Beating the virus: An examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 Pandemic
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Abstract:	The Covid-19 pandemic has severely tested the leadership and communication abilities of political leaders globally. Guiding an effective response to the global pandemic has required leaders to demonstrate not only effective planning and coordination skills, but the ability to communicate clear consistent messages in an empathetic manner as well. In New Zealand the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was recorded on 28th February and over the course of March and April 2020, 1,132 further cases of Covid-19 were confirmed and 19 deaths – a much lower transmission rate than most industrialised nations (WHO 2020). On 27th April 2020, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, announced that they had won the battle against community transmission of Covid-19 (Anderson 2020). This paper analyses the speeches and public statements (n= 40) made by Prime Minister Ardern in March and April 2020 through the lens of crisis leadership and crisis communication. In particular, it looks at the use of different mediums (Parliamentary statements, Daily Briefings, Facebook live Broadcasts and Podcasts) as mechanisms for engaging in narrative and dialogue with the public. The paper underscores the importance of communication in crisis management and looks at how positive and consistent messaging inspires confidence and social solidarity.

Beating the virus: An examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Beating the virus: An examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely tested the leadership and communication abilities of political leaders globally. Guiding an effective response to the global pandemic has required leaders to demonstrate not only effective planning and coordination skills, but the ability to communicate clear consistent messages in an empathetic manner as well. In New Zealand the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was recorded on February 28 and over the course of March and April 2020, 1,132 further cases of Covid-19 were confirmed and 19 deaths – a much lower transmission rate than most industrialised nations (WHO 2020). On April 27, 2020, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that they had won the battle against community transmission of Covid-19 (Anderson 2020). In the course of the Covid-19 pandemic the leadership and communication style of Ardern has been widely lauded as exemplary (Clark 2020; Friedman 2020; McCarthy 2020; Smyth 2020; Wilson 2020). This paper analyses the speeches and public statements (n = 40) made by Prime Minister Ardern in March and April 2020 through the lens of crisis leadership and crisis communication. In particular, it looks at the use of different mediums (parliamentary statements, daily briefings, Facebook Live broadcasts and podcasts) as mechanisms for engaging in narrative and dialogue with the public. The paper underscores the importance of communication in crisis management and looks at how positive and consistent messaging inspires confidence and social solidarity.

Keywords: crisis leadership, Covid-19, crisis communication, empathy, coronavirus

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The Covid-19 pandemic has severely tested the leadership and communication abilities of political leaders globally. With exponential reinfection rates and high mortality rates particularly amongst the elderly population, the pandemic has wrought significant economic and social damage on communities, nations and global markets. Guiding an effective response to the global pandemic has required leaders to demonstrate effective planning and coordination skills, as well as the ability to communicate clear consistent messages in an empathetic manner. The language used by leaders can perform a critical role in shaping individual behaviour and the tone of the message can instil confidence and offer reassurance to the wider public (Burdett 1999). Thus, language and tone help frame a shared reality, enabling a shift in sensemaking for followers in terms of how they collectively perceive a critical and changing situation (Whittle *et al. 2*015). As such, we take leadership to be a social process, in which values and beliefs espoused by the leader emerge from and interact with a particular social context (Hamilton and Bean, 2005), in this case, the national context.

One nation considered 'successful' at managing community transmission of the virus is New Zealand (Cousins 2020). The first confirmed case of Covid-19 was recorded in New Zealand on February 28 and over the course of March and April 2020, New Zealand recorded only 1,132 cases of Covid-19 and 19 deaths – a much lower transmission rate than most industrialised nations (WHO 2020). On April 27, 2020, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that they had won the battle against community transmission of Covid-19 (Anderson 2020). Such a contained outbreak, in relation to the experiences of other nations, led to widespread praise from commentators, who pointed to Prime Minister Ardern's effective

leadership style and the compassion shown in communications (Clark 2020; Friedman 2020; McCarthy 2020; Smyth 2020; Wilson 2020).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the crisis communication approach adopted by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in March and April 2020 from the perspective of the communicative features demonstrated. More specifically, the following research questions were posed in the study:

RQ1: What were the key features of the crisis communication approach adopted by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What were the particular points of emphasis in the messaging of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic?

In the research, we pay particular attention to the role of crisis communication in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine the importance of messaging in generating greater readiness for the arrival of Covid-19 and building resilience in dealing with the effects and impact of the virus. We look at the use of different mediums (parliamentary statements, daily briefings, Facebook Live broadcasts and podcasts) as mechanisms for engaging in direct dialogue with the public. In doing so, we recognise the role of leader in crisis communication as one of directing action, informing decision makers, setting the overall tone, consoling and counselling victims (Garnett and Kouzmin 2009). Our methodological approach involves the use of thematic analysis to identify key phases in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We follow Corley and Gioia (2004) by mapping the themes most dominant in each of the key phases to understand how the crisis communications approach of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern evolved during the crisis.

Our paper makes several important contributions to the literature on crisis leadership and crisis communications. First, the paper examines the importance of communication in

crisis leadership, looking specifically at Jacinda Ardern's approach in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies of crisis leadership have often focused on identifying leadership skills and competencies considered to contribute to effective crisis management (see Prewitt, Weil, and McClure 2016; Walker *et al. 2016;* Wisittigars and Siengthai 2019; Wooten and James 2008). However, more recent research has underscored the need to focus on the communicative and discursive aspects of crisis leadership (Gigliotti 2019; Gilstrap *et al. 2016;* Jamal and Abu Bakar 2017; Stam *et al.* 2018; Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017). This paper draws upon primary data to examine how crisis leadership and communication were enacted in real time. Second, much of the crisis management literature seems preoccupied with improving the effectiveness of systems, processes and models, without paying sufficient attention to the human, social and communitarian aspects of the crisis (Dückers *et al.* 2017; Zulkarnaini, Shaari, and Sarip 2020; Hutchins and Wang 2008). In this paper, we address how effective crisis communication can help to co-create the crisis experience and assist individuals to engage in sensemaking and develop a shared understanding of reality.

Literature review

Leaders are often evaluated on their ability to respond to sudden, unexpected and large-scale crises. Wooten and James (2008) argue that leaders are required to display a set of competencies that guide individuals through the various crisis stages and into a successful recovery. They identify communication skills as a critical competency and assert that a leader's ability to communicate clearly, confidently, persuasively and empathetically is critical to shaping an individual's perception of the crisis and their evaluation of the leader's ability to deal with it. In this section, we look at the role of the leader in crisis situations and specifically examine how communication is used by leaders to connect emotionally and psychologically with their audience.

Leadership during crisis situations

Crisis situations test the resilience, leadership and preparedness of organisations, systems and people (Germain and McGuire 2010). To respond effectively to crises, organisations, communities and society must engage in strategic planning and acquire a state of readiness. Being prepared for a range of possible eventualities allows for greater situational control, offering greater flexibility and options to deal with complex, unexpected scenarios. As Wooten and James (2008) point out, leadership in a crisis demands an integration of skills and traits that allow a leader to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events while under public scrutiny. Gigliotti (2019) argues that the crisis leader needs to discharge two roles: engaging in authentic human acts and delivering institutional messages. In terms of authenticity, the leader performs the role of comforter and counsellor, helping individuals to make sense of the crisis and reassuring them about the future. In discharging their institutional role, the leader needs to deliver formal scripted responses often in the form of official statements on important matters. Combined, the leader is viewed as the figurehead who needs to stand tall and firm when a crisis strikes. Implicitly bound up in Gigliotti's (2019) conceptualisation is a realisation that crisis leadership is a discursive and co-constructed phenomenon.

Research has suggested that women are more likely to be thrust into leadership positions in times of crisis while men are more likely to achieve these positions during times of prosperity (Brückmuller & Branscombe 2010; Kulich *et al.* 2018). This may be attributed, at least in part, to the way women develop relationships under crisis conditions. Maiorescu (2016) asserts that women's communication style is more dialogic and centres around building relationships, rapport and connections, whereas male communication tends to be more monologic, goal oriented and focused on gaining respect and commanding attention. As a result, Elliot and Stead (2018) conclude that in times of crisis, women leaders build a form of

gender capital that can lead to women being hailed in the media as more ethical leaders than male counterparts.

A key task of leaders is to present a hopeful, yet realistic vision of the future during times of crisis. Kantabutra (2003) argues that the vision must be brief, clear, present a challenge to followers and have the ability to inspire. He maintains that the vision must have the potential to empower followers and sustain their commitment towards achieving the stated goals. The vision communicated by a leader also helps to align followers to key structures and support systems. In this regard, the vision enables the leader to exercise social influence over the followers and shape follower perceptions and expectations about the crisis itself (de Bussy and Paterson, 2012; Gigliotti 2019; Liu, Cutcher, and Grant 2017; Knights and McCabe 2015). As Oliver (2006) notes, effective crisis visions will be characterised by reasoning that is both caring and just. To this end, Walker *et al.* (2016) highlight that crisis leaders' effectiveness will emit from a communication style characterised by openness, honesty, transparency, and presence.

Media engagement and crisis communications

Maintaining clear communications is critical in forging direct relationships and helping individuals interpret complex data and information in crisis situations. Hargis and Watt (2010) maintain that individuals are particularly sensitive to the quality and content of messages during crisis events, making it critical that message content is clear, accurate and complete. The media play a crucial role in disseminating information about a crisis, highlighting key incidences and holding decision-makers to account for their actions. Garnett and Kouzmin (2007) argue that the media help to frame a crisis, educate the public and report on the effectiveness of the crisis response. However, they caution that there is the potential for distortion and sensationalism, particularly in the absence of clear, consistent and accurate information from leaders.

The increasing use of social media is changing how leaders engage with their followers. In contrast with traditional communication forms where a more formal, conventional tone is expected, Kulkarni (2019) posits that social media facilitates a more conversational, dialogic approach which allows leaders to present a human face to the crisis and engender personal relationships with followers. While Gruber *et al.* (2015) note that the phenomenon of social media can fuel the proliferation of perceptions of crisis situations due to the speed at which information is shared and the multitude of actors generating and sharing information, it is argued that constructive engagement with social media provides leaders with an unfiltered forum to transmit key messages to followers. Moreover, it allows leaders to reinforce or challenge narratives of their leadership approach, show their authentic self and influence public impressions of their effectiveness (Liu, Cutcher, and Grant 2017). According to Eriksson and Olsson (2016), social media can also be used to transmit quick updates and warnings during times of crisis, and the use of video uploads and interactive tools affords leaders an opportunity to present persuasive narratives to explain their decision-making.

Forging relationships under crisis conditions

Setting common goals and uniting around a set of shared values can be an effective approach to motivating and reassuring individuals in crisis situations. In this way, in the political setting, Morrell and Hartley (2006) find the characteristics of the leader and the values of the surrounding social context to be interdependent. By positioning communitarian values and ethics at the centre of crisis communications, Armitage (2018) argues that individuals are more likely to base their day-to-day decisions on choices that safeguard the welfare of others. Taking a care ethics perspective in crisis leadership communication identifies relational aspects and impact on humanitarian needs as a critical concern. According to Oliver (2006), a care ethics approach prioritises the alleviation of suffering, safeguarding the welfare of others and maintaining and restoring relationships. In so doing, it focuses on collective needs (Reynolds,

2016) and putting others first at the expense of short-term economic reasoning (Oliver, 2006). In crisis situations, research indicates that a care ethics approach is often associated with leader displays of self-sacrificing behaviour, forging trust and goodwill between leader and followers (Zhang and Ye 2016; Matteson and Irving 2006; Halverson *et al.* 2004).

The communicative act of sharing personal feelings is often contradictory to conventional expectations of leaders. On the one hand, a leader is meant to perform a demeanour of courage and confidence in contexts of extreme uncertainty but at the same time, may be expected to display authentic vulnerability without appearing weak. This point illuminates the paradox of the public and private roles of the crisis leader (Gigliotti 2019). Social acknowledgement and the affirming and validating of the victims' experience (Dückers *et al.* 2017; Bauman 2010; Prewitt *et al.* 2016) creates a sense of being heard and feeling understood (Reynolds, 2013). For his part, Johnson (2018) underlines the need for crisis leaders to respond to the emotional needs of both victims and the wider community through facilitating a process of grieving and promoting healing and recovery. Such displays of authenticity combined with shared commonalities and the use of language that places the leader on the same level as followers helps generate trust and acceptance of the leader (Davis and Gardner 2012). Communicative acts that promote transparency and collaboration are essential to effective crisis leadership as participative decision-making, listening, and openness serve to forge trust and build social capital (Gilstrap *et al.* 2016). These actions help frame a crisis event as something that is normal and solvable. They also instil confidence in the community's ability to rebuild, restore and recover from the crisis.

Method

This study seeks to examine the multifaceted crisis communication approach taken by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, it reviews the

speeches, broadcasts and public statements made during March and April 2020 to explore how Jacinda Ardern disseminated key messages through different media channels to the wider public. We follow Fairhurst (2001) by rejecting trait-based approaches to leadership, and instead look to access how the relationship between the individual leader and the social context is configured through communications. To do this, we analyse the ways in which crises communications' texts are presented, highlighting privileged discourses and linguistic frames to uncover a pattern of relations (Foucault 2002). Crucially, we look to uncover how the main points of emphasis evolved through the emerging crisis and how various media channels were used to transmit messages at different phases of the pandemic.

Data collection and phases in the research

A total of 40 publicly available statements made during March and April 2020 were analysed for the purposes of this study. This timeframe was selected as New Zealand confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on February 28, 2020 and announced that it had won the battle against community transmission of Covid-19 on April 27, 2020. The primary data (n = 40) used in the study originates from six main types of sources:

1. Updates on Covid-19 Response Briefings (n = 15)

2. Conversations on Covid-19 with the Prime Minister (n = 5)

3. Prime Minister speeches in parliament (n = 3)

4. Post cabinet press conference (n = 8)

5. Facebook Live broadcasts (n = 8)

6. Prime Minister statement to the nation on Covid-19 (n = 1)

Appendix 1 provides a detailed overview of the data used in the analysis. The primary data was obtained from a range of outlets including: Beehive.gov.nz (official government website); Parliament.nz (official Hansard reports) and Facebook.com (profile page of Prime Minister

Jacinda Ardern). The inclusion of social media content alongside official publications is justified on the basis that research has increasingly demonstrated that social media is often preferred by leaders over traditional crisis communication channels as it creates a personal and direct connection with the audience (Kulkarni 2019; Kelleher 2009; Men and Tsai 2012). The data was analysed using NVivo 12 by QSR International and took one of three formats (video, video podcast, MS Word transcript). For data analysis purposes, we broke the timeline into three distinct phases:

- Phase 1: Preparedness and decisive action (March 01 – March 21, 2020)

  Phase 1 encompasses the initial period of the outbreak from the first confirmed case of Covid-19 on February 28 to the first Prime Minister statement to the nation on March 21, 2020

- Phase 2: Education and social solidarity (March 22, 2020 – April 20, 2020)

  Phase 2 is characterised by the swift transition to alert level 2 (on March 21) to alert level 3 (on March 23) to alert level 4 and a state of national emergency (on March 25). This four-week period is marked by increased community transmission of Covid-19 and strict lockdown conditions.

- Phase 3: Resilience and momentum (April 20, 2020 – April 30, 2020)

  Phase 3 commences with the announcement on April 20 of the transition to alert level 3 on April 27 and runs until the end of the sampling frame on April 30, 2020. On April 27, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that they had won the battle against community transmission of Covid-19.

Figure 1 provides a timeline of the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand.

- Insert Figure 1 here -

Data analysis

For the purposes of data analysis, we followed the principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985), as well as adopting constant comparison techniques (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Maykut and Morehouse 2004). This allowed us to sort and code the data into clearly demarcated themes and allowed us to combine and aggregate the data in a meaningful way. Following the approach adopted by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012), we used open coding to create a first order set of concepts with which to classify the data. Using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we reduced the number of first order concepts to fourteen second order themes by examining relationships between concepts in the data. Further refinement enabled us to derive five aggregate themes which serve as the key overarching dimensions for the study. Figure 2 outlines the three stages of the data analysis process.

- Insert Figure 2 here -

Findings

The findings section examines the key themes that emerged during each of the three phases of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Phase 1: Preparedness and decisive action (March 02 – March 21, 2020)

In the early days of dealing with the crisis, the rhetoric of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern focused on explaining the overarching principles guiding the government response to handling the Covid-19 pandemic. During this period, press conferences and briefings focused on the economic, social and health impacts likely to stem from the global outbreak arising from an analysis of the spread of Covid-19 in other countries. The importance of taking a 'balanced precautionary approach' (March 2; March 16), following an 'evidence-based approach' (March 14; March 16) and the need to 'go hard and go early' (March 14; March 16; March 19; March 21) was underlined. Such principles involved all government departments and led to tangible actions such as the imposition of restrictions at the borders; 14-week ban on incoming cruise

ships; increased community support for the vulnerable; cancellation of mass gatherings; scaling up of public health messaging; increase in testing stations; wage subsidy and business continuity support. In crisis management terms, this phase corresponds to stage 1 (signal detection) and stage 2 (preparation/prevention) of James and Wooten's (2005) approach to crisis management. At this point, Wang, Hutchins, and Garavan (2009) argue that leaders perform a vital role in coordinating and motivating people to be critically prepared, while ensuring sufficient functional resources are in place. The key themes dominating this early phase of the crisis focus on a proactive decisiveness and reassurance to the public that expert advice has been taken in opting for a particular strategic approach. At this stage, Ardern adopts the institutional role of the leader, where decisions are communicated clearly and formally (Gigliotti 2019). An illustration of the principles and approach taken can be seen in the following quotes:

> What I want to be really clear on is that there are different models out there around the world that have had different experiences with Covid-19. We do not want to be Italy. We do not want to be those countries who have experienced mass outbreaks... What we're going to do is make sure that we take the actions that are required to keep New Zealanders safe, but I'll listen to the evidence and advice around what is the best way to do that.
>
> Post-Cabinet Press Conference, March 16, 2020

> Now our response has meant that in unprecedented times, we make unprecedented decisions. Now we had a window as a nation to take some very difficult decisions: to move early and place restrictions at our border in order to protect New Zealander's health. We took that opportunity and it was a big decision. There

weren't other countries to look to and rely on – as other than Israel, no one like us was making that decision, but we did. And it was the right thing to do. But these decisions will have an impact and they will be significant. But a strong health response is our best economic defence.

<div align="right">Prime Minister Speech in Parliament, March 17, 2020</div>

A further key aspect entailed preparing government services and the public for an increased number of confirmed cases of Covid-19. As well as offering reassurance about the level of preparedness of the government, health professionals were empowered to tackle the virus. Research by Nyenswah, Engineer, and Peters (2016) conducted in relation to the Ebola outbreak highlights the importance of distributed leadership and the need to empower professionals to respond quickly and effectively in crisis situations. The importance of preparation and the notion of shared responsibility is evident in the following quotes:

On our health front, we are gearing up every day. Every day that we have this additional time, we are utilising to make sure our response is ready for the cases inevitably that we continue to receive. Our testing for instance, Mr. Speaker by the end of the week will be up around 1500 per day and Mr. Speaker, that puts us on an equivalent footing with those nations on a per head basis and our capacity with the likes of Korea. Now our plea is to clinicians: if you believe you should test, test. If you believe you should test, test. The capacity is there.

<div align="right">Prime Minister Speech in Parliament, March 17, 2020</div>

We know it's going to take some time for all of the globe to recover from Covid-19, and there will be for instance more cases in New Zealand. But I hope, as you can see, we are prepared, we've planned for this, and we are ready and if we work

together, we will get through it. That's why now, my request to you is to unite against Covid-19. The government is doing our bit, now we're asking you to do yours. Make sure you follow those basic health principles: wash your hands; cover your sneeze and if you're sick, stay home. If there are older people in your life, make sure that you look out for them. If your neighbours are self-isolating, check if they need anything. And finally, to support our businesses and our economy, if you're shopping, buy local.

Facebook Live Broadcast, March 19, 2020

Phase 2: Education and social solidarity (March 22, 2020 - April 20, 2020)

Phase 2 is marked by the swift movement from alert level 1 to alert level 2 (on March 21) to alert level 3 (on March 23) to alert level 4 and a state of national emergency (on March 25) in a concerted effort to halt the spread of Covid-19. This phase corresponds to stage 3 (containment/damage control) of James and Wooten's (2005) approach to crisis management where the emphasis is on limiting damage and losses incurred through the crisis. An emphasis on preparedness and the need to take decisive action continued to play an important role in the early stages of phase 2. It is also clear that officials realised the severity of the threat posed by Covid-19 and responded quickly to mitigate the likely impact. In doing so, they are heeding the cautionary advice of Boin (2009, 367) who states that crises and pandemics are often 'transboundary' in nature and often escalate quickly and in unforeseen directions exploiting geographic boundaries. An indication of the seriousness of the threat posed by Covid-19 and the need to take significant action is highlighted in the following quotes:

I am fully aware that we have moved at huge speed. No other country in the world has moved to these measures with no deaths and infections at their level that we

have. We currently have five people in our hospitals, none in ICUs or on ventilators at this stage. But we have no time to waste. We could have waited to plan every intricate detail required to execute this closure; until we could answer every single question or circumstance, but every hour we wait is one more person, two more people, three more people exposed to Covid-19.

Prime Minister Speech in Parliament, March 25, 2020

We are expecting roughly 300 people to come into New Zealand today. Many of those are from Australia. For those people, you must have a plan. I cannot emphasise that enough. You will be interviewed when you arrive in New Zealand and if you do not have a plan for self-isolation, a way to get home appropriately and to stay in self-isolation, you will essentially be placed into quarantine. I know many people have been upset by that, but we have to take these really strong measures to make sure we're looking after you and people around you.

Facebook Live Broadcast, March 29, 2020

With lockdown measures in place, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern directed attention to messaging about the importance of unity and sought to reassure the public that key decisions were being driven by strong communitarian values. Research has shown that prominent national values in New Zealand include tolerance and support for equality (Sibley et al. 2011). Indeed, this is evidenced in low power distance (Lin et al. 2018) and "tall poppy syndrome" – a phenomenon that maintains that all individuals should be considered equal in all aspects of life (Kirkwood 2007: 366). Indeed, in line with these values, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that all government ministers (including the prime minister) and public service

executives would take a 20% pay cut for six months, in solidarity with New Zealanders who had lost their jobs or taken significant pay cuts. She explained this self-sacrificing behaviour as an important act of leadership (Zhang and Ye 2016; Halverson *et al*. 2004) and indicative of the values of her government. For his part, Russell (2001) argues that leaders instil values as much or more through deeds as through words, and that values need to be clearly expressed and consistently demonstrated by leaders through both words and actions. The values-centred approach by the New Zealand government saw the rejection of a herd immunity approach favoured by other countries:

> Well, it's one of the things that I think around the globe we will see countries having to grapple with, the way they manage their borders, until we have either herd immunity or a vaccine. I think you can see most countries are opting for herd immunity; the price of that is too high. In fact, in New Zealand, we never considered the idea of herd immunity. Just to be clear on what that means, herd immunity basically means 95 percent of your population being immune to a disease. Usually, that's achieved through vaccination, so that's what we strive for in things like measles, and so on, but in this case, without a vaccination, it means people having been exposed. People being exposed to that degree means thousands of people dying. So that's not an option in New Zealand. It's not something we ever considered. That means that we have to continue to try and protect ourselves while we wait for a vaccine, so it does mean border restrictions will be part of our management system.
>
> Post-Cabinet Press Conference, March 30, 2020

During this phase, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern participated in a series of six Facebook Live broadcasts, where she updated the public and directly answered their questions about Covid-19. A key feature of these broadcasts was their direct personal nature and the combination of detailed information sharing and relaxed informal tone (Eriksson and Olsson 2016; Kulkarni 2019). When outlining responsibilities, she encouraged individuals to be kind and compassionate towards others and repeatedly referred to 'our team of five million', indicating unity in the battle against Covid-19. The dialogic nature of the Facebook Live broadcasts also helped build a shared experience of Covid-19, supplementing the more institutional role of formal messaging with a human level of authenticity (Liu, Cutcher, and Grant 2017). For their part, Reynolds and Quinn (2008) argue that during a crisis, an open and empathetic style of communication can engender public trust and encourage individuals to engage in positive behaviours. The combination of empathetic statements and actions with informal appeals for the community to 'look after each other', generates a strong image of social solidarity, where each member of society has a role to play and sacrifice to make. Examples of Jacinda Ardern's approachable style can be found in the following quotes:

> *Kia ora,* everyone. I thought I would check in as we finish up the Easter weekend, which I know wouldn't have been a normal Easter weekend for many of you on account of us all being in alert level 4, but I hope that wherever you are, that you've managed to maintain some of the traditions you might have as a family. I see a bit online of what people have been up to and I even know some friends who have had virtual dinners together if they have been on their own and I know people have found really creative ways of trying to come together in some way, be it live congregations and so on.

I also want to reemphasise the need for kindness and support for those who have had or currently have Covid-19 after hearing reports about comments online which I would say amount to bullying. This virus could affect any one of us and any one of our loved ones. This virus could affect any one of us and any one of our loved ones and I know if we were in that position that it would be difficult enough without having to face the unjustified judgment of others. There are 514 people who are or have battled this illness and they deserve our support, just as we would for anyone who was sick and in need.

Phase 3: Resilience and momentum (April 20, 2020 – April 30, 2020)

Keeping the public aware of the overall trajectory and progress in relation to combatting Covid-19 was a key measure in ensuring public acceptance of lockdown restrictions and confidence in government actions. Often this took the form of daily briefings on the rate of progress in tackling the virus, but in phase 3, there was a particular emphasis on defining the notion of 'success' and setting public expectations in relation to this. Bowers, Hall, and Srinivasan (2017) argues that the setting of milestones and allowing the public to track progress is critical to building public confidence and support in the handling of a crisis. For her part, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern defines success in the following terms:

I think the way that I would describe it is that success doesn't mean zero Covid cases, because we will still get cases. It means zero tolerance for cases. It means as

soon as we know we have a case, we go in straight away, we're testing around that person, we're isolating them… we contact trace, we find out all the people who may have been in contact with them while they could have passed it on. That's how we keep stamping out Covid cases whenever they come up. That's quite a different strategy from other countries…Some countries have adopted what they call a suppression strategy, just trying to keep the numbers down but ours is a bit different and so far, we've been really successful. So, we need to just keep going.

Facebook Live Broadcast, April 20, 2020

During this phase, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern reflected upon the difficulties encountered so far in the pandemic and the gravity of the situation both past and ongoing. This acts as a reinforcement of the social solidarity highlighted in phase 2, but also provides an additional function in that it reminds the public of the gravity of the situation and the reason for their continued responsibility in ensuring compliance. Acknowledging human loss and suffering ensures bereaved individuals are not forgotten about in the midst of the crisis (Johnson 2018) and is indicative of the person-centred approach taken by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern:

Today, I want to remember the people of New Zealand who have lost someone to Covid-19. Or the many more who had the terror of almost losing someone. Throughout this pandemic there have been individuals who I have tracked the progress of. I didn't know their names, but I knew their status. And I still get a phone call for every single person we lose to Covid-19 in New Zealand.

Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing, April 20, 2020

With evidence suggesting that the outbreak of Covid-19 in New Zealand was coming under control towards the end of April, and some of the social restrictions being eased, the image of social solidarity remained consistent, along with messaging on the responsibilities of all areas

of society to play a role in the careful re-introduction of working and social practice. The end of phase 3 corresponds to stage 4 (business recovery) of James and Wooten (2005) approach to crisis management where the goal is to help businesses start to return to normal. In this situation, in order to ensure New Zealanders maintained the social rules which helped control the outbreak, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern recalls the memory of ancestors who fought in World War II, emphasising the importance of sacrifice and national spirit. This imagery forms part of an 'everyday hero' crisis narrative which connects to values of hope and optimism for a brighter future (Liu *et al*. 2020). The values of resilience and sacrifice are articulated in the following quotes:

> And so, this weekend, Anzac weekend, enjoy the company of your bubble. Stay local, reflect on the amazing sacrifices of our forebears. Decades ago, they came together in the most testing of circumstances, half a world away and helped forge who we are today. It was a very different battle to the one we are in now. But the character of who we are as a country remains exactly the same. So please stay strong, stay home, be kind. And let's finish what we started.
>
> Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing, April 20, 2020

> We ask that you still keep your distance from those in your workplace, and to reduce the risk further, make sure you stick to your bubble at home. We are opening up the economy, but we are not opening up people's social lives. For the very reason that we need to reduce down our risk as much as possible.
>
> Update of Covid-19 Response Briefing, April 27, 2020

This semblance of the past, is joined by a view of the future (altered) state of normality for New Zealand society. In particular, there is an outlining of the responsibilities expected from various areas of society, and also a demonstrable understanding of some of the more acute impacts which will be felt moving forward. In this phase, Prime Minster Jacinda Ardern continues to promote social solidarity and a care ethics approach, reminding the public to consider the welfare of others (Armitage 2018) and underlining the importance of not sacrificing health in favour of the economy (Oliver 2006). A need to maintain collective resilience and momentum in confronting Covid-19 is evidenced in the following quotes:

I ask Kiwis to keep doing what you are doing. Stay home if you're sick. Get tested quickly. Work and learn from home if you can. Stay in your bubbles. Stay in your region. And most importantly. Stay strong. Be kind. We are going to be okay.

Statement to Parliament, April 28, 2020

There'll be young people out there as well, who will be wondering what their future is going to look like now. We've lost a lot of predictability, and we've lost it in a really short space of time. Some of course who might be coming to the end of their education and be thinking about job opportunities that might look a little bit different than they would have even three months ago.

Conversations on Covid-19 (Rachel Taulelei) April 26, 2020

Where the Government has a role to play, we've played it. What I would ask the private sector, is to value your work force in the same way. We've seen the

importance of people who are working on the front line. Whether they are a cleaner, whether they control waste, whether they work in a supermarket.

Update of Covid-19 Response Briefing, April 30, 2020

Conclusions

This paper examines the initial crisis communication approach taken by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. While this approach has been viewed as largely effective (Anderson 2020; Cousins 2020) and the death rate in New Zealand at the time of writing (May 22, 2020) was 21 (NZ Herald 2020) – one of the lowest in developed countries – it is important to note that the Covid-19 crisis is ongoing.

Our findings offer two main contributions to the field of crisis leadership. First, we focus on the linguistic and discursive aspects of the leadership function at a time when communication had to be quick, accurate and impactful (Boin 2009; Burdett 1999). A key finding looks to how the framing and tone of messaging evolves as the various stages of the crises are reached. This advances the work of Gigliotti (2019) by not only looking to the various roles played by the crisis leader, but also to the development and changing emphases of these roles as the situation changes. The institutional stance we find in the early stages of Ardern's crisis leadership seeks to reassure the public in relation to the government's decisiveness and evidence-based approach. However, this tone shifts in phase 2 and phase 3 towards a more empathetic approach encouraging solidarity among the community and a common understanding on how people should make sense of the situation, and also move forward with it (Gilstrap *et al.* 2016). Thus, we argue that Ardern's tone evolved towards one of a shared experience of the crisis, from an initial reinforcement of decisiveness to the leader ultimately positioning themselves on a common level with the public (Davis and Gardner 2012).

An interesting aspect of this unfolds through the power of engaging with the media and social media channels to shape perceptions of authenticity and approachability. In this instance, we note the use of direct messaging though social media, is used mostly as a mechanism to portray authenticity and informal humanity (Kulkarni 2019), a role and format increasingly undertaken as the crisis emerges.

Our second contribution is to continue to move theories of crisis management beyond the more technical aspects of policymaking and systems building (Hutchins and Wang 2008; Zulkarnaini, Shaari, and Sarip 2020). The Covid-19 crisis presents not only a challenge to leaders' decision-making, but also to how they communicate with individuals on public health matters. Through the use of daily briefings, press conferences and Facebook Live broadcasts, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern convinced New Zealand's 'team of five million', to alter their behaviours and establish new social norms (Liu, Cutcher, and Grant 2017), While the framing of 'new' realities has been noted before in the leadership literature (Whittle *et al. 2*015), here we have the opportunity to document this in a crisis leadership situation. We found how discursive devices, images of social solidarity and information outlining both responsibilities and 'success', can be used to co-create the crisis experience.

While this analysis uncovers many interesting aspects in relation to the crisis communications of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, several important limitations are also noted. One key limitation is that the study represents the analysis of one political leader. Our analysis of the leader in situ allows us to consider how communications are framed to interact with the values of the social context, however, we do not seek to generalise the findings of this interpretivist work by claiming Ardern's to be an optimum approach for replication. Rather, we look to how Ardern's communications may suit the social values of New Zealand. While characteristics such as charisma and decisiveness may be universally applicable (Den Hartog et al. 1999), different approaches to leadership resonate in different ways depending on the

expectations of the social context. Future comparative studies may look to identify which aspects of the discourses and linguistic frames utilised here are commonplace, and which are informed by the expectations of local context. However, as New Zealand is currently viewed as a relative 'success' at controlling community transmission, we argue this to be a useful reference point in how one leader constructed their crisis communications strategy. Future comparative studies would be valuable in providing a contrast to the approach taken here. Further, while the isolation of the communicative function denotes a key contribution of this work, we understand that responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have been a necessary coordination of policy, science, industry, and leadership. While more holistic studies may help in uncovering these interrelated elements, we feel we have been able provide a unique insight into the role crisis leadership, and in particular, crisis communication can play in this acute and widespread effort.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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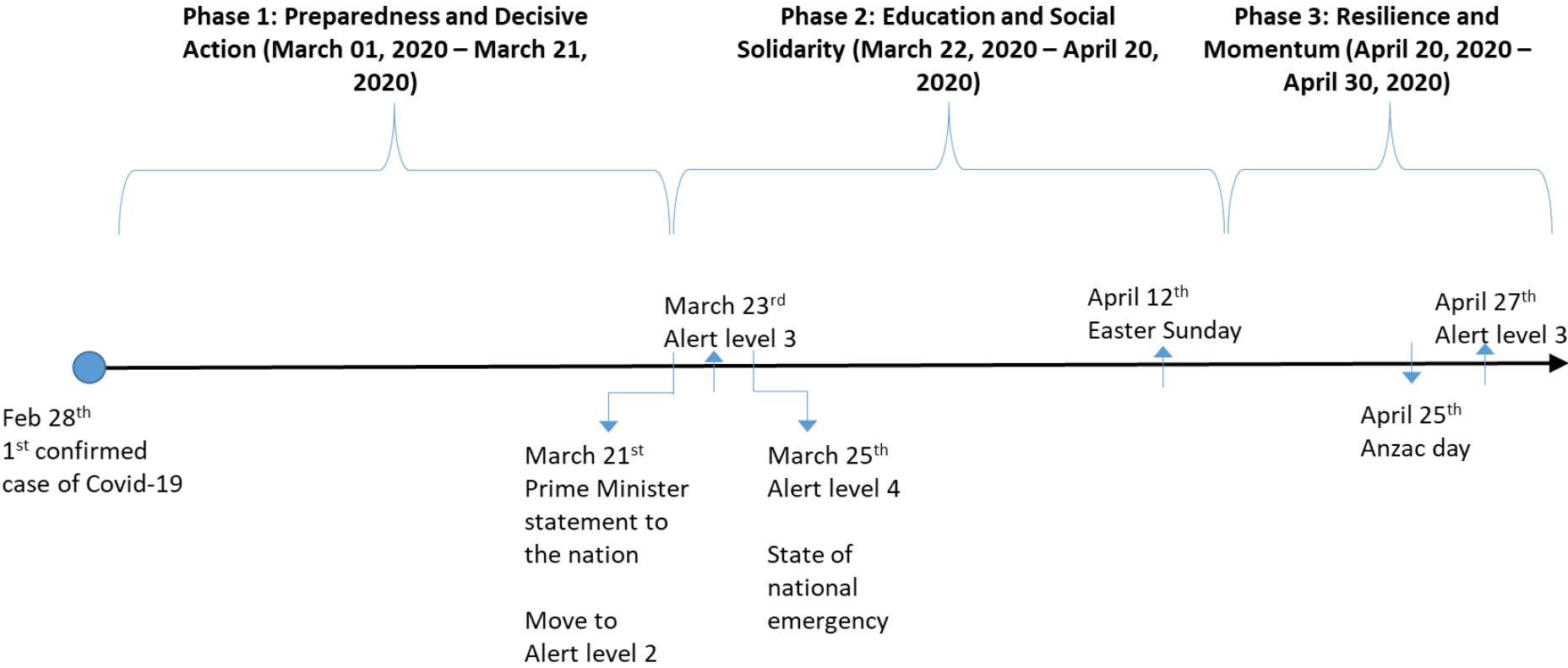
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Appendix 1. Speeches and broadcasts made by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in March and April 2020

Date	Title	Type	Length (words or minutes:seconds)
Phase 1: Preparedness and Decisive Action			
March 02, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Video	30:24
March 09, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	6596 words
March 14, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Video	22:42
March 16, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	5909 words
March 17, 2020	Prime Minister Speech in Parliament	Video	10:08
March 18, 2020	Conversations on Covid-19 with the Prime Minister	Video	18:11
March 19, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	3:20
Phase 2: Education and Social Solidarity			
March 21, 2020	Prime Minister Statement to the Nation on Covid-19	Video	8:30
March 23, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	8599 words
March 25, 2020	Prime Minister Speech in Parliament	Video	13:30
March 28, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	16:37
March 29, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	9:05
March 29, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	39:10
March 30, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	4988 words
March 31, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	11:48
April 04, 2020	Conversations on Covid-19 (Nigel Latta)	Video Podcast	27:48
April 05, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	10:35
April 05, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	39:21
April 06, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	5642 words
April 07, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	50:33
April 08, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	72:44
April 09, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	51:45

April 13, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	9:59
April 13, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	38:34
April 15, 2020	Conversations on Covid-19 (Andy Hamilton)	Video Podcast	17:03
April 15, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	42:02
April 16, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	13:08
April 16, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	54:58
April 19, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	45:50
April 20, 2020	Facebook Live Broadcast	Video	11:35
April 20, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	49:45
Phase 3: Resilience and Momentum			
April 22, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	46:01
April 26, 2020	Conversations on Covid-19 (Rachel Taulelei)	Video Podcast	26:57
April 27, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	42:42
April 28, 2020	Prime Minister Speech in Parliament	Video	10:50
April 28, 2020	Post-Cabinet Press Conference	Word Transcript	3671 words
April 28, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	53:20
April 29, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	41:42
April 30, 2020	Conversations on Covid-19 (Suzy Cato)	Video Podcast	20:58
April 30, 2020	Update on Covid-19 Response Briefing	Video	41:26

Figure 1. Timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand

Phase 1: Preparedness and Decisive Action (March 01, 2020 – March 21, 2020)

Phase 2: Education and Social Solidarity (March 22, 2020 – April 20, 2020)

Phase 3: Resilience and Momentum (April 20, 2020 – April 30, 2020)

March 23rd
Alert level 3

April 12th
Easter Sunday

April 27th
Alert level 3

Feb 28th
1st confirmed
case of Covid-19

March 21st
Prime Minister
statement to
the nation

Move to
Alert level 2

March 25th
Alert level 4

State of
national
emergency

April 25th
Anzac day

Figure 2. Data structure

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Themes

1st Order Concepts

- Looking at the science
- Slowing down community transition rates
- Rejection of herd immunity approach

- International comparisons
- Risk assessment

- Acting decisively in uncertain times
- Taking a precautionary approach

- Minimise damage and lessen economic impact
- Going hard and going early

- Contract tracing, testing, border restrictions

- Wage subsidies, online job platforms
- Business continuity and stimulus support

- Empowerment of medical professionals, border officers and law enforcement

- Coordination of health, business, economy and welfare

- Care of elderly and vulnerable groups
- Importance of community

- Shared experience
- National values

- Direct Facebook broadcasts

- Statutory declarations
- Fines
- Reporting mechanisms

- Information on testing, contact tracing, isolation
- Alert system
- Information about restrictions

- Responsibilities for visitors to New Zealand
- Duties of employer and employees in reopening of workplaces

2nd Order Themes

- Expert advice/science
- Choice in approach
- Proactivity
- Strong decisions
- Preparedness
- Systems
- Empowerment
- Coordination
- Looking after each other
- Empathy
- Informality
- Penalising non-compliance
- Information on Covid-19
- Outlining responsibilities

Aggregate Themes

- Evidence-based approach
- Decisiveness
- Coordination and alignment
- Social solidarity
- Education and information

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Prof. Jessica Li
Editor-in-Chief,
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04 June 2020

Dear Professor Li,

I hope you continue to stay well and safe. On behalf of my co-authors, thank you for inviting us to contribute to the Covid-19 special issue of HRDI. We are really grateful for the opportunity to be involved with the issue.

Thank you too for the feedback that you provided on our submission. We have addressed the feedback as follows:

(1) We wonder because Jacinda Ardern is a woman, how does her leadership in crisis compares to the theories and perspectives on women leadership? While your study does a fine job of pointing out the linguistic and discursive aspects of leadership function and advances theories of crisis management. However, you do not comment on how the dialogic approach taken by the Prime Minister aligns or contrasts with the debate over the value of women leadership in crisis situations.

Response: We have provided a short discussion (on page 5) on the differences in leadership style between men and women, particularly in relation to the dialogic communicative style of women during times of crisis. As suggested, we have referenced the work of Kulich et al. 2018 and have also looked at the contribution of Elliot and Stead (2018) who found that women leaders are more likely to be hailed as ethical leaders.

(2) While discussing Jacinda Ardern's leadership during Covid-19 crisis, we wonder if her style is guided by the national cultural orientation of New Zealand. Is democratic leadership style a cultural norm in New Zealand?

Response: We provide a new discussion on page 15 on New Zealand national values, in particular, the values of tolerance and support for equality. We highlight that low power distance is a characteristic of New Zealand culture leading to "tall poppy syndrome" – a phenomenon that maintains that all individuals should be considered equal in all aspects of life.

(3) When presenting the impact of individual factors and external factors such as, the national culture, societal value system, and government structure have on leaders in time of crisis, it could provide our readers with a more comprehensive framework to think about their own experiences.

Response: While the focus of our analysis remains on the evolution of crisis communications, we have worked to better frame this as an interdependent system, where both the characteristics of the individual leader and the social values of the surrounding contest play informative role in producing the leadership discourse. We reframe the methodology as rejecting a purely trait-based approach and look instead to how the relationship between leader and social context is configure through communications. We make reference to both Fairhurst (2001) and Foucault (2002) to justify this position and the forthcoming analysis which looks to privileged discourses and linguistic frames. Most importantly, we have rewritten the final paragraph of the conclusions to reaffirm that our analysis is indeed contextually embedded, and that while there may be universally applicable characteristics of leadership, the potential for contextual difference must be acknowledged. Thus, we invite the reader to consider which aspects of our analysis may hold in their own culture, and which may look different as the culture itself has different societal expectations of their leader.

(4) We also noticed a few minor spelling errors but nothing cannot be fixed by a careful round of proofreading.

Response: We have checked and corrected all spelling, capitalisation and mechanics against British spelling and punctuation and conventions in the British press (e.g. for 'parliament' and 'cabinet', 'Facebook Live', 'MS Word'). We have also corrected all formatting and punctuation against the Instructions for Authors, and the Taylor & Francis Standard Reference Style: Chicago author-date document.

We hope these changes meet with your approval and wish to thank you again for your support.

Best wishes,
Drs. David McGuire, James Cunningham, Kae Reynolds, Gerri Matthews-Smith