is putting on a show based on his political persona.

The governors' crisis communication styles were consistent with the CDC's guidelines. The noted exceptions in Governor Desantis' inaccuracies and Governor Ducey's lack of openness may have been due to their political allegiances to the president. The governors' communication styles demonstrate that they are "in the arena," while President Trump has attempted to remove himself from the arena. The governors were required to allocate critical resources, direct logistics, and communicate with their constituents. They could not avoid those responsibilities. On the other hand, President Trump may have calculated that appearing to be hands-on during the crisis would have disadvantaged him politically.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to study the effectiveness of crisis communication by United States federal and state leaders using the CDC crisis communication framework. Political discourse analysis was performed on press briefings of President Donald Trump and seven U.S. governors. The research found that U.S. governors demonstrated crisis communication strategies that aligned with the CDC guidelines in most circumstances, while President Trump's communication strategies often did not align with the guidelines.

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