Impact of Social Sciences Blog: The public places more trust in scientists and politicians, when they appear individually, rather than together, to communicate COVID-19 public health measures

Page 1 of 4

The public places more trust in scientists and politicians, when they appear individually, rather than together, to communicate COVID-19 public health measures

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians have been accompanied by scientists when communicating the need for anti-contagion measures. In this post, **Mike Farjam** *discusses the results of a joint Italian/Swedish experiment into public attitudes towards this form of expert communication.*

The experiment conducted in Lombardy, Italy – one of the world's hardest hit regions, during the first wave of the pandemic – shows anti-contagion measures are supported less when presented side-by-side by politicians and scientists, whereas support is higher whenever the same measures are recommended by scientists alone.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lombardy region in Northern Italy was one of the hardest hit areas worldwide. During the outbreak, the Italian government applied restrictive measures to contain the pandemic in Lombardy and in the whole country, including a 2-month long hard lockdown with school closures. One of the first government initiatives was to set up a task force of public health scientific experts whose mission was to give advice on public policies. Scientific experts were often featured in the public media to explain anti-pandemic measures, while public decision-makers used the opinion of experts to legitimate the imposed measures. Many countries followed a similar pattern, where scientists stood side-by-side politicians in press conferences presenting anti-contagion measures. Could this public liaison between scientists and policy-makers affect the public support for the proposed measures?

> Could this public liaison between scientists and policy-makers affect the public support for the proposed measures?

To answer this question, a team of Italian sociologists (Federico Bianchi and Flaminio Squazzoni from BEHAVE, University of Milan), Giangiacomo Bravo (from Linnaeus University, Sweden) and I partnered to run an experiment in Lombardy, Northern Italy at the end of May 2020, that is, right before the government began to ease the strict lock-down measures previously in place in the country: in other words, it was a behavioural experiment *in the making,* when large-scale cooperation and public trust were crucial for the success of anti-contagion measures.
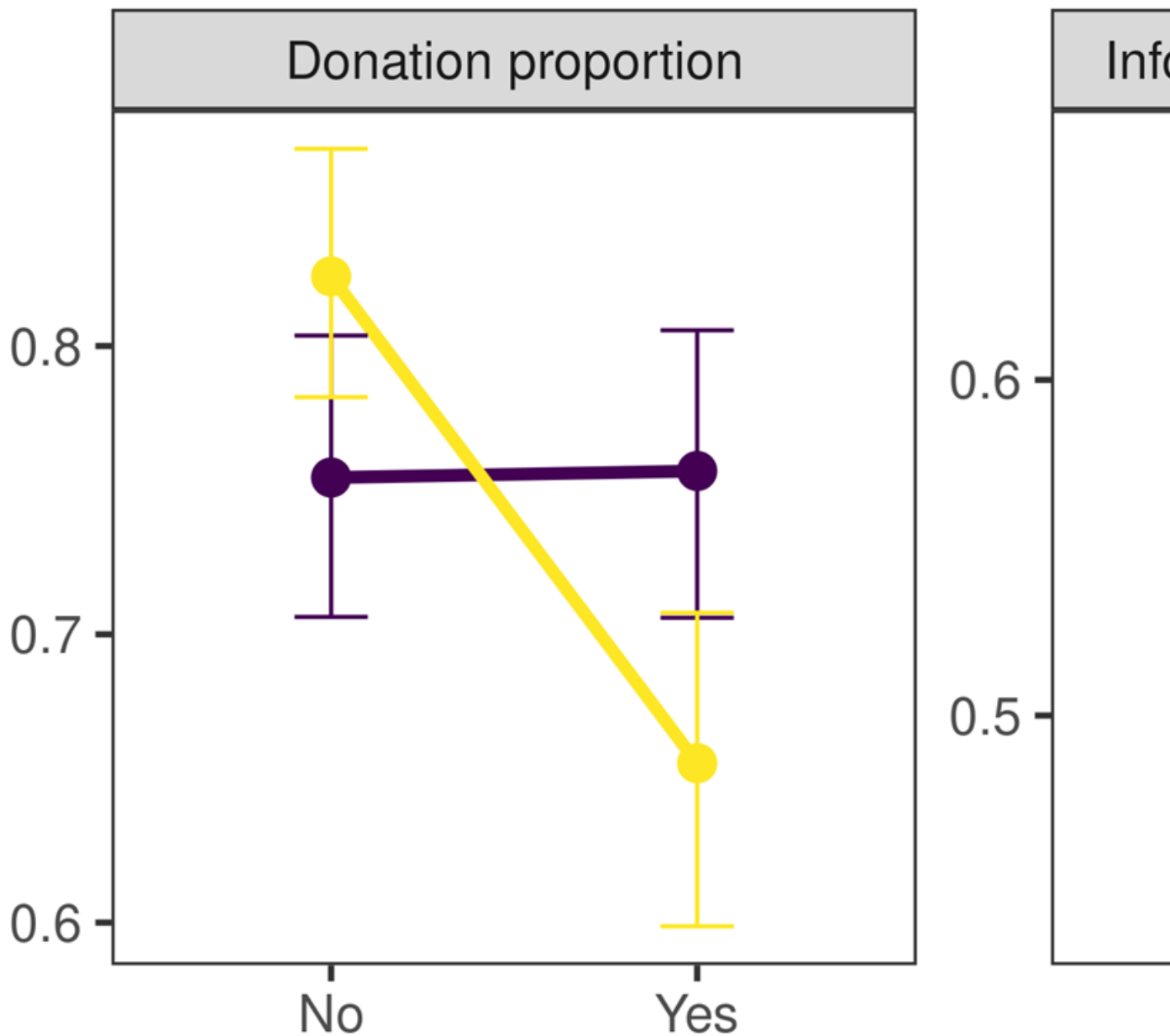
The experiment

1,131 participants from all over Lombardy were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In the baseline condition, we presented a text with information on how COVID spreads and general advice on anti-contagion restrictions of personal mobility and privacy. In the other three conditions, we specified who made these recommendations by manipulating three different sources of information, i.e., either *scientists*, *politicians*, or *scientists and politicians together*.

We took three measurements to see how the source of recommendations affected COVID-related behaviour. First, participants were asked whether they wanted additional information regarding the statements, as to measure COVID-related information-seeking behaviour. Second, participants were confronted with statements regarding suggested interventions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and were asked to rate them on an agreement–disagreement scale. These interventions were those debated in the public media at the time as possible counter-measures in the case of norm violation and for social control, including the use of a contact-tracing smartphone app. Last, participants received a lottery ticket to win a €50 voucher as a compensation for the time spent with the experiment. Participants could then choose to instead donate the value of the lottery ticket to a NGOs linked to COVID-19. We interpreted a donation decision as a pro-social decision in the context of the pandemic.

What did we learn from the experiment?

Impact of Social Sciences Blog: The public places more trust in scientists and politicians, when they appear individually, rather than together, to communicate COVID-19 public health measures

Page 2 of 4

Our results are summarized in the figure below. For all three measurements, we found that the support of participants was highest whenever scientists were the only source of information. Probably not surprising, considering the weak trust in politicians in Italy, we found that support for policies was low when suggested by politicians. We were surprised to see that donations (as a proxy of pro-social behaviour) were lowest when politicians and scientists *together* were mentioned as the source of information. Our results suggest that having scientists standing next to politicians during the presentation of these measures could be detrimental to public support.

Impact of Social Sciences Blog: The public places more trust in scientists and politicians, when they appear individually, rather than together, to communicate COVID-19 public health measures

Page 3 of 4

Scientis

Mean decisions in treatments with politicians and/or scientific experts as sources of information; Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals.

Impact of Social Sciences Blog: The public places more trust in scientists and politicians, when they appear individually, rather than together, to communicate COVID-19 public health measures

Page 4 of 4

Our experiment cannot answer the question of why this effect occurred, and we only hypothesized that co-responsibility creates confusion in the information signal. Experiments are artificial settings and many more factors affect behaviour in the real world. However, in our case, it was sufficient to add a minor modification in the proposed text to generate different responses from participants. During a time when public support for policy interventions can literally save lives, political institutions must also be extremely concerned about how communication and information signals can influence public perception of decision-making roles and responsibility. This lesson also applies to the vaccination campaign that has been recently launched, when cooperation will be needed on a large scale to ensure maximum coverage. While the importance of trusted source in public communication is key during a pandemic, all questions remain open as to how the pandemic has redefined the public role of scientists and the boundaries between public mandate and expertise.

This post draws on the author's co-authored paper, [Dangerous liaisons: an online experiment on the role of scientific experts and politicians in ensuring public support for anti-COVID measures](#), published in Royal Society Open Science.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

In text table, authors own, featured image credit, '[Boris Johnson Coronavirus Press Conference](#)', Number 10 via Flickr ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)).