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# Risk communication: Fear during the lockdown in Spain and Argentina. Analysis of the press conferences of the Presidents of the Government

Comunicación de riesgo: El miedo durante el confinamiento en España y Argentina. Análisis de las comparecencias de los presidentes del Gobierno

## ABSTRACT:

Fear is dominant in situations of uncertainty, such as the one represented by the Covid-19 pandemic. As it highly impacts people's behavior, it can be used as a persuasive tool to accomplish the measures, such as the lockdowns in the first stage of the pandemic. This exploratory study analyzed the first statements of the presidents of Spain and Argentina in the early phases of the pandemic to identify the presence of fear in presidential messages related to the variables of risk communication, such as alarmism, transparency, empathy, legitimacy, and significant actions. It was observed that presidential communication uses fear in variable alarmism, where it was expected, and in all kinds of messages.

## KEY WORDS:

Press conference; lockdown; covid-19; risk communication; emotions; fear.

## RESUMEN:

El miedo es una emoción dominante en situaciones de incertidumbre como la que representó la pandemia de covid-19. Por su alto impacto en el comportamiento de las personas, puede usarse como herramienta de manipulación para lograr el acatamiento de las medidas, especialmente disposiciones extraordinarias como el confinamiento domiciliario dispuesto en la primera etapa de la pandemia. Con este supuesto, se realizó un estudio exploratorio de las presentaciones públicas de los mandatarios de España y Argentina en las primeras fases de la pandemia. Para identificar la presencia de la emoción miedo en los mensajes presidenciales se codificaron las variables alarmismo, transparencia, empatía, legitimidad y acciones significativas, características de la comunicación de riesgo. Se observó que los presidentes de



gobierno recurrieron al miedo en la comunicación de riesgo para dar peso a medidas de estricto cumplimiento se confirmó, aunque no solamente en la variable alarmismo, donde era esperable, sino que estuvo presente en todos los mensajes.

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**PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Conferencia de prensa; confinamiento; covid-19; comunicación de riesgo; emociones; miedo.

## 1. Introduction: Fear in public communication

The coronavirus pandemic declared in March 2020 became a phenomenon of global analysis in many aspects, including public communication. As an unknown threat that affected the whole world at an impressive speed and severity, the emotion of fear had a central role in the pandemic (Camezzana et al., 2022). As a social expression of uncertainty, fear is used in critical situations to motivate compliance with special rules.

During the pandemic, lack of information or fear of death were factors of psychological impact on citizens (Molero Jurado et al., 2020). Some studies have shown that the fear of death increased obsessive searching about coronavirus (Ramos-Vera & Serpa Barrientos, 2021; Silverio-Murillo et al., 2021). This obsession was an expression of fear for the threat itself but was also an anticipation of future menaces (Hernández Márquez & Rojas Mancines, 2021). Thus, fear has affected social groups differently (Etxebarriet et al., 2020). For example, the issues that have most concerned young students were the contagion or death of family and friends and the interruption of the academic trajectory (Szapu et al., 2022). On the other hand, the lockdown meant suspensions in economic activities, with the consequent threat to a good part of the population of job loss and economic instability (Viquez et al., 2020).

For the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651), anticipatory skills are the key for sovereigns to control the citizens in dire circumstances. According to the philosopher, the management of emotions is the only way that there is no external stimulus that generates the feeling of danger in the population. Faced with the defenselessness of citizens against possible threats, it is power, which Hobbes calls Leviathan, that stands as a protector (Gutierrez, 2020), thanks to which it can legitimize its actions. From that perspective, individual fear can turn into collective emotion when a community faces an emergency like the coronavirus health crisis (Social Corona Research Group, 2020).

Fear is a primary emotion generated through the perception of threat, danger, or pain, real or presumed. Emotions are spontaneous psychophysiological reactions whose visible manifestation expresses a physiological reaction as adaptative behavior. Neuroscience studies identify six primary emotions: joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust (Damasio, 2018). Among them, fear has gained interest as a correlate of the reactions of indignation and fury that cross the politics of the XXI century (Nussbaum, 2018).

Since the first psychology studies, fear has been a fundamental factor in propaganda strategies (Domenach, 1986) as the irrational component is part of the mechanisms of manipulation and advertising (Berger, 2020) (James, 1985; Lippmann, 1925). Public communication has traditionally been approached from the rational perspective, although in recent years, sociology began to incorporate the emotional variable (Bericat, 2000, 2016; Castells, 2009).



Emotions are also variables that allow us to understand the phenomena of instrumentalization of disinformation (Manfred et al., 2022). Fear makes individuals passive when making decisions or actions, so fear can be used as a persuasion tactic to «control the masses» (Cárdenas Rica & Lozano González, 2021). The use of disinformation to generate uncertainty and manipulate people has antecedents in public communication and diplomacy (Rodríguez Andrés, 2018). However, it has offered numerous examples during the pandemic (Casino, 2022), especially of deliberate use by the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, El Salvador, and Venezuela (Torrealba et al., 2022). For example, the threat of contagion allowed the Argentine Government to validate a vaccine without a scientific background, such as the Russian Sputnik V. The vaccine based its legitimacy on aggressive propaganda (Amado & Rotelli, 2022) on social media and press with a particular emphasis in Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela (Linville et al., 2022).

In addition, fear is a central component in emergencies and the communication management they demand. In these cases, communication becomes an institutional resource to counteract citizens' fears and disseminate calmness and safety (Vernetti, 2020). Hence, public communication facilitates compliance with sanitary procedures as it helps people to reduce anxiety and increases resilience (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020). On the contrary, its deficiency can lead to «a loss of confidence and reputation, economic impacts and, in the worst case, loss of life» (Hoya & Zapatero, 2022).

Fear enhances uncertainty if citizens ignore how to act or how administrations manage the crisis (Losada Díaz et al., 2020. For this reason, government communication is essential in communicating well-being and calmness to minimize uncertainty and avoid panic). In this way, society responds positively to the threat by complying with government recommendations as communication facilitates the understanding of the Executive's dispositions for citizens to easily accept and comply with them (Plain Guibarra & Eagle Sanchez, 2020).

## 1.1 FEAR IN THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Risk communication is when public crisis managers, traditionally national governments and international agencies, share information about health hazards to make citizens aware of the threat (Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2020). It is a central part of political, social, institutional, and health management, through which citizens become aware of the risk and are more likely to comply with governmental procedures.

Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) recognize the importance of risk communication to manage an infectious expansion and avoid social and economic consequences and uncertainty. The risk communication seeks to call for action and get people to identify and adopt the authorities' mechanisms to alleviate the health sequelae (Moreno Millán, 2008).

Strategies to address the communication of a crisis, especially health crises, offer determining factors to inform citizens from the administrations in charge (Molero et al., 2020). The most important is transparency so that the public recognizes what is known and what is unknown about the risk and exposes verifiable figures and data to reinforce confidence in the message. It is also advisable to convene experts so that citizens perceive that the measures adopted have a technical and scientific endorsement. Verifiable, technically-backed information counteracts misinformation and increases social mistrust (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020a).

## 2. Methodology

In order to identify the presence of the emotion «fear» in risk communication at the beginning of the pandemic, we analyzed the initial appearances of Spain and Argentina's Presidents. We conducted a content analysis of a sample of transcriptions of the press conferences published on the institutional websites of La Moncloa (Spain) and Casa Rosada (Argentina). Between March and May 2020, Spanish President Pedro Sánchez registered 12 appearances, and Argentinian Alberto Fernández only five when they announced the health emergency.

We selected five main variables from those recommended in risk communication: transparency, legitimacy, significant actions, empathy, and alarmism. Once coded, we detected the presence of fear in each of them. Given the exploratory nature of this work, we sought to verify the potential of this methodological path for future research in larger samples. For coding, each variable was defined according to the recommendations of the reviewed literature.

1. Transparency: The message is more reliable when it has verification parameters. The presence of this variable is coded in the sample when figures are exposed (number of deaths, infected, people hospitalized). Also, when referring to experts or endorsed health organizations such as the World Health Organization.
2. Legitimacy: This message expresses the legal support of the recommendation for communicating that the Government's decisions are under legality. It is detected when the authorities refer to the existing legislative framework or identify supporting resolutions.
3. Significant actions: In the case of the pandemic, it was the official explanation about concrete actions to stop the spread of the virus. The variable is evident when specific health measures and recommendations are exposed.
4. Empathy: Communication is tighter when the spokesperson empathizes with people. This variable is coded when there is an explicit reference to citizens' emotions, especially to the suffering of the deaths or when the President expresses solidarity or gratitude towards the recipients.
5. Alarmism: These messages generate concern, such as when the situation is depicted through war terminology or as a one-way situation and as if the official solution is the unique alternative.

## 3. Appearances as part of risk communication

In the context of a pandemic, the spokesperson has to convey the legitimacy of the message, that is, that it has accordance with the law (Prieto, 2020). Press conferences configure a transparency occasion when society witnesses an open dialogue between officials and journalism (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022). Hence, press conferences are an effective communication tool in risk situations because they provide valuable information and communicate the accessibility of responsible officials in troubled times (Rotelli & Amado, 2022).

Centralizing the message on a single spokesperson is a central recommendation in risk communication (Casino, 2022; Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2020; Costa-Sánchez &

López-García, 2020b) when accomplished with regularity and consistency (Moreno & Peres, 2020). Communication from the highest authority centralizes the message hierarchically while conveying an idea of the seriousness of the appearance of the President. Both heads of state of Spain and Argentina chose to appear in the first instances of the health crisis. However, the number of appearances is regular in the Spanish case, while in the case of Argentina it was limited and sporadic.

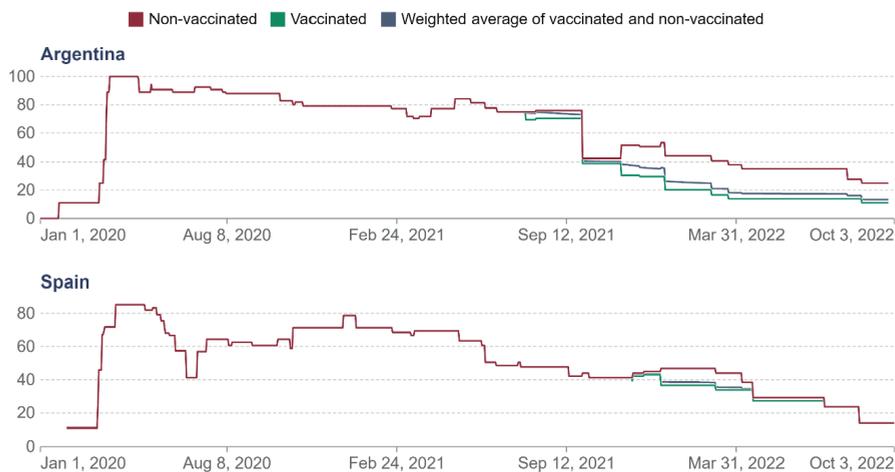
The lockdowns were one of the central measures (Mathieu et al., 2020) many governments took when the World Health Organization declared a pandemic at the end of March 2020. Being mandatorily at home carries a feeling of psychosocial stress that breeds fear and anxiety, as expressed by the rise in Google searches related to mental health (Silverio-Murillo et al., 2021).

In a context of ignorance of the disease and increasing lethality, the high compliance with the lockdown was derived from fear of the disease or the sanctions of authority (Alcalá, 2020). In that sense, risk communication has been relevant to counteract fear and the psychological effects of lockdown (Sandín et al., 2020).

Several studies confirm that a large percentage of the population was informed about the pandemic through television and heeded the recommendations to curb the virus (Casino, 2022; Losada Díaz et al., 2020). According to nine indicators weighed by the University of Oxford Stringency Index (Mathieu et al., 2020), there was high compliance with the lockdown in the two countries in the first weeks. In the case of Spain, the maximum restriction was 85% between March 31, 2021, and May 3. Argentina reached 100% restrictions between March 24 and April 23 and remained at 87% until October 8 (Figure 1).

### COVID-19: Stringency Index

The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).



Source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8> CC BY

**Figure 1.** Stringency Index Spain and Argentina. *Source:* Hale *et al.* (2021).

An analysis of the appearances of the heads of state of Spain and Argentina can be a way to identify what presence fear had in the first messages to society once the emergency was declared in two countries with different health situations. With this idea, an exploration was made motivated by the question of the place that had the fear in the communication of risk to give weight to measures of an exceptional nature, which required strict compliance by the population. As a correlate, fear was expected to be present in risk communication focused on alarmism rather than with the variables transparency, empathy, legitimacy, and meaningful actions.

## 4. Analysis of the cases of Spain and Argentina

The presidents of the Governments of Spain and Argentina offered appearances during the coronavirus lockdowns in both countries. In both cases, they were broadcast by the public channels (RTVE in Spain and Sistema de Medios Públicos de Argentina), and are available on the institutional YouTube channels (La Moncloa and the website of the Government of Spain and the channel Casa Rosada of Argentina). Table 1 lists the sample with the identifiers used to present the results.

**Table 1.** Appearances of the presidents of Spain and Argentina analyzed.

Date	President	Event Title	Identifier
March 14, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Extraordinary Council of Ministers that establishes the state of alarm for the Coronavirus COVID-19	PS 1403
March 15, 2020	Alberto Fernández	Press conference by Alberto Fernández, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta and Axel Kicillof, at the end of the Interministerial Meeting to monitor the coronavirus, COVID-19	OF 1503
March 17, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	The Government will mobilize up to 200,000 million euros, almost 20% of GDP, to face the economic and social impact of the Coronavirus	PS 1703
March 21, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government to report on the Coronavirus	PS 2103
March 22, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Press conference of Pedro Sánchez after his videoconference with the regional presidents	PS 2203
March 28, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government on measures against Covid-19	PS 2803
April 4, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government on new measures against Covid-19	PS 0404
April 10, 2020	Alberto Fernández	Press conference of the President of the Nation, Alberto Fernández, about the extension of the quarantine for the COVID-19 Coronavirus, from Olivos [presidency residence]	OF 1004

(Continúa)

**Table 1.** Appearances of the presidents of Spain and Argentina analyzed (Cont.).

Date	President	Event Title	Identifier
April 12, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Press conference of the President of the Government after the meeting of the Conference of regional presidents	PS 1204
April 18, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government to announce a new extension of the state of alarm	PS 1804
April 25, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President before the third extension of the state of alarm	PS 2504
April 28	Pedro Sánchez	The Government approves a de-escalation plan that will last until the end of June	PS 2804
May 2, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government announcing a new extension of the state of alarm	PS 0205
May 9, 2020	Pedro Sánchez	Appearance of the President of the Government prior to the start of phase 1 of the de-escalation process in part of the national territory	PS 0905
May 12, 2020	Alberto Fernández	Press conference of the President of the Nation, Alberto Fernández; the Head of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta and the Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, Axel Kicillof	OF 1205
May 25, 2020	Alberto Fernández	Press conference of the President of the Nation, Alberto Fernández; the Head of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta and the Governor of the province of Buenos Aires, Axel Kicillof, the extension of the quarantine, from Olivos	OF 2505
June 4, 2020	Alberto Fernández	Press conference of the President of the Nation, Alberto Fernández; the Head of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta and the Governor of the province of Buenos Aires, Axel Kicillof, the extension of the quarantine, from Olivos	OF 0406

Source: Own elaboration., 2023.

Since this is an exploratory study, variables were used to describe the dominant style of hearings and identify which fearful emotion was associated with, defined as the perception of an actual or suspected threat, danger, or pain.

## 4.1 SIGNIFICANT ACTIONS

The appearances of Pedro Sánchez and Alberto Fernández are made in the first weeks after the declaration of the pandemic, but the situations are different. In the case of Spain,

the health situation reached a peak of infections and deaths, while in Argentina this only happened in September 2020. However, the seriousness of the pandemic in Europe was used by Fernández to help him to legitimize a strict lockdown.

The two leaders rely on data to legitimize the extraordinary measures demanded by the situation and are cited as references to international experts and organizations and the advisory committee experts. Pedro Sánchez reinforces Europe/European Union support and repeatedly mentions the Constitution, explaining what each measure entails. On the other hand, Alberto Fernández makes almost no reference to the laws that endorse his decrees of necessity and urgency without the intervention of parliament.

## 4.2 LEGITIMACY

The difference in the health situation between the two countries was expressed in the presentation of the plan, which in Spain was the «de-escalation plan», which connoted the objective of appeasing the situation. At the same time, the Argentine President spoke of managed quarantine or the acronym ASPO, which referred to Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation, a euphemism for lockdown. The two months after March, when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic disease, were the most uncertain and critical for risk communication. In Argentina, on March 20, 2020, by decree of necessity and urgency of the Executive Power (No. 297/2020), «Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation» was imposed, which was prolonged by amending provisions of the Executive for 234 days in 2020 (Mathieu et al., 2020). In the case of Spain, on March 14, 2020, the Government declared a state of alarm for managing the health crisis caused by COVID-19 (Royal Decree 463/2020). The alarm state was extended four times with the approval of the Congress of Deputies, as required by Article 11 of Organic Law 4/1981, of June 1.

Another difference in the health and communication strategy is that in three of the four appearances in Argentina, the heads of the country's two largest states joined (AF 1503, 1205, 0406). Both the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and the homonymous province concentrate 40% of the country's population and have the two main international airports, so the presence of these leaders in the appearances put the focus on those districts. In the case of Sánchez, the approach was national, which underlines the collaboration between the Spanish autonomies.

## 4.3 EMPATHY

Empathy toward citizens' emotions is a resource used by the two presidents; as Fernández said, «I want to dedicate this moment to show solidarity and send greetings to all the relatives» (AF 1004). In the Spanish case, phrases such as «our sorrow and affection to relatives and friends of the deceased» (PS 1703) were used. In the appearances of Pedro Sánchez there are more appeals of the type «I understand the nervousness», putting oneself in the place of the population. At the same time, in the messages of Alberto Fernández he appeared as a recommendation of the style «I expect nobody is worried» (AF 1503).

## 4.4 TRANSPARENCY

The most present variable is transparency, which through data operates as a legitimizer of decisions. In his appearances, the Spanish President mentions pandemic experts in all his appearances, as well as the World Health Organization, while giving figures on deaths and the number of beds occupied in hospitals and the ICU. Also, in the case of Alberto Fernández, the presentation of numbers was associated with fear, like this expression with which he explained a graph:

Look, the cases grew excessively, in the popular neighborhoods, but in the City of Buenos Aires, in the last week, they increased 100 percent; the rest of the city increased one hundred percent infections. What do I mean? The virus is circulating in the streets. I ask you, as much as possible, to stay at home (AF 2505).

## 4.5 ALARMISM

Pedro Sánchez appeals to alarmism, using war language as an «enemy» when talking about the virus, «battle», and «weapons» to refer to measures to prevent the disease, as well as mentioning achievements as «victory». This framing of a battle against which he expresses the language of war is less common in Alberto Fernández. However, the fear in this President appeared in veiled threats, such as telling of a case in which a person breached the quarantine in which justice acted, or open, as when he rebuked a journalist who asked for social anguish. He replied, «I ask you to stop sowing anguish, it is distressing that they do not take care of you, it is distressing that the State abandons you, distressing and distressing, rather, it is that the State says nothing happens here, serious things are happening here, and that is why we act as we act» (AF 2505). On the other hand, when Pedro Sánchez is referring to those who do not comply with the quarantine, he calls them 'allies' of the virus without mentioning that there may be police/judicial action behind it.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

Fear was dominant in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdowns. Governments should take measures to control the situation, as well as reassuringly communicate them to citizens. If the function of this communication is for citizens to know the relevant facts of the crisis and the measures to be followed (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020b), alarmism should have been avoided. However, using warlike terms is one of the elements that transmit to the population the image of sanitary war that inscribes fear in the tactic of persuasion (Social Corona Research Group, 2020).

To the extent that individuals become passive beings out of fear, it is easier to propose a scenario in which governments propose themselves as the only ones capable of improving the situation (Cárdenas Rica & Lozano González, 2021). It was observed that the heads of Government resorted to fear to give weight to strict compliance measures. Although it was not the axis of the presidential communication in the appearances, it was detected that fear appeared associated not only with alarmism, as is expected by definition, but also with the

variables transparency, empathy, legitimacy, and significant actions. For example, fear was associated with transparency when data on deaths were used to configure a possible scenario that could increase the population's fear. Even empathy can be scary when used to talk about feelings of distress and uncertainty resulting from failure to take action.

Although this strategy seemed practical initially, the research raises the need to deepen its effects in the medium term. Some authors suggest that citizens felt reassured by the message conveyed, given the authorities' confidence. In the initial moments, more than 60% of citizens approved of the management of the Government. Slightly more than 50% would highlight the Executive's empathy, clear information, and speed, especially the interest in the psychological situation of the general population (Losada et al., 2020; Fernández-Hoya et al., 2021).

In the case of Argentina, in those initial two months of the pandemic, President Fernández achieved the peak of confidence of his administration and the best record of the governments of the XXI century. According to the Index of Confidence in the Government prepared by Di Tella University, Fernández was rated 3.29 (out of 5) during April and May. However, he fell below two at the end of the year and ended his term just above 1. This observation opens new questions associated with fear in that it can be operative for early fulfillment. However, suppose the fear scenario is overcome or not fulfilled as threatened. In that case, it can result in a *counterproductive effect (backfire effect)* to the extent that an initial fulfillment can become resistance. This situation is the novelty of the pandemic insofar as most risk communication studies are planned for short-term catastrophes, which confirms the peculiarity of the pandemic crisis, which lasted for more than two years (Wood & Porter, 2019).

One deepening aspect of the finding is that fear can be expressed in different ways, not necessarily in an alarmist way. In fact, for some authors, the Government not only did not convey a message of fear but was overprotected with a calmer message in the initial stages of the pandemic, which did not prepare citizens for the much more negative factual scenario (Costa-Sánchez et al., 2020). In this sense, fear is a human component of crises, and that it is instrumentalized negatively in some cases does not mean that it cannot be a vital part of risk communication, as vital as it is in life as a defense mechanism.

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