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Framing the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparative analysis of Swedish and Danish crisis communication

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Abstract

We explore how Swedish and Danish leaders used framing in crisis communication to mobilize support for their Covid-19 mitigation policies. This research note is grounded in social constructionism and framing theory, analysing how framing in crisis communication is used as a political tool to justify a chosen pandemic strategy. We employ content analysis to compare Swedish and Danish press conferences during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Denmark and Sweden are politically and culturally similar countries; however, in March 2020, they chose radically different strategies to respond to the escalating Covid-19 pandemic. Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to initiate a lockdown, whereas Sweden kept much of society open. Our findings indicate that Swedish and Danish leaders strategically used framing in their communication to convey understanding of the pandemic that supported their respective agendas. Furthermore, the study contributes insight on how framing is used to justify or question the basis of decision-making in crises. We argue that through constructing a sense of urgency and emphasizing the uncertain nature of the crisis, scientific evidence as the appropriate basis of decision-making is challenged, prompting a discussion about the political nature and responsibilities in crisis management.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, crisis communication, framing, social constructionism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented challenges for politicians and leaders as they grappled with limiting the spread of the virus and reducing its consequences (Sobral et al., 2020). A key responsibility of governments during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic was to inform citizens about the new crisis and explain the actions needed to mitigate its consequences (Lindqvist et al., 2020). Crisis communication by political leaders is a vital component of any pandemic strategy to assist citizens in making sense of the crisis and

understand what actions they must take (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Seeger et al., 2008). However, crisis communication may also be used by political leaders to promote certain meanings and understandings of the pandemic, to justify and mobilize support for their chosen pandemic policies (Lindqvist et al., 2020; McLean & Ewart, 2020).

While some scholars have explored the political aspects and implications of crisis communication in health crises, few have specifically studied how framing in crisis communication may be used as a tool to mobilize political support. This research note contributes to the existing literature on crisis communication through investigating how political

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leaders in Denmark and Sweden used framing—the act of selecting and organizing information and cues to influence how others perceive an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993)—in their Covid-19 crisis communication to mobilize support for their respective pandemic strategy. The cases of Denmark and Sweden provide an opportunity to compare how crisis communication was used to justify and mobilize support for two contrasting and controversial pandemic responses in two otherwise politically and culturally similar countries (Bengtsson & Brommesson, 2022).

We investigate the following research questions:

1. How did leaders in Sweden and Denmark use crisis communication to *define* and *diagnose* the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How did leaders in Sweden and Denmark use crisis communication to *justify* their prescribed solution to the Covid-19 pandemic?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Crisis communication

Crisis communication is an essential tool for pandemic management, due to the necessity of collective preventative actions and changed behaviours to reduce virus transmission (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Seeger et al., 2008). Crisis communication in this article refers to the ongoing dissemination of information through the multiple phases of a crisis, including education on risks and the actions that will be taken to respond to the crisis (Seeger et al., 2008). Under high uncertainty and ambiguity, citizens need to be able to understand the crisis, the threat of the virus and how they are expected to respond (Lee & Li, 2021; Sobral et al., 2020; Weible et al., 2020).

Scholars have argued that while there is significant value in studying the effectiveness of crisis communication for pandemic management (Balog-Way & McComas, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Weible et al., 2020), crisis communication is not a neutral tool. Instead, it is a normative and political practice, with value-based political judgements inherently present in political discourse about crises, their consequences, the appropriate solutions needed to mitigate them and judgements of who and what should be protected (Brown, 2020; Bennett & Carney, 2015; Heath & O'Hair, 2008; Seetoh et al., 2012; Zhao, 2020).

2.2 | Social constructionism and framing theory

Social constructionism considers crises, their consequences and their appropriate solutions not to be knowable, objective facts, but instead to be normative interpretations by social actors, such as scientific experts, political leaders or members of the public (Koon et al., 2016; Zhao, 2020). Framing theory explains how communication is used to *define*, *diagnose*, *evaluate* and *prescribe* an issue through the selective use of language and themes (Entman, 1993). Framing is a process in which communicators, such as political leaders or journalists, select

and organize information and cues to influence how others perceive and interpret an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Social constructionism provides a theoretical framework and epistemology to explore political construction of crises, while framing theory provides a framework to analyse how communication is used in the problem definition and evaluation of a crisis.

Some scholars have focused on how framing in crisis communication can be used to promote behaviour change through shaping citizens' interpretation and understanding of the pandemic (Drinkwater et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Sobral et al., 2020). Others have focused on the strategic use of framing by political leaders, and how 'sense-giving' through framing has been used by political leaders to promote their agenda (Koon et al., 2016; Nisbet, 2015; Petridou & Zahariadis, 2021; Sobral et al., 2020; Zhao, 2020). Our study focuses specifically on the strategic use of framing, by analysing how political leaders defined, diagnosed, evaluated and prescribed the crisis and their policies through the selective use of language and themes.

Studies focused on the framing of pandemics can be distinguished in terms of research purpose, either analysing how framing impacts the effectiveness of crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dagnall et al., 2020; Favero & Pedersen, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Newton, 2020; Sobral et al., 2020), or focusing on political and social aspects and implications of framing in crisis communication (Brown, 2020; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Lindqvist et al., 2020; Ogbodo et al., 2020). These studies collectively have highlighted themes used in media and crisis communication during pandemics: empathy and emotions, time-framings, individual and collective responsibility, scientific evidence, uncertainty, vagueness, economic aspects, numbers and statistics and cross-country comparison.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This article examines and compares political leaders' framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden and Denmark through analysing the governments' televised Covid-19 press conferences in the first phase of the pandemic. Content analysis is used to systematically analyse the source material.

We chose Sweden and Denmark for the comparative study of crisis communication as they are considered to be culturally and politically similar, however during the early stages of the pandemic, the countries responded very differently to the emerging crisis (Schneider et al., 2020; see Supporting Information: Appendix A in the supplemental online material for further details on the country contexts and data selection). We focus specifically on the crisis communication during the first phase of the pandemic when knowledge about the crisis was still scarce and the need for social actors to make sense and interpret the crisis was acute (Lindqvist et al., 2020). A detailed list of our data sources can be viewed in Supporting Information: Appendix B.

To answer the research questions, we examine emphasis framing, in which actors accentuate certain themes over others in

communication, to define, diagnose, evaluate and prescribe the pandemic and the appropriate actions needed (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Fischer, 2003; Koon et al., 2016; Schaffner & Sellers, 2009). Content analysis is employed to systematically compare how themes were used by political leaders in Denmark and Sweden, using manual coding and a mix of deductively and inductively generated themes (see Supporting Information: Appendices C and D for further details on our analysis and coding).

It is important to note that although Sweden and Denmark are considered socially, culturally and politically similar, there are significant differences in the organizational structure of government and public authorities. In Denmark, the government and public authorities are closely linked, with individual ministers fully responsible for public authority activities. In Sweden, the public authorities are independent from government ministries, and while they are subordinate to the government, they have significant autonomy in decision-making. The agency structure influenced the involvement of the Public Health Authorities (PHA) during the pandemic. In Sweden, the PHA took a leading role in pandemic management, communication and decision-making. In Denmark, the government was the central decision-maker, with the PHA mainly responsible for providing recommendations to the government and providing general guidelines to the population (Pashakhanlou, 2022; Seing et al., 2021).

The Swedish PHA hosted daily press conferences in parallel to the government press conferences, and these likely influenced the general perception and sense-making of the pandemic, its risks and its consequences.

Yet, this research note is concerned with how framing was used from a political leader perspective to understand how the governments' used crisis communication to ensure political support for the policies implemented since the government is the body that is ultimately responsible and accountable for the pandemic management (Bouder, 2022). We, therefore, made the decision to focus on the communication from government ministers and specifically the Prime Minister, rather than the communication from the PHAs.

4 | FINDINGS

Table 1 compares the existence of themes in Swedish and Danish press conferences using the percentage of all the press conferences coded to each theme. The percentage coverage of each theme was calculated using the chart function in NVivo software.

4.1 | RQ₁: How did political leaders in Sweden and Denmark use crisis communication to define and diagnose the pandemic?

Our coding indicates that both Swedish and Danish political leaders spent a large proportion of the press conferences communicating the

nature of the virus, the risk and threat it posed to society, and the likely consequences of the pandemic.

4.1.1 | Similarities

When communicating the risk magnitude of the pandemic and the virus, both countries repeatedly emphasized the seriousness of the situation and the threat it posed to individuals and society. The leaders also attempted to set expectations, by stating that the situation would become worse before it became better.

"The reason being that Sweden is in a serious situation. The risk of community transmission of the new coronavirus is very high and its effects pose a significant threat to the Swedish public health and to society" (Stefan Löfven, Swedish Prime Minister, March 15, 2020)

Second, leaders from both countries used scientific risk assessments when communicating the threat of the virus to society and its citizens. Third, when defining and diagnosing the pandemic, the main theme present in both countries' communication was the consequences for the health of the population and the health care system, the consequences for the economy, and the impact on everyday life.

4.1.2 | Differences

When discussing the pandemic and its development, Danish leaders repeatedly mentioned uncertainty, such as expressing that the country 'is standing on unknown terrain' (Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister). However, uncertainty regarding the pandemic was only explicitly mentioned once during the Swedish press conferences, when stating that 'the situation is uncertain and may change quickly' (Löfven, 2020).

"If you ask if we know the route or have the map in front of us, then the short answer is a no, we do not, because it is a whole new situation the whole world is in." (Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister, April 14, 2020)

Second, numbers and statistics of the recorded Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths were used by Danish leaders in each press conference, as a way to update the public and emphasize the crisis's rapid development. However, such numbers and statistics were only used on two occasions during the Swedish press conferences. Third, Denmark's leaders consistently used examples from the rest of the world, and especially from Europe and Italy, to emphasize the risk of rapid development and the effect the crisis could have on hospitals and deaths.

Category	Theme	Subtheme	Sweden	Denmark	
Defining and diagnosing			15.9	19.28	
		(Un)Certainty	0.18	1.4	
			Certainty	0.05	0.07
			Uncertainty	0.13	1.33
		Consequences		8	9.58
			Economy	1.04	1.5
			Health and care	1.76	4.33
			Impact on everyday life	5.21	3.75
		International comparison		1.22	1.88
		Knowledge, science and expertise		2.05	0.82
		Statistics		0.53	3.19
		Risk magnitude		4.55	2.41
	Justifying the solution			19.71	26.31
			(Un)Certainty	0	1.94
			Certainty	0	0.65
			Uncertainty	0	1.3
		Protecting		10.74	16.38
			Economy	3.8	6.78
			Health and care	6.14	8.25
			Impact on everyday life	0.8	1.34
		International comparison		0.48	1.87
		Knowledge, science and expertise		4.35	2.09
		Urgency		4.14	4.04
			Act before it's too late	0.79	3.42
			Right action at the right time/preparedness to act	3.35	0.62

Note: The table shows the percentage of the press conferences coded to each category, theme and subtheme for Sweden and Denmark. Only content related to the coding categories is included in the analysis. The colour coding indicates whether the theme featured more in Swedish or Danish press conferences as a percentage of the total coverage.

"Italy has closed down. Hospitals lack respirators and staff. I would like to emphasise: this is not fearmongering propaganda. It is not an imaginatively conceived future scenario. It is the reality in a country that most of us know and have been to on holiday—a country in Europe, in our part of the

world." (Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister, March 11, 2020)

In contrast, Swedish leaders only used national comparisons a few times, such as stating that the Covid-19 virus was spreading everywhere in the world when referring to the difficulties all countries were facing in

TABLE 1 Percentage of the coverage coded to each theme.

acquiring enough personal protective equipment, or by stating that statistics are difficult to compare cross-nationally.

4.2 | RQ₂: How did leaders in Sweden and Denmark use crisis communication to justify their prescribed solution to the pandemic?

Swedish and Danish leaders dedicated a significant proportion of their press conferences to communicating the rationale behind their policies and strategies.

4.2.1 | Similarities

Danish and Swedish leaders emphasized how the policies would protect fundamental parts of society, with the three key themes emerging as 'the economy', 'health and care' and 'impact on everyday life'. Both sets of leaders focused on explaining that the rationale behind their policies was to 'flatten the curve'. Both countries also emphasized the importance of protecting vulnerable groups, defined as elderly people and people with underlying health conditions.

Protecting the economy featured considerably, with leaders communicating how and why certain policies were taken to protect jobs, companies and the national economy. However, in neither country were the health and economic considerations presented as a trade-off. For example:

"All the measures we take, even though they hit hard, we take because it is what we think will make us the strongest, also economically, when we are on the other side of what we are facing right now" (Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister, March 17, 2020)

4.2.2 | Differences

As in the previous section, Danish leaders often explicitly referred to 'uncertainty' when outlining their Covid-19 strategy, such as stating the unprecedented nature of the crisis and explaining that the government would undoubtedly make mistakes when deciding on how to mitigate it. In the Swedish press conferences, the leaders did not explicitly refer to uncertainty in relation to mitigation policies. Instead, the uncertain nature of the crisis was only implicitly mentioned when discussing the rationale for their decisions, by stating the need to continuously follow the new developments of the crisis to ensure effective contingency work.

"I have also at previous occasions asked myself and others if we think that we will make mistakes. The answer is yes. Will I make mistakes? The answer is of course also yes." (Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister, March 17, 2020)

Second, Swedish political leaders repeatedly referred to scientific evidence and the advice from the health authorities when discussing their Covid-19 policies. The advice of the health authorities was often stated as the main reason behind the implementation of a new Covid-19 policy.

"I see it as an example of the responsible expert authority constantly following developments, updating advice and recommendations... Fundamentally, this is how all effective contingency work happens... we take in new information and new assessments and that the government and our authorities act on that basis." (Lena Hallengren, Swedish Minister of Health, March 2, 2020)

In the Danish case, scientific evidence and expertise were not presented as unambiguous facts. Instead, the Danish Prime Minister stated that decisions should be based on 'evidence, to the extent that it exists', indicating limited availability of scientific evidence. The Prime Minister also repeatedly stated that in addition to the recommendations and advice that the government receive from the health authorities, political judgements will need to be made about how quickly and how decisively they must act. There was no discussion of the political aspect of decision-making or the implications of scientific uncertainty during the Swedish press conferences.

Third, Danish leaders emphasized the importance of acting quickly to stop the transmission of the virus—through explanations that waiting or hesitating to act would lead to greater consequences.

"It has to be said in a way so that it cannot be misunderstood—if we do not do everything we can now to reduce and delay the infection, then our healthcare system will not be able to handle the situation." (Heunicke, March 10, 2020)

In contrast, Swedish leaders emphasized that the government was ready to implement 'the right actions at the right time' (Stefan Löfven, Swedish Prime Minister). In this way, the Swedish leaders omit any notion of not acting, or that they are actively avoiding more restrictive and radical policies to reduce virus transmission.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Decision-making under risk and uncertainty: Scientific expertise versus political judgements

In analysing how leaders evaluated and justified the solutions to the pandemic, clear differences emerged in how Swedish and Danish leaders discussed and defined the role of scientific expertise and evidence in the Covid-19 decision-making process. In Swedish communication, information about decision-making often followed or was prefaced with a reference to advice of the Public Health

Authority. In contrast, the Danish Prime Minister emphasized the role of political judgements and responsibilities in decision-making (Jasanoff, 2012). The emphasis of the scientific expertise versus the political nature of decision-making were not merely rhetorical messaging, but reflects the pandemic management strategy in the two countries. In Sweden, the government relied significantly on the Public Health Authority for decision-making and expertise, whereas the Danish government was the central decision-maker and on certain occasions, went against the recommendations of their Public Health Authority (Christensen et al., 2021; Pashakhanlou, 2022).

Yet, the use of strategic framing also served to justify the contrasting approach to decision-making in the two countries. Political actors may use scientific expertise strategically in crisis communication to legitimize their policies, especially in policy areas that are characterized by risk, where scientific experts are relied upon to conduct risk assessments and suggest solutions (Boswell, 2009; Lavazza & Farina, 2020; Weiss, 1979). This argument relates closely to the Swedish approach. However, in policy areas that are inherently uncertain, such as areas of risk and crises, the authority of scientific expertise can be undermined and the role of political judgements augmented (Bertilsson, 1990; Boswell, 2009; Jasanoff, 2005). Danish leaders emphasizing uncertainty and referring to limited availability of scientific evidence allowed them to justify the role of political judgements in decision-making (Baer & Jasanoff, 2012; Lavazza & Farina, 2020; Risbey, 2008). In the Swedish crisis communication, the leaders only implicitly acknowledged the uncertain nature of the crisis, which reinforced, rather than challenged, the notion that decision-making should be made by experts based on scientific evidence.

The comparison of the Swedish and Danish crisis communication provides important insight into how the 'uncertain' nature of a crisis can be constructed by actors through communication, and used strategically to justify the perceived legitimacy of certain policies and policymakers.

5.2 | 'Urgency' and its implications for decision-making

Another key difference in the Swedish and Danish crisis communication was the way that a sense of 'urgency' was constructed through the leaders' diagnosis of the pandemic, and in turn how this urgency frame was used to justify mitigation strategies. Danish leaders constructed the perceived urgency of the crisis through explicitly referring to how quickly the situation was worsening. Furthermore, Danish leaders consistently discussed the disastrous development of the pandemic in other European countries. Using the urgency frame, the Danish leaders were able to justify their implementation of severe mitigation policies at a relatively early stage.

In contrast, Swedish leaders rarely referred to the rapid development of the crisis, they did not make use of statistics or numbers to highlight how the crisis was developing and did not discuss the development of the pandemic in other countries. The

omission of the urgency frame from the definition and diagnosis of the pandemic was reflected in how they justified their policies, with the overall argument being that the right policies were to be implemented when they were needed.

Urgency as a discursively constructed frame has been unexplored in pandemic literature. However, the urgency frame has been discussed by scholars studying climate change discourse and in other policy debates (Baer & Risbey, 2009; Crist, 2007; Grundmann & Krishnamurthy, 2010; Risbey, 2008; Weingart et al., 2000; van Wijk & Fischendler, 2017). Van Wijk and Fischendler (2017), in their study of urgency discourse in mega-projects, found that actors strategically use the urgency frame as a rhetorical mechanism to mobilize support for certain policies and to circumvent normal decision-making processes. Furthermore, Weingart et al. (2000) found that through invoking urgency in climate change discourse, leaders were prompted to act rapidly, rather than arguing that there was a need for more scientific evidence and research.

6 | CONCLUSION

The comparison of two countries that used very different approaches in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic provides insight into how the leaders discursively constructed and invoked particular frames in their crisis communication that reflected the leaders' agendas and Covid-19 mitigation approaches.

This research provides new insight into how framing is used in crisis communication when the crisis is characterized by a high level of risk and uncertainty. Danish leaders emphasized the importance of political judgement and responsibility, whereas Swedish leaders referred to decisions made on the advice of scientific expertise. Uncertainty and urgency frames emerged as particularly salient. These topics have been explored in existing literature on crises, risk and controversy, however, few studies focusing on crisis communication in pandemics have explored the themes of uncertainty and urgency in depth.

This research raises important questions about how political accountability is communicated in crises. Such communication poses fundamental questions about the balance between scientific expertise and political judgement, and while this is beyond the scope of this study, future research could explore how this balancing act has been communicated to the public by leaders during Covid-19. Although many variables influence eventual public reaction to government communication and government decisions, data from March 2021 revealed Danes as more likely than Swedes to believe their government actions had protected health and jobs during the pandemic (YouGov, 2021). Nevertheless, both Swedish and Danish health authorities showed some weakness in terms of public trust, at least in comparison to their Norwegian counterparts (Ihlen et al., 2022).

While this study has focused on the construction and use of framing, further research is needed to understand the effect of framing techniques on citizen understanding of the pandemic, and the popularity of the communicated policies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data sources are publicly available on the Internet. The data sources are enumerated in detail in the Supplemental Online Material.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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