# Media literacy and COVID-19 communication: Work and home sphere differences

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## ABSTRACT

As a learning process wherein we ask questions to enhance knowledge, *media literacy* offers a powerful lens for examining how people practice communication across diverse applied contexts such as professional communicators shaping messages about COVID-19. Borrowing a page from Renee Hobbs' (1998, 1999, 2010, 2011, 2021) media literacy education research, we sought to compare/contrast media content creators' (journalism, advertising, public relations, marketing communication) information-seeking behaviors during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic for both their paid work and unpaid volunteer work, as well as for their own and family edification. Blending the media literacy lens with social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), our survey findings collected at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 suggest that professional communicators (N=174) relied more frequently on *media sources* (64.9%) for COVID-19 information for work (paid and unpaid) and on *people* such as medical professionals (51.5%) as sources for COVID-19 information for their own personal and family use. Other findings detail professional communicators' use of media literacy learning processes of accessing, analyzing, creating, reflecting, and taking action.

**Keywords:** *media literacy, COVID-19, public relations, advertising, journalism, marketing communication.*

## INTRODUCTION

By definition, pandemics are public health threats with global impact. There are both academic implications and specific applications to be drawn from research about the COVID-19 phenomenon since perhaps this pandemic has changed forever the way people live and work around the world. The importance of community networks during a pandemic has underscored the value of staying connected with one another to stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation (Folk, et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, people rely on authoritative sources such as government officials (Edwards, 2022) with accurate health information during times of emerging infectious diseases when collective action is needed even though experts may not have all the facts (Vaughan, 2011). Media play a significant role for information-seeking. Yet, the journey has not been easy, straightforward, or equitable as people try to gain access to accurate health safety information (Etienne, 2022).

Amidst pandemic information-seeking behaviors, connections between COVID-19 health information and the work of journalists (Edwards, 2022; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) and other communication professionals (Anwar, 2020) – including those working in public relations (Huang, et al., 2022; Mahler, n.d.,), advertising, (Atal & Richey, 2021; IAB, 2020), and marketing communication (Capodanno, n.d.; Reddy & Gupta, 2020) – have been firmly established. Too, important distinctions between use and perception of traditional media versus online media (Lee et al., 2022), as well as perceptions of trust in various authorities, also have been examined (Thornton, 2022). Moreover, professional communicators and others have grappled with conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation about coronavirus, more broadly (e.g., Jia & Luo, 2023), which impacts on media literacy capabilities.

Intersections of these outcomes offer an important lens for examining *media literacy*, defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of forms" (Aufderheide, 1993, p. v.). News Literacy Project, a nonpartisan national education nonprofit organization, advocates for "smart, active consumers of news and information and equal and engaged participants in a democracy" (About, n.d., para. 1) and has closely followed news coverage and social media attention to COVID-19 according to social identity dimensions such as age, race; misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories; and more. Vetting trustworthiness of news information sources – for both consumers and professional communicators – includes: 1) examining a source's credibility beyond social media platforms, 2) looking for standards across news organizations' adherence to ethical guidelines, 3) checking for transparency about reporting practices and media ownership, 4) examining how errors are handled in terms of accountability and corrections, and 5) assessing news coverage in terms of original reporting (or mere opinion/commentary), amount of mechanics errors, and comparison with coverage of other standards-based newsrooms (Five, n.d.) Media literacy education scholar Hobbs (2021) posited that media literacy includes many of the same learning processes as Aufderheide (1993) identified (*accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating*), but added *reflecting* and *taking action* to the mix.

This current study was designed to explore media literacy processes for socially constructed media content – by comparing and contrasting how professional communicators produced COVID-19-related information for others, as well as used it for themselves and their family.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

News is a socially constructed, and therefore, manufactured product. Social construction theory posits that cultural and social norms set the pace for ways human reality is experienced, influenced, and understood (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). These processes shape journalism, as professional communicators like reporters circulate knowledge, make public property out of social and cultural resources, and "transform mere happenings into publicly discussable events" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 3). Similarly, communicators working in public relations, advertising, and marketing communication (Benhabib & Bisin, 2011; Bremner, 2018; Carpenter, 2020; Hackley, 2001; Kent, 1993) also socially construct texts (words, images) to communicate with stakeholders. Simultaneously, public relations practitioners offer information subsidies to journalists in the form of press materials that shape news accounts in ways favorable to organizations (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986). Thus, information used to shape news and other communication products is subjective, culminating in a manufactured product shaped by a complex, yet artificial or subjective, selection, collection, organization, and dissemination of data (Carey, 1986; Fowler, 1991; Gans, 1979; Hall, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Overall, scholars have suggested that this constitutes a process – one that

should not be studied devoid of context and other variables affecting communication workers' interpretation of reality. For the current study, we invited producers of COVID-19 information to share insights about their awareness, sourcing practices, and social responsibility for a better understanding of relationships among media literacy tenets and a pandemic.

The foundation upon which we built this inquiry and our seven formal research questions unfolds next in four subsections: 1) life and death in the time of COVID-19, 2) media literacy, 3) traditional vs. social media as information sources, and 4) trust, credibility, and information sources.

**Life and death in the time of COVID-19**

As of this writing, five and a half million people globally have died from COVID-19 in the past two years, with actual numbers perhaps quadruple this figure given that some countries do not collect reliable statistics and long-term health effects remain unknown (Adam, 2022). Caused by SARS_CoV-2, COVID-19 spread to pandemic status in 2020 among nations wholly unprepared and lacking in information about its severity, how it spreads, or how to prevent it – fundamental stepping stones to developing a cure and vaccine (Morens, et al., 2020). The information void soon was filled with public fear, rumor, political intrigue, and health officials' inability to provide immediate answers to critical questions (Houston, et al., 2015). With so many working from home, people turned to traditional news media coverage and social media platforms for clues about how to respond, sometimes finding misinformation and inacuracies (DeConinck et al., 2020).

**Media literacy**

Understanding how we learn about weighty topics like disease, its pandemic status, and information spread has long fascinated researchers across the hard and soft sciences. So, examining processes that lead to learning about disease is relevant and timely. We know that children learn media literacy in school, but we still know too little about how media literacy plays out among adult media content providers.

To begin, people who are media literate possess high *awareness levels of media* and the *technologies* used to transmit messages. People use a media literacy backdrop to navigate their daily lives in a rapidly changing world

(Postman & Weingartner, 1969), wherein media content offers collections of factual information about issues that people store in their memory as knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). These facts provide a foundation for reasoning and decision making, especially with regard to information used for health and safety purposes (Jensen, et al., 2020). At least one media scholar, Marshall McLuhan, even suggested that increased awareness of media helps people to behave more humanely toward one another and the planet (Culkin, 1967).

In schools, teachers accept more than one set of student answers to questions, inspiring students to engage in an inquiry cycle fueled by "analysis and interpretation of ideas and information" (Hobbs, 2021, p. 6). This circular process enables students to learn through creating media, enhancing reflection, and building confidence about taking action in the community – which in turn leads to better questions and "authentic lifelong learning" (Hobbs, 2021, p. 6). Media critics posit that schools provide a "principal medium for developing in youth the attitudes and skills of social, political, and cultural criticism" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 2). Precisely if/how this dynamic plays out among professional media content providers, though, is less understood.

Because media literacy during a pandemic offers a critical life-and-death context for information consumption, we consider the media literacy learning process spiral as a focal point for discovering how content providers learn and communicate about complex issues such as a deadly emerging virus – based on general types of sources they consult. Research examining journalists' sourcing practices has a rich history dating back several decades (e.g., Ettema & Glasser, 1985; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In short, discovering how and where information/facts and the information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) journalists rely upon emerge and find their way into news media content enables us to better understand media content providers' "reflective deliberation" (Kompf, 2004, para. 2), or media's role in shaping a well-informed society. Specifically, Postman and Weingartner (1969) referenced Ernest Hemingway's quip that a great writer "must have a built-in shockproof crap detector" (p. 20) and incorporated this sentiment into the media literacy movement (learning *how* to learn) by encouraging learners to "develop built-in shockproof crap detectors as basic equipment in their survival kits" (p. 220). The current study was designed to discover outcomes of media content providers' deliberations about where they

sought details to produce information about COVID-19 for audiences, themselves, and their families.

## Traditional vs. social media as information sources

There is no doubt that people consulted a wide variety of sources for COVID-19 information that contributed to different types of knowledge generation over the course of two-three years. Information source selection plays a significant role with high stakes when public health and individual lives hang in the balance. People still use traditional media, while social media have made significant gains among usage patterns in recent years. Indeed, social media tools have revolutionized ways professional communicators in journalism, advertising, public relations, and marketing communication transmit messages and interact with stakeholders. These platforms offer fora where content and conversations are created across individuals, brands, organizations, and nations (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Knoll, 2016), with many seeking to enhance their reputation (Eyrich, et al., 2008) via these social networks (Klepek & Starczycna, 2018).

In journalism, traditional media are said to be supplanted by social media as evidenced by diminishing market share and reduced advertising revenues (Desjardins, 2016). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, news consumers continued to consult traditional media sources. Lee and colleagues (2022) found that news seeking via social media is a negative predictor of factual knowledge – but a positive predictor of subjective knowledge and excessive confidence about having accurate information. In a COVID-19 context, this means that social media information may impede people's COVID-19 learning and possibly lead to harmful actions or inaction due to "information overload, news-finds-me perception, and people's vulnerability to misinformation" (pp. 59-60). Meanwhile, research findings also suggest that people's use of traditional media for COVID-19 news seeking probably "did not exert a harmful effect on factual knowledge gain (and thus did not affect knowledge miscalibration either)" (Lee et al., 2022, p. 60), making traditional news media consumption more advantageous than social media consumption (Dimitrova, et al., 2014, Lee, 2020).

During times of crisis, news producers' challenges with information sourcing practices may become further exacerbated. For example, research findings suggested that sourcing information about a public health crisis amidst the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique context with discernable challenges addressed in China by journalists sourcing social media channels (Zhang & Wang, 2022). Earlier, journalists covering political revolution in Egypt seem to consult "unofficial" sources like social media content whenever no other sources are available, qualifying this practice somewhere between "expressed enthusiasm and cautious skepticism" (Schapals & Harb, 2021, para. 1).

## Trust, credibility, and information sources

Intersections of audience trust/credibility and information sources whom communication workers consult has a rich tradition in journalism research (e.g., Christians, 2009 for a summary). While *trust* is widely considered to be an important concept as basis for social order/cohesion and a crucial variable for gauging perception and evaluation of news media among media effects researchers (e.g., Tsfati, 2003), it is a challenging concept to operationalize. Kohring and Matthes (2007) resolved that *credibility* and *trust* are widely negotiated among communication scholars based on theoretical lens used for inquiry. Yet, the two terms are not synonymous or mutually exclusive (Self, 1996), despite roots of this broad research arena taking shape in the pioneering work of Hovland and colleagues (1959). Furthermore, emergence of a reliable scale for measuring trust in news media has been slow to develop (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

More recently a paradoxical binary dualism has emerged to complicate a seemingly straightforward quest to understand relationships between audience trust in journalists and the news they produce. For example, Ladd (2011) explained that distrust suggests resistance to new information while trust in media can increase political knowledge – while Müller (2013) posited that apprehension toward media is a natural reaction, so that trust really has no relationship with degrees of political engagement. Manninen (2021) creatively addressed the paradox by operationalizing *trustworthiness* in terms of fulfilling audience expectations, discovering that news audiences in Finland expect high-credibility sources (e.g., public officials) and greater levels of comprehensive investigation than online journalists tend to provide. Being able to trust COVID-19 information sources has been a critical pursuit for all communication workers these past two years.

Degrees of trust and credibility associated with information sources has played out uniquely in the context of coronavirus given that numerous conspiracy theories have been attached to COVID-19 since the

outbreak (Jia & Luo, 2023). Researchers have examined the health consequences of both conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation campaigns linked to strategic political motives and global social media communication. In the U.S., for example, many attributed non-mask-wearing behaviors to former President Donald Trump's downplaying of the virus (Cathey, 2020). Yet, research findings about relationships among public health campaign compliance messaging with personal beliefs in conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation about the coronavirus – as it impacts preventive behaviors (e.g., seeking a vaccine/booster, wearing a mask, social distancing, avoiding hugging/kissing) (e.g., Lazarević, et al., 2021; Marinthe, et al., 2020) – has had mixed results (e.g., Pierre, 2020). Findings of Romer and Jamieson (2020) suggested that conspiracy beliefs translate to reduced countermeasure behaviors and those of Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) suggested that conspiracy theories introduce additional threats.

To summarize this review of literature as the foundation for our inquiry, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an extraordinary context for examining the work of professional communicators and their applied and socially constructed products about COVID-19 in the form of advertisements, press materials, news, videos, blogs, and more. Media audiences' reliance on digital technologies has transformed traditional information dissemination industries while we continue to employ attention to interplay of media with scrutiny of trust, credibility, and information sources. Thus, we offer these seven research questions:

- RQ1. How well did professional communicators perceive they understood COVID-19 as part of their a) paid work or unpaid volunteer work, and b) for themselves/family?
- RQ2. What type of content did professional communicators produce about COVID-19?
- RQ3. What sources did professional communicators use to gain access to information about COVID-19 a) for paid work or unpaid volunteer work, and b) for themselves/family?
- RQ4. What skills do professional communicators perceive as useful for analyzing information and creating messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?
- RQ5. Which competencies do professional communicators perceive as most useful for reflecting on impact of media and technology when

producing messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?
- RQ6. Which collaborative techniques did communicators perceive as most useful for taking action when producing messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?
- RQ7. How important was it for communicators to evaluate traditional and social media sources' credibility and quality if they consulted them as part of their a) paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?

## METHOD

We used the survey method with an online Qualtrics instrument to collect data used to answer these seven research questions based on data collected among professional communicators working in advertising, journalism, public relations, and marketing communication.

In July 2021, we began the project by testing a draft of our questionnaire among 16 professional communicators solicited via LinkedIn and Twitter who described themselves as creators of content involving COVID-19 information as part of their paid work or unpaid volunteer work. The pretest results enabled us to make minor adjustments to probe phrasing and order on the questionnaire. The final instrument listed 28 questions. First, we asked communication professionals a screener question about whether or not they had produced communication materials about COVID-19 in conjunction with their paid work/unpaid volunteer work, with six follow-up questions about which communication-related field they work in and how long they have been working in that field. Then, we asked three questions about what type of content research participants produced about COVID-19 and eight questions about media literacy learning processes of accessing, analyzing, creating, reflecting, and taking action. We offered two questions about the importance of media sources' credibility and quality, inviting participants to rank according to a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Very Unimportant, 4 = Very Important). We also offered two questions inviting participants to rank according to a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Don't Know, 5 = Very Well), the importance of media sources' credibility and quality. Also, we asked another two questions inviting participants to rank how well they understood COVID-19 according to a 5-point Likert

scale (1 = Don't Know, 5 = Very Well). Six demographic questions appeared at the end of the instrument. We followed institutional review board (IRB) processes at our university and secured approval for our research project.

**Data collection**

When the final copy of the questionnaire was ready and IRB approval secured, we launched the Qualtrics site and shared the survey link across social media platforms of Twitter and LinkedIn. No incentive was offered to potential research participants. A total of six messages were sent via LinkedIn and Twitter to recruit and remind potential research participants. Data were collected in October 2021. This timing was optimal for collecting data required to answer this study's research questions because professional communicators had had at least one year to educate themselves about COVID-19. As of October 2021, 66.4 % of the U.S. population had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccination and 57.4 % of the U.S. population had been fully vaccinated (Statista, 2021). At this point, doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine appeared safe for children, too, with nearly 91% effectiveness in preventing symptomatic infections among 5- to 11-year-olds (Neergaard & Perrone, 2021). Furthermore, by October, most of the universities and colleges across the U.S. had returned to in-person instruction (InsideHigherEd, 2021). In addition, in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released a statement recommending a booster shot at the end of September 2021 (CDC, 2021).

**Data analysis**

Frequency and descriptive analyses, using SPSS, enabled us to analyze survey data following the 31-day data collection period.

## FINDINGS

A total of 192 survey responses were collected among communication professionals. Five potential respondents indicated that they did not produce any communication materials about COVID-19 in conjunction with their paid employment, so they did not complete the survey. Thirteen other potential respondents did not finish completing the survey, so these data were extracted from the analysis. This left a total of $N = 174$ survey respondents who completed the Qualtrics questionnaire.

Demographically, the pool of research participants were predominantly U.S. residents with gender identity fairly equitably distributed among female- and male-identifying participants, ethnic identity overwhelmingly Caucasian/White, sexual orientation overwhelmingly heterosexual, mostly in the 20-39 age range, with a little more than half college graduates. As professional communicators, the career specialty of advertising, public relations, and journalism was fairly equitably distributed. See Table 1 for a complete demographic profile of research participants.

**RQ1.   How well did professional communicators perceive they understood COVID-19 as part of their a) paid work or unpaid volunteer work, and b) support for themselves/family?**

Regarding perception levels for understanding COVID-19 as part of their paid work or unpaid volunteer work, most participants indicated high knowledge levels required for professionally communicating about COVID-19 with audiences ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .700$) and for themselves/family ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .782$).

**RQ2. What type of content did professional communicators produce about COVID-19?**

As indicated in Table 2, the most frequently reported content that communicators produced about COVID-19 was advertisements (54.1%, $N = 92$), public relations (52.9%, $N = 90$), social media content (42.9%, $N = 73$), news stories (35.3%, $N = 60$), blogs (22.4%, $N = 38$), employee communications (16.5%, $N = 28$), and podcasts (8.2%, $N = 14$). In the open-ended Other category, seven participants indicated that they also produced infographics and videos about COVID-19.

**RQ3. What sources did professional communicators use to gain access to information about COVID-19 a) for paid work or unpaid volunteer work, and b) for themselves/family?**

As indicated in Table 3, research participants more often consulted *media sources* to produce information about COVID-19 for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (64%) and *people* such as their employer or a medical professional for COVID-19 information for themselves/family (47.7%).

Table 1. *Demographic profile of research participants* (*N = 174*)

| | |
|---|---|
| **Career field** | |
| Advertising | 31% (*N* = 54) |
| Public relations | 28.7% (*N* = 50) |
| Journalism | 24.1% (*N* = 42) |
| Marketing communication | 13.2% (*N* = 23) |
| Other | 3% (*N* = 5) |
| **Tenure in career** | |
| 1-5 years | 51.7% (*N* = 90) |
| 6-10 years | 27.6% (*N* = 48) |
| 16+ years | 8.6% (*N* = 15) |
| 11-15 years | 8.6% (*N* = 15) |
| <1 year | 3.4% (*N* = 6) |
| **Gender** | |
| Female | 49.2% (*N* = 92) |
| Male | 40.1% (*N* = 75) |
| Transgender | 2.9% (*N* = 5) |
| Preferred not to say | 1.1% (*N* = 2) |
| **Ethnicity** | |
| Caucasian/White | 70.7% (*N* = 123) |
| Black/African American | 8.6% (*N* = 15) |
| Native American/American Indian | 8% (*N* = 14) |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 6.3% (*N* = 11) |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 3.4% (*N* = 6) |
| Preferred not to say | 3% (*N* = 5) |
| **Age** | |
| 30s | 46.6% (*N* = 81) |
| 20s | 34.5% (*N* = 60 |
| 40s | 10.9% (*N* = 19) |
| 50s | 5.2% (*N* = 9) |
| 60+ | 1.7% (*N* = 3) |
| Preferred not to say | 1.1% (*N* = 2) |
| **Sexual orientation** | |
| Heterosexual | 78.9% (*N* = 138) |
| Bisexual | 8% (*N* = 14) |
| Gay | 5.1% (*N* = 9) |
| Fluid | 2.3% (*N* = 4) |
| Queer | 1.7% (*N* = 3) |
| Same-gender-loving | 1.1% (*N* = 2) |
| Asexual | 0.6% (*N* = 1) |
| Lesbian | 0.6% (*N* = 1) |
| Pansexual | 0.6% (*N* = 1) |
| Preferred not to say | 0.6% (*N* = 1) |
| **Household size** | |
| < 3 people | 50.6% (*N* = 88) |
| 4-6 people | 46.6% (*N* = 81) |
| 7+ people | 1.7% (N = 3) |
| Preferred not to say | 1.1% (*N* = 2) |
| **Home space** | |
| Live alone | 37.9% (*N* = 66) |
| Live with family | 33.9% (*N* = 59) |
| Live in a rental place | 21.2% (*N* = 37) |
| Live with roommates | 6.3% (*N* = 11) |
| Did not have a permanent place to live | 0.6% (*N* = 1) |

| Education | |
|---|---|
| College graduate | 37.9% ($N = 66$) |
| High school graduate or GED | 7.5% ($N = 13$) |
| Technical/vocational program graduate | 14.9% ($N = 26$) |
| Completed 2 years of college | 14.4% ($N = 25$) |
| Completed master's degree | 9.8% ($N = 17$) |
| Completed < 2 years of college | 6.9% ($N = 12$) |
| Completed doctoral degree | 1.1% ($N = 2$) |
| Did not complete high school | 0.6% ($N = 1$) |
| Preferred not to say | 5.2% ($N = 9$) |
| Plans for future education | 1.7% (N = 3) |
| **Nation of residence** | |
| U.S. (Oregon, Illinois, California, Washington, Georgia, New Jersey) | 90% ($N = 157$) |
| Non-U.S. | 0.6% ($N = 1$) |
| Preferred not to say | 9.2% ($N = 16$) |

Table 2. *Type of content communicators produced about COVID-19*

| Content | N | Percent % |
|---|---|---|
| Advertisements | 92 | 54.1% |
| Public relations | 90 | 52.9% |
| Social media content | 73 | 42.9% |
| News stories | 60 | 35.3% |
| Employee communications | 28 | 16.5% |
| Blogs | 38 | 22.4% |
| Podcasts | 14 | 8.2% |
| Other | 7 | 4.1% |

Table 3. *Sources professional communicators consulted for COVID-19 information*

| | For paid work/unpaid volunteer work | | | For themselves/family | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Responses* | | *Percent of cases %* | *Responses* | | *Percent of cases %* |
| **Sources** | *N* | *Percent %* | | *N* | *Percent %* | |
| **Media** | **268** | **64.9%** | **154%** | **178** | **47.7%** | **102.9%** |
| Consulted at least one large traditional mainstream media source | 95 | 23.0% | 54.9% | 105 | 28.2% | 60.7% |
| Consulted at least one digital media source | 90 | 21.8% | 52.0% | | | |
| Went on the internet | 83 | 20.1% | 48.0% | 73 | 19.6% | 42.2% |
| **People** | **142** | **34.4%** | **82.1%** | **192** | **51.5%** | **110.9%** |
| Asked my employer | 29 | 7.0% | 16.8% | 48 | 12.9% | 27.7% |
| Consulted a doctor or some other medical professional | 86 | 20.8% | 49.7% | 108 | 29.0% | 62.4% |
| Asked a family member or friend | 27 | 6.5% | 15.6% | 36 | 9.7% | 20.8% |
| Other | 3 | .7% | 1.7% | 3 | .8% | 1.7% |

**RQ4. What skills do professional communicators perceive as useful for analyzing information and creating messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?**

*Listening* and *reading* are the most frequently skills communicators perceive as useful for analyzing information and creating messages about COVID-19 both for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (54.1%, *N* = 93), and for themselves/family (36.8%, *N* = 64). See Table 4.

**RQ5. Which competencies do professional communicators perceive as most useful for reflecting on impact of media and technology when producing messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?**

As detailed in Table 5, *understanding how differences in values/life experience shape media use and message interpretation* was the most useful competency professional communicators perceived when producing messages about COVID-19 both for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (67.6%, *N* = 117) and for themselves/family (37.6%, *N* = 65). The second most-frequently selected response among research participants was *acknowledging the power of communication* for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (60.1%, *N* = 104) and for themselves/family (24.3%, *N* = 42). Another most-frequently selected response was *applying ethical judgment and social responsibility* for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (49.7%, *N* = 86) and for self/family (14.5%, *N* = 25). See Table 5.

Table 1. *Skills communicators perceived as useful for analyzing information and creating messages about COVID-10*

| Skills | For paid work/unpaid volunteer work | | For themselves/family | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Percent %* | *N* | *Percent %* |
| Listening | 93 | 54.1% | 64 | 36.8 |
| Reading | 93 | 54.1% | 64 | 36.8 |
| Technical digital space skills | 77 | 44.8% | 46 | 26.4 |
| Other | 4 | 2.3% | | |

Table 5. *Competencies communicators perceive as most useful for reflecting on impact of media and technology when producing messages about COVID-19*

| Competencies | For paid work/unpaid volunteer work | | For themselves/family | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Percent %* | *N* | *Percent %* |
| Acknowledging the power of communication | 104 | 60.1% | 42 | 24.3% |
| Considering the potential harm of media messages | 77 | 44.5% | 41 | 23.7% |
| Understanding how differences in values/life experience shape media use and message interpretation | 117 | 67.6% | 65 | 37.6% |
| Applying ethical judgment and social responsibility | 86 | 49.7% | 25 | 14.5% |
| None | 1 | 0.6% | 2 | 1.2% |
| Other | 1 | 0.6% | | |

**RQ6. Which collaborative techniques did communicators perceive as most useful for taking action when producing messages about COVID-19 a) for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?**

As indicated in Table 6, the most useful collaborative technique professional communicators perceived as useful for taking action when producing messages about COVID-19 was *working with others* for paid work/unpaid volunteer work (66.5%, *N* = 115) and for themselves/family (60.7%, *N = 105*). See Table 6.

**RQ7. How important was it for communicators to evaluate traditional and social media sources' credibility and quality if they consulted them as part of their a) paid work/unpaid volunteer work and b) for themselves/family?**

Regarding the level of importance of evaluating traditional and social media sources' credibility and quality, participants indicated a *high level of importance* as they consulted traditional media sources (*M* = 3.29, *SD* = .587) and social media sources (*M* = 3.28, *SD* = .685) as part of their paid work/unpaid volunteer work or for themselves/family.

Table 6. *Collaborative techniques communicators perceived most useful for taking action when producing messages about COVID-19*

| Techniques | For paid work/unpaid volunteer work | | For themselves/family | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Percent %* | *N* | *Percent %* |
| Brainstorming | 76 | 43.9% | 56 | 32.4% |
| Generating ideas | 94 | 54.3% | 92 | 53.2% |
| Working with others | 115 | 66.5% | 105 | 60.7% |
| None | 6 | 3.5% | 9 | 5.2% |
| Other | 2 | 1.2% | 2 | 1.2% |

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Research findings suggesting that communicators relied heavily on media sources for coronavirus information for their paid and volunteer work, but on actual people for themselves and their family could be naturalized when considering that we all were physically restricted in our mobility during lockdown. Yet, the dichotomy in sourcing practices also gives rise to questions about possible perceptions that using real people as sources for themselves and loved ones offers an elevated status to such coronavirus news sources.

This study's findings about media literacy in a specific applied communication context – during the COVID-19 pandemic – offer implications to help academics continue building theory for better understanding of applied communication and to help professional communicators continue serving stakeholders across the wider society. Social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) explains how messages and materials become public property both socially constructed and socially used. These processes have been of paramount importance for communicating about a public health issue given that thousands of people worldwide have died daily of

coronavirus (Murphy et al., 2022) and credible information was a matter of life and death.

Because there is "enormous practical value" associated with digital and media literacy competencies benchmarked in five ways (Hobbs, 2010, pp. xii-xiii), findings for each of our RQs offer reflection on professional communicators' perceptions of a "constellation of life skills" (Hobbs, 2010, p. xii) while producing COVID-19 communication materials.

*1. Make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas.* RQ1 findings suggest that most research participants possessed high knowledge levels about COVID-19, so that professional communicators working in advertising, public relations, journalism, and marketing communication had acquired what they needed to do their job, volunteer work, and for themselves and their family.

*2. Analyze messages in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose and point of view, and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content.* RQ7 findings suggest that research participants placed high importance levels on evaluating traditional and social media sources' credibility and quality as part of their paid work/unpaid volunteer work and for

themselves/family when communicating about COVID-19. However, RQ3 findings suggest that research participants applied different information sourcing practices by consulting more *media* sources for paid work/unpaid volunteer work versus *people* such as their employer or a medical professional for themselves/family. Thus, we posit that the role of source trust, access, deadline pressures, and other variables require deeper investigation. We encourage further exploration of this set of issues using additional research methods such as interview, to tease out why professional communicators regarded sources differently according to audience.

*3. Create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound, and new digital tools and technologies.* RQ2 findings suggest that the most frequently reported COVID-19 content produced among professional communicators was advertisements, public relations, social media, and news stories. Fewer reported creating content shared via blogs, employee communications, podcasts, infographics, and videos. While we didn't specifically ask about audience size, the geographic distribution of research respondents suggests that their materials spread across the U.S. and internationally.

*4. Reflect on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical behavior.* RQ5 findings suggest that research participants most regard the competencies of *understanding how differences in values/life experience shape media use and message interpretation* – as well as *acknowledging the power of communication*, and *applying ethical judgment and social responsibility* – as they reflected on impact of media and technology while producing messages about COVID-19 both for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and for themselves/family. These findings suggest that professional communicators are responsibly thinking about how audiences used the COVID-19 content produced in their respective field of advertising, public relations, journalism, and marketing communication.

*5. Take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and community, and by participating as a member of a community.* RQ4 findings suggested that professional communicators frequently rely on *listening and reading* skills to analyze information and create messages for both paid work/unpaid volunteer work and for themselves/family. Moveover, RQ6 findings suggest that *working with others* was the most useful collaborative technique

professional communicators applied for taking action when producing messages about COVID-19 for paid work/unpaid volunteer work and for themselves/family.

**Limitations**

While these research findings offer important applied insights into socially constructed advertising, public relations, journalism, and marketing communication materials produced about COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic, it is important to contextualize the findings as self-report survey data subject to cognitive biases (Ten cognitive biases, n.d.) such as survey participants anticipating what they think researchers want to hear. Moreover, the demographic composition of research participants skews heavily Caucasian/White and U.S. residents, suggesting that findings likely would be quite different among more diverse groups, globally. And finally, survey data were collected amidst an information-rich scene and findings could vary according to social contexts.

**Future research**

Moving forward, we encourage other applied communication researchers to consider the interdisciplinary lens of combining media literacy with social construction theory to examine critical phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic – in conjunction with its global impact. Media literacy demands lifelong learning beyond any formal classroom. Because media products are socially constructed and subjective, we each have a responsibility to remain intellectually curious and increasingly more discerning of media we consume and reference – for others with our paid work and unpaid volunteer work, as well as for ourselves and family. Hobbs (2021) likened media literacy with the power of *autonomy*, or being able to "think for yourself without having to be dependent upon the interpretations and opinions of others" (p. 8). Hemingway may have used *crap detector* as a heuristic for discerning messages, while others use the idiom of taking something with a *grain of salt* as a critical thinking tool for information considered hard to swallow. Indeed, a need for new competencies for navigating our instantaneous social media world for a global society will not dissipate any time soon.

Using formal research methods in addition to the survey method and/or combining research methods should yield useful, detailed data for greater

understanding and generalizability. There is much to be learned about how manufactured communication materials widely impact society and are produced amidst adoption of new technologies, new application of traditional and digital media, across demographic social identity dimensions, changing definitions of *news*, and more – especially when all interplay in health contexts of life and death.

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