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Rhetoric expert explains strengths and weaknesses of government COVID-19 messaging

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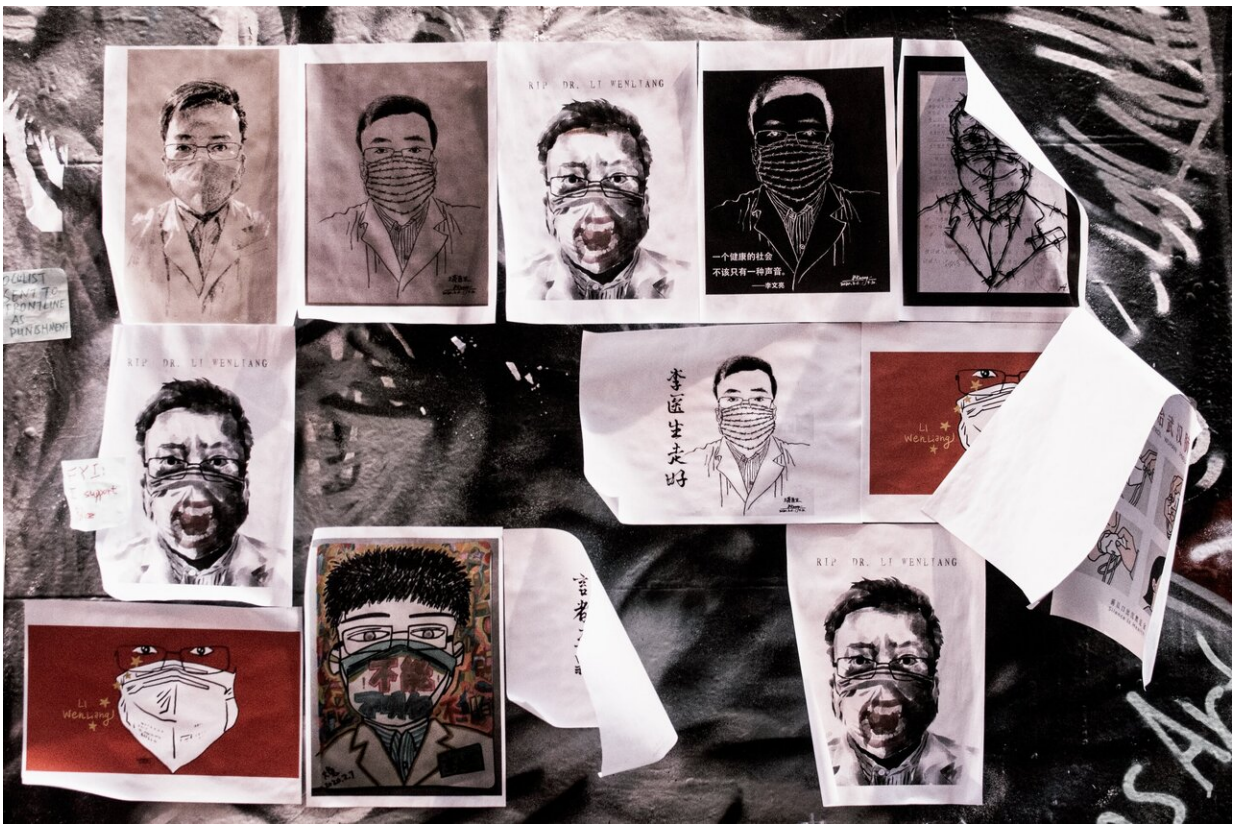

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In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans everywhere huddled in their homes, awaiting the latest news and directives from

their elected officials and medical experts.

Especially on the East Coast, daily briefings on the governmental response to the pandemic became an established genre, as TV networks and local stations went live to broadcast what their national and state leaders had to say.

From a rhetorical standpoint, says Bill FitzGerald, it was striking to see how these leaders differed in both style and substance.

"They must address a range of constituents, and each region had unique circumstances in terms of when and how hard the pandemic hit," says the associate professor of English at Rutgers University–Camden.

With that, says the expert in rhetorical studies, each leader has had his or her rhetorical strengths and challenges in meeting the occasion.

"The high bar to clear is communicating difficult information in an authoritative but reassuring manner so people understand what is expected of them and buy into these expectations," he says.

FitzGerald posits that the most successful leaders have been those whose rhetorical performances personify the communities that they lead in some tangible way, as well as appeal to a sense of identity and solidarity. For instance, he says, "We're all in this together" sounds like "We are Jersey strong," from New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy and "We are New Yorkers; we know how to do this" from New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

However, FitzGerald cautions, the style has to match the substance, hence the amount of preparation that supported the daily briefings with data, websites, a supporting cast of experts and officials, and above all, a sense of messaging.

"Overall, Gov. Murphy met the rhetorical challenge in his mix of reassurance and public scolding and 'genuineness,'" says the Rutgers University–Camden professor. "This is what I heard from people who felt that he was emotionally present in ways that the cooler Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf was not. Wolf did not sell his response to the pandemic as effectively as Murphy or Cuomo."

Cuomo, adds FitzGerald, was in another league, with his daily briefings serving as a de facto national response in setting a tone and marshaling resolve with the modulation of reason and emotion—for example, anger and empathy—that was missing in the federal government's response.

FitzGerald argues that everything state governments did was in glaring contrast to the muddled response of the Trump administration.

"I mean, who doesn't realize that? Trump intentionally undermines the messaging with an agenda at odds with public health," says FitzGerald. "Pence plays both sides against the middle in the epitome of double-speak. The federal response is basically a counteroffensive."

The Rutgers–Camden scholar emphasizes that leading by example is always the most effective rhetorical strategy and visual rhetoric—optics, such as politicians who wear facemasks—is the most powerful form of messaging. Moreover, messages are more effective when politicians deliver them alongside—and in concert with—trusted medical and health professionals, who provide their expert knowledge and analysis.

"We wonder why we have a surgeon general, but public health is one of our most important civic functions," he says. "It requires the same degree of acceptance of authority as that of the police and military. When politicians undermine public health, they fail in their constitutional responsibilities. Like Nero, they fiddle while the city burns."

When the near-daily briefings from elected leaders and medical experts cool, it's with good reason, says FitzGerald. At some point, "the show gets old. A sense of crisis passes," he explains, and people tune out the message, whether they should or not.

However, he notes, it's a two-way street: Ending daily briefings signals that the worst is over and people can move on with their lives. Conversely, when briefings reemerge, it signals that we are not out of the woods yet.

"The messaging involved in opening back up is different than the messaging in shutting down," he says. "A change in approach coincides with the development of phases and codes with the sense that things are gradually returning to normal."

Provided by Rutgers University

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