

HASA **2022** CONFERENCE

RESILIENCE THROUGH
COLLABORATION

A close-up photograph of two hands shaking. The hand on the left is wearing a light blue nitrile glove, and the hand on the right is wearing a white nitrile glove. The background is a blurred white surface, possibly a lab coat or a clean environment. The lighting is soft and even.

What worked and what didn't? Pandemic communication lessons for the future

Mia Malan, Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism

What is Bhekisisa?

1. Founded in **2013** as the **M&G's health desk**
2. Became an **independent organisation** in 2019
3. We're an NPO and **donor-funded**
4. We publish stories on our website and syndicate copy to **four mainstream SA media houses**
5. We have a **multimedia team** and will launch our **TV programme**, Health Beat, this Thursday online
6. We do paid-for **moderation** of panel discussions, run our own webinars, **Twitter Spaces** and **media trainings**

HASA 2022
CONFERENCE



Top stories between 5 March 2020 and 30 July 2022

Overseas trips & a midnight curfew: This is life in lockdown level 1

By Bhekisisa Team - September 22, 2020



You can hang out with your friends for two hours longer but night clubs are still off limits. Here's what else is new.

Newsletter

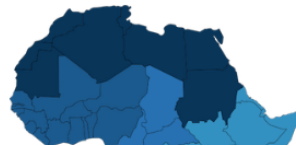
Enter your e-mail to get our weekly newsletter

Subscribe

We tell a good story with the science to back it. Support great journalism today.

DONATE

Choose a Region



Back to school — again. Can parents decide to keep their children out of school?

By Gopotang Makou - August 7, 2020



Learning continues under lockdown level 3 as the South African school year resumes, again. These department of basic education directives tell you what to expect for the rest of the school year.

Newsletter

Enter your e-mail to get our weekly newsletter

Subscribe

We tell a good story with the science to back it. Support great journalism today.

DONATE

Choose a Region



1. 92,000 (overseas trips, Aug 2020); 70,000 (back to school, Sep 2020) 2. Type of story: Resources

What do the two top Bhekisisa stories tell us?

1. During the pandemic people were desperate for information that had a **direct effect** on their lives (how to keep themselves safe, lockdown rules)
2. People struggled to make sense of the gazetted lockdown regulations because the rules were written in language they **didn't understand**
3. The government, at that stage, **didn't issue easy-to-understand translations** of lockdown rules or vaccine science
4. This opened the gap for the media to largely fulfil that role. But it was complex: **most journalists/editors had no science or health policy background**, so they struggled to make sense of the information themselves

Most important pandemic communication lesson

Accurate information during a pandemic is pretty useless if people can't understand it

If the sources that journalists without science or policy backgrounds get their information from convey that information with jargon and industry language, they either get it wrong or they report it with the jargon which results in the public not making sense of the information (e.g. Saphra press releases)

What's the role of communication during a pandemic?

1. To provide people with **easy-to-understand information** that they can use to protect themselves, access treatment, and follow pandemic safety rules
2. To hold the government **accountable** for the creation and implementation of evidence-based policies

What are the characteristics of effective pandemic communication?

1. It's **easy to understand and accurate**
2. It's **consistent** (consistency is the currency of trust)
3. It's **transparent**
4. It's **proactive** or responds to crises quickly
5. It's delivered during a **window period** that people are most receptive for a particular stream of information
6. It's **flexible** and delivered in the **format** that a particular group of people can **access and understand**

How did the government fare with communication?

Good stuff:

- COVID figures were **released daily**; there was a **dashboard with vaccination figures**
- **Salim Abdool Karim's television address** was easy to understand and scientists were used to communicate science (instead of politicians who people don't trust)
- There were weekly **Friday morning briefings** for the media, family meetings, WhatsApp groups
- Health department officials were relatively readily **available for media interviews** (live radio/TV crossings, individuals such as Nicholas Crisp went out of their way to accommodate interviews)
- Later in the pandemic **GCIS translated lockdown rules** into easy-to-understand language on social media (COVIDCommsSA also helped)

How did the government fare with communication?

Bad stuff:

- Communication was **inconsistent** and very **few press releases** were issued: surveys show many people didn't know **where to get vaccinated** or didn't understand how vaccines work (Gauteng Health)
- Communication was often **not transparent**: The **MAC advisories** were only released after the court ordered the health department to release the documents; **Digital Vibes**
- Communication was **rarely proactive**: AstraZeneca vaccines; **vaccine deliveries**, rarely responded to **social media** questions, **boosters** (**social listening group** information rarely used to design targeted comms)
- Easy-to-understand vaccine information (demand creation) reached people **too late**: the window period had passed

There wasn't enough communication in **vernacular languages**; information was often **not updated**
(vaccine sites)

How did the private health sector fare with communication?

Good stuff:

- **Discovery Health** started to communicate about vaccines very early on; organised **media site visits**; communication was consistent; **Omicron** (reflective of a well-staffed communication department)
- **Mediclinic and other hospital groups** released weekly hospitalisation and death figures
- **Dischem** consistently issued press releases about sites, **reacted to social media questions**

Bad stuff:

- **JnJ** couldn't have been less transparent when SA didn't get their JnJ vaccines on time
- **Aspen** released confusing information about when JnJ vaccines would arrive

What are the consequences of bad communication?

1. **Low uptake** of lifesaving interventions such as vaccines or quarantine facilities
2. **Uptake of treatment without any scientific proof** that it works (Ivermectin, Interferon-alfa-2B)
3. **Low adherence to non-pharmaceutical measures** such as mask wearing and social distancing
4. **Mistrust** of the government, which opens up huge gaps for a public display of **politics** (scientists disagreeing with each other on TV about lockdown, MAC politics, Chinese and Russian vaccines)
5. **Incorrect media reports** and **confused health workers** (immunocompromised and booster shots) – some media ran op-eds authored by Ivermectin-supporting doctors; scientists competing for media attention)
6. **The emergence of chaos: anxiety**, resistance and defiance

How do we fix this?

Xhora Mouth Administrative Area, Eastern Cape:

- Jan 2022: Close to 80% of people 12+ fully vaccinated
- Used **existing structures** and relationships and **trusted sources** to communicate (traditional leaders, community radio station, **CHWs**, puppet with megaphone performing from scripts)
- Made it very **easy to get vaccinated** (Health Point, transported people to Madwaleni Hospital)
- **Bulungula Incubator** played a significant part in this



Lessons I learned about pandemic communication as a journalist

1. **Accurate information** is pretty **useless if people don't understand it** – the most valuable service you can offer is to make science and policy easy to understand (protection, anxiety, accountability)
2. You're going to get nowhere without **partnerships** during a pandemic (media outlets, scientists, health department)
3. If you try to cover **everything**, you'll end up reporting on **nothing**
4. **Repurpose** stories – in every possible format (print, video, audio)
5. **Consistency** is the key to **trust**
6. The traditional definition of a story has **changed** – adapt or die (Twitter threads, TikTok)
7. **Branding** is a thing during pandemics – ride the wave
8. When people take note of your stories, gear up for **attacks**

HASA **2022** CONFERENCE

RESILIENCE THROUGH
COLLABORATION

THANK YOU!

Email: miam@bhekisisa.org