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Efficient authority communication in times of crisis

Examining how vulnerable language minorities experienced Covid-19 communication strategies in Finland, Norway, and Sweden

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Abstract

This chapter investigates how vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Disadvantaged language minorities have been shown to have a higher risk of pandemic-related health issues, and information from authorities about the crisis is typically mainly focused on the majority of the population. This chapter builds on secondary analysis of existing research and uses the communication ecology framework to study how language minorities experienced information about the Covid-19 pandemic, and which information strategies they experienced as in need of improvement. Furthermore, expert suggestions of best practices for reaching vulnerable language minorities with communication about the pandemic are investigated. The results show that while mediated information channels are important, for vulnerable language minorities, interpersonal discussions and local, context-bound activities become central for efficient communication from authorities in times of complex societal crisis.

Keywords: crisis communication, communication ecology framework, complex vulnerabilities, Covid-19 pandemic, vulnerable language minorities

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an extraordinary event, causing a state of collective societal disruption and has thereby required unique responses and communicative actions from various authorities and governmental bodies (Boin et al., 2005). Communication from authorities has been argued to predominantly focus on majority populations, while inadequately responding to the different needs of minority groups (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Waitzberg, 2020). In this chapter, we investigate how vulnerable language minorities experienced communication from authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic in three Nordic countries: Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

The aim of the chapter is twofold: first, to study where vulnerable language minorities found their information about the Covid-19 pandemic, and which information handling strategies they thought worked well; and second, to investigate which communication efforts scholars and experts in the field suggest as best practices for reaching vulnerable language minorities in the mentioned countries, based on experiences of the pandemic to date.

The focus of the chapter is to investigate the receiver (i.e., citizen) viewpoint. This viewpoint has, to date, often been overlooked in studies and reports on vulnerable groups and the pandemic context, as scholars have conversed with professional communicators (authorities, companies, etc.) or nongovernmental organisations and volunteers, while ordinary citizens have been left out (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Waitzberg, 2020).

Methodologically, the chapter is based on a literature review and on secondary analyses of relevant research projects and reports in the studied countries. We use the communication ecology approach (Spialek & Houston, 2019; Perrault et al., 2014) to frame vulnerable language minorities' information-gathering strategies and challenges experienced. The remainder of the chapter is guided by three research questions:

- RQ1. Which components were included in the Covid-19 pandemic communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden?
- RQ2. Which pandemic communication ecology framework components did vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experience as well-functioning, and which were deemed to require further improvement?
- RQ3. Which pandemic communication efforts directed towards vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden have been suggested as best practices by scholars and experts in the field?

Framing vulnerable language minorities' communication strategies

The Nordic language minority context is heterogeneous, constituted of Indigenous peoples, ethnic and national minorities with significant history in the region, as well as migrant groups arriving after the 1960s and their descendants (Keskinen et al., 2019). Both Nordic and global studies show that many individuals with migrant backgrounds have been more severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic than the majority population. These challenges relate to access to testing and healthcare services, and higher health risks in general (Ahmed et al., 2020; Brekke, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2020).

All Nordic countries have seen comparatively higher proportions of Covid-19 cases among the foreign-born population (Hayward et al., 2021; Holmberg et al., 2022). Particularly foreign-born individuals from lower- or middle-income countries seem to have a higher mortality risk and a higher number of hospitalisations (Drefahl et al., 2020; Indseth, Grøslund et al., 2021; Rostila et al., 2021). Those with forced migration backgrounds and undocumented migrants have been particularly vulnerable, as well as migrants staying in camps and detention and reception centres (Hayward et al., 2021).

Relative poverty, neighbourhood population density, and poorer labour market conditions, with subsequent dependency on on-site work and public transport, all seem to have increased the risk of vulnerable ethnic and language minorities being exposed to Covid-19 and its consequences (Hayward et al., 2021; Rostila et al., 2021). Concerns about income loss can also become a barrier to testing, quarantine, and isolation (Labberton et al., 2021).

Language barriers have been raised as a major point of concern, as lacking proficiency in the dominant languages makes it more difficult to relate to health information from authorities (Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Zechner & Romakkaniemi, 2020). However, ethnic and language minorities constitute heterogeneous population segments, and whether being a language minority exposes individuals to increased pandemic health risks seems to be strongly linked to other structural features such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, class, educational background, and their intersections (Bowleg, 2020; Maestripieri, 2021).

These complex vulnerabilities form the context within which the analysis of communication strategies is set. With the emphasis on *vulnerable* language minorities, the focus of this chapter is thus on structurally disadvantaged language minorities who have experienced increased health risks during the Covid-19 pandemic and can be defined from various, partly overlapping, perspectives.

We utilise the disaster communication ecology approach (Spialek & Houston, 2019; Perrault et al., 2014) as a framework for understanding crisis communication complexity from the public's viewpoint. Disaster communication ecology

is the application of the more general communication ecology approach to crisis contexts and has previously been used to understand, for example, severe weather events (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022).

This approach is relevant for understanding vulnerable language minorities' communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the framework is applicable to both specific communication contexts and outspoken citizen subgroups. For instance, in a study focusing on multi-ethnic societies and disaster contexts, Liu (2022) pointed out that communication ecologies may vary between groups, as communication resources central to one ethnic group may be seen as less important for another.

According to the framework, individuals, as well as groups, construct networks of communication strategies in relation to a specific context and with a set of stated goals and activities in relation to that context. The communication ecology approach thus allows reflection on communication strategies in relation to these goals and activities (Broad et al., 2013; Spialek & Houston, 2019).

Furthermore, the ecology approach divides communication strategies into predefined subcategories rather than merely studying usage patterns in general. The categories that build up an ecology are divided into 1) mediated, 2) interpersonal, and 3) organisational actions. These categories may overlap: Mediated actions can be gathering direct information from media sources central to the context (e.g., authorities) or from news outlets, while interpersonal contact may be discussing the topic with one's social networks or community groups. Organisational actions are about taking in information in more structured meetings with, for example, regional governmental organisations (Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022).

Houston (2021) applied the communication ecology framework to the Covid-19 pandemic and proposed a set of goals that may steer communication activities among the public. The goals were "to meet the goal of coping with the threat and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Houston, 2021: 888). Activities were further specified by Houston (2021) in accordance with the above-mentioned communication strategy subcategories (mediated, interpersonal, organisational actions), and thus, as focusing on 1) seeking or sharing information about the crisis, and 2) accessing support for oneself and providing support to others. In this chapter, we investigate these goals in a sample of vulnerable language minorities.

Communication ecologies also reflect the complexity of how citizens communicate in today's media landscape. Reuter and Kaufhold (2018) and Austin and colleagues (2012) pointed out that citizens are not merely receivers but also producers and spreaders of, for example, social media content, and this will influence how crisis communication is disseminated. Thus, investigating the pandemic context with the ecology approach allows both these perspectives to be studied (Houston, 2021).

Communicating the pandemic to vulnerable language minorities

Public authorities have faced challenges communicating the pandemic to non-native-speaking individuals and groups in the Nordics (Finell et al., 2021; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021). A secondary aim of this chapter is to investigate which communication efforts scholars and experts in the field have suggested as best practices for providing vulnerable language minorities with relevant information about the pandemic.

To develop suitable communication initiatives relevant for all subgroups of citizens, authority information strategies should apply a holistic view on how to meet the diverse needs of different public sectors and underlying complex inequalities (Sellnow & Veil, 2016; Skogberg et al., 2021). This includes having a readiness to handle the general uncertainty that often accompanies crisis developments and understanding the complexity of current communication landscapes and technology (Austin et al., 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008).

In the case of vulnerable language minorities, communicators should identify certain challenges related to this. For instance, Sellnow and Veil (2016) discuss the concept of competing voices, which is when subgroups in diverse societies may not be able to, or choose not to, follow public health messages due to language barriers, trust issues, or similar concerns. Instead, such citizens may rely on alternative mass or social media information sources, inside or outside the country of residence, or on influential intermediaries within their minority group.

Challenges related to competing voices become central in global crises, where authorities may overlook the potential consequences of such multicultural conversations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, some vulnerable groups have relied more on unofficial information from social media networks or news outlets in other parts of the world, something which may generate experiences of mistrust and further marginalisation (Ekblad et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

Competing voices cannot be avoided, but a key to diminishing their potentially negative impact is audience-focused initiatives aiming at inclusion by, for instance, combining traditional one-way messaging from authorities with dialogues and exchange of information with the minority group (Sellnow & Veil, 2016; Skogheim, Orderud, Ekne Ruud, & Søholt, 2020). Such efforts may occur both as “real-life” meetings and by benefiting from technology and digital media platforms. Initiatives may be beneficial in relation to managing the crisis at hand as well as for building long-term collaboration with the citizen groups.

Method

We conducted online literature searches of relevant research projects and reports in the studied countries over three periods: May–June 2021; August–September 2021; and February–March 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing at this time, and therefore, a broad search approach was used to identify as many publications as possible.

Systematic searches in literature databases were combined with scanning mass media or social media reports about ongoing projects and reviewing content from universities, authorities, and other relevant organisations' websites and similar. Publications from ongoing projects were subsequently tracked with further searches or by directly contacting involved researchers or personnel.

We used central search terms related to the topic (e.g., vulnerable language minorities, pandemic communication, authority communication strategies) in English, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish. Additional search terms were subsequently included when observed in the preliminary scanning of documents, and new searches were conducted when necessary.

Identified documents included, for example, peer-reviewed research articles, governmental and NGO reports, and position and white papers by relevant actors. In some cases, documents identified in the last period (February–March 2022) were revised or expanded versions of previously identified texts (e.g., Sheikh et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). If content in the different versions was similar, we included the most recent one, and if content differed, and information directly relevant for the chapter topic had been excluded from more recent versions, we included both documents.

We categorised documents according to their relevance to the research questions of this chapter into the following two subgroups: group A) documents consisting of empirical data about how vulnerable minorities experienced authorities' communication about the pandemic (RQs 1 & 2); and group B) recommendations about best practices for communicating the pandemic, or similar “lessons learned”-related summaries, provided by scholars and experts in the field (RQ 3).

Documents in groups A and B were analysed in relation to the research questions using the pandemic communication ecology framework provided by Houston (2021) (for specific details about method, language, etc., in the studies, see the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter). Content reflecting vulnerable language minorities' viewpoints (group A) was thus coded as mediated, interpersonal, or organisational information handling strategies; whether the person acted as a receiver, producer, or sender of information (or a combination); and whether the person categorised the communication efforts as working well, needing further improvement, or neutral.

In group A, we found thirteen relevant studies, which were relatively equally distributed between countries (four studies were found in Finland, six in

Norway, and three in Sweden). Vulnerable minority sample sizes in the studies ranged across all documents between 5–3,668, and within countries, the sample sizes ranged between 18–3,668 in Finland, 5–617 in Norway, and 36–271 in Sweden (one Swedish study did not provide a sample size).

Interviews (nine studies) and surveys (four studies) were the methods used, and in some studies, a combination was used. Minorities in the studies were either defined by main spoken language or by country of origin. Thirteen languages were included, as well as eight countries or geographical regions, partly overlapping.

In group B, the study review resulted in 26 documents. These documents included content in which various types of experts including, for instance, community leaders, voluntary organisation workers, and researchers gave their view on best practices, based on the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic to date. Most documents focused on one country (four focused on Finland, twelve on Norway, and seven on Sweden), while some had a broader focus (Council of Europe member states, Nordic countries, and Scandinavia were the focus of one document each).

We coded content in relation to RQ3 into practices that experts had categorised as having worked well, needing further improvement, or neutral, and as practices belonging to the mediated, interpersonal, or organisational information distribution subcategories in the communication ecology framework (Houston, 2021).

Some documents included data relevant for both categories A and B and, in those cases, were included in both groups (evident in the online Supplementary Material file). In some texts, in addition to structurally vulnerable language minorities, other types of language groups that should not be seen as vulnerable in this context were also included (e.g., Swedish-speaking Finns who received information in their mother tongue). In such cases, only vulnerable minorities are included in analyses. We made the decision to include or exclude based on how the language groups were defined in the analysed document. If no such information was available, we based the decision on our knowledge of the group's situation in the country in question and, if needed, consultation with colleagues active in the country.

Documents had varying research designs and included results in varying detail; therefore, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between studies regarding the research questions. We make some general comparisons in the results section below, but these should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, in some cases, content was described in general or neutral terms, while the surrounding text allowed interpretation. In these studies, we have carefully reviewed these interpretations.

Furthermore, several additional documents were identified in the literature search that included, for instance, summaries regarding the current knowledge

base on the topic or more general empirical studies, but data directly relevant for the chapter topic or country context could not be extracted. Such texts were thus only included in the initial literature review and are partly referred to in the introduction and conclusion sections of this chapter.

Results

The results are presented below in two parts: First, we discuss results regarding the vulnerable minorities' viewpoints (RQs 1 & 2), and second, we summarise the suggestions for well-functioning communication strategies for vulnerable language groups provided by professional communication experts and other central actors (RQ3). In the concluding section of the chapter, we compare the two viewpoints and propose final suggestions for relevant communication strategies. In the text, we refer to a selection of articles and reports; a complete list of identified studies can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Vulnerable language minorities' pandemic information handling strategies

In answering RQ1, we mapped central components of the Covid-19 pandemic communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable minorities. Information gathering and spreading activities were distributed across all three activity subtypes used (mediated, interpersonal, and organisational), reflecting the complexity of how media is used by citizens in general and the additional challenges a citizen faces when belonging to a vulnerable language minority.

The first communication ecology subtype, mediated activities, is about information gathering from mediated sources relevant for the context, such as authorities or mass media outlets. In the studies, such activities were the most mentioned subtype, with citizens mentioning several ways in which information from the authorities in the country of residence had reached them. Information via authorities' own online channels (e.g., websites, social media, and live broadcasts of press conferences) was central in most studies.

Some studies did not define the language of such information (Esaiasson et al., 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Skogberg et al., 2021), while others mentioned that citizens had benefited from content in the country's main language (Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021) or content translated to their own language (Brekke, 2021a; Ojwang, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2021). Usage choices naturally reflected user proficiency in the country's main language, and later in the pandemic, more information had been made available in several minority languages in all three countries.

Esaiasson and colleagues (2020) found that usage of authority websites was less common among Swedish immigrants who did not identify as a part

of the country. Accordingly, a few studies mentioned how citizens searched for information directly from health authorities in their former home country (i.e., not country of residence) via websites or similar mediated channels (Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021).

Another type of mediated communication activity mentioned by citizens in several cases was more direct mediated outreach strategies from authorities in their country of residence. This communication included receiving SMS messages from authorities or reading information posters placed in, for instance, building staircases in the area (Brekke, 2021b; Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021).

The mediated information found via authorities' own media channels was naturally combined with content that reached the citizens indirectly via traditional mass media news outlets and their social media channels. Again, some studies did not define the language of such mass media content (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Skogberg et al., 2021). In the studies that did, citizens used both mass media content in the country's main language (Brekke, 2021a; Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021) and in their own language.

Regarding the latter, content was, in some languages, found via the main national media companies, such as the Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK), while some language minorities could also benefit from smaller radio stations, or similar, operated by minority groups in the country of residence (Brekke, 2021b; Ekblad et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021). Alongside mass media outlets in the country of residence, news media and similar in the former home country were central, especially for those with weak language skills in the Nordic languages (Esaiaasson et al., 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

A few studies mentioned additional mediated information sources: Ojwang (2020) included research institutions and scientific journals, while Esaiaasson and colleagues (2020) mentioned alternative news media. In addition, most studies mentioned social media usage in general without detailing the type of usage, which can include all the above-mentioned mediated sources but also interpersonal communication, as mentioned in the section below.

Moving on to the second dimension of communication efforts in the communication ecology framework, interpersonal contacts are when information about a topic is spread via direct contact with peers or similar. A clear result from the analyses is that, in the reviewed minority groups, such strategies became especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Family, friends, colleagues, and other peers were central in information gathering. Interpersonal support was illustrated in several ways in the studies, with citizens in all three countries turning to family, workplace colleagues, fellow students, and similar peers both via direct face-to-face contact and social media. With these contacts, citizens strived to collect more information, get help

with interpreting information received, and spread previously collected information themselves (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). Several studies (Finell et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021; Skogberg et al., 2021) mentioned this as one of the most central or best forms of support. The Swedish sample in Ekblad and colleagues' (2021) study reported that the first information that reached them in their mother tongue was via such channels.

As mentioned above, the relevance of social media usage generally (i.e., without specification of how social media was used and thus potentially including mediated or interpersonal communication) was mentioned in several studies (Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021). Swedish samples (Esaiasson et al., 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021) mentioned that social media became more central for citizens who lacked language skills in the country's main language. Norwegian minorities also combined information that they had received directly from mass media in their former home countries with content that their family and friends there had identified and then forwarded via, for instance, social media (Brekke, 2021b; Madar et al., 2022).

Some studies mentioned a more specific form of interpersonal collaboration between authorities and minority citizens: information ambassadors (Brekke, 2021a; Finell et al., 2021). Such ambassadors are members of the community that have the task of distributing health information to other citizens. The ambassadors are supported by the authorities and sometimes work on a voluntary basis or as employed communicators.

The ambassadors' activities include both interpersonal and organisational communication efforts (see more about the latter below). Interpersonal communication activities involving ambassadors in Finland and Norway included, for instance, face-to-face contact and making and spreading videos and similar content to social media networks (Brekke, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021). In many cases, the ambassadors had been actively spreading information about the pandemic to peers already before they became ambassadors (Brekke, 2021a; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

The third communication effort dimension included in the communication ecology framework is organisational contacts, which consists of the information that is disseminated in contact between citizens and organisations. Such activities may overlap with interpersonal contacts, as a citizen often discusses information received from an organisation with peers or family, during or after the organised activities.

Organisational contacts mentioned in the studies ranged from very structured, such as meetings with the authorities, to more unstructured, such as groups for sports or leisure activities. Structured organised meetings between authorities and voluntary immigrant organisations or other organised activities, such as religious gatherings, school meetings, or associations activities, were mentioned as important sources in all three countries (Ekblad et al., 2021;

Ojwang, 2020; Skogberg et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

Several types of unstructured meetings between health authorities and citizens were also mentioned in the samples. One such type of meeting was visits to healthcare institutions or participation in school or group leisure activities, during which information could be gathered and discussed and later forwarded to peers (Ekblad et al., 2021; Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021). Another type of meeting, mentioned in Brekke (2021b), was authorities' outreach activities in Norway, such as stands in public places and giving information door-to-door in the community.

Vulnerable language minorities' experiences of pandemic communication

RQ2 focused on which mediated, interpersonal, and organisational communication activities citizens in vulnerable groups experienced as well-functioning and which communication did not work. The results below are presented in the same order as previously.

Beginning with mediated information (i.e., content gathered from media sources) from authorities in the country of residence, citizens experienced several issues with content gathered directly from authorities' online channels (such as websites or social media). The problems were related to the information provided by the authorities and the language used.

Ekblad and colleagues (2021) found in a Swedish sample that information in the country's main language was difficult to understand due to the complexity of the messages, and Gele's research team (2021) mentioned equivalent results for information from authorities in general in Norway. Brekke (2021a) mentioned that Norwegian material translated into minority languages included symbols that were difficult for citizens with non-Norwegian cultural backgrounds to interpret.

Storstein Spilker and colleagues (2021) found that translations were sometimes difficult to find, of poor quality, or did not include the most current information. Furthermore, in some cases, minorities distrusted the sources behind the published material (i.e., the authorities) due to previous experiences living in conflict areas (Brekke, 2021a; Gele et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the Norwegian sample in Madar and colleagues' (2022) study listed health authorities' websites as the most important source of information. Ojwang (2020) reported that, in Finland, while authorities' online sources were not seen as the most useful source of information, they were the most trustworthy. Another Finnish study, by Skogberg and colleagues (2021), reported that 75 per cent of their sample had found adequate information via such information sources. Regarding citizens who had gathered mediated information from health authorities in their former home country, a study by

Finell and colleagues (2021) showed that one-third of Finnish minorities thought that this information was useful.

Mediated authority outreach strategies more directly aimed at residents belonging to vulnerable language minority groups, such as SMS messaging or information posters in building staircases, were experienced as positive in Finland, where the recipients of SMS messages felt more secure (Finell et al., 2021). Skogheim and colleagues (2021), in Norway, mentioned more critical views, for example, that SMS content was difficult to understand and should have been provided in more languages. Storstein Spilker and colleagues (2021) reported that information posters in building staircases were seen as positive, as they conveyed the seriousness of the situation.

Several studies reported that information from traditional mass media news outlets and their social media, or similar online channels, was seen as very relevant, trustworthy, or important (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022). For instance, Skogberg's team (2021) reported that approximately 90 per cent of their sample thought that information found in Finnish media, and two-thirds thought that content in foreign media, was adequate. Skogheim and colleagues (2021) also reported that Norwegian minorities had followed the country's news media during the Covid-19 pandemic more than before. On the other hand, a Finnish study (Finell et al., 2021) found that some minorities experienced the information provided by mass media as exaggerating the risks of the pandemic.

A specific form of mass media outlet in the country of residence, such as regional radio channels or web pages operated by minority groups, were seen as very important (Brekke, 2021a; Sheikh et al., 2021). This was due to both providing content in their main language and being more culturally relevant.

Regarding information provided by mass media in former home countries, participants in a Swedish study (Ekblad et al., 2021) experienced these as both positive and negative. Information reached them faster via these channels, but reports were sometimes seen as more dramatic. A Norwegian sample also mentioned the risk of news from outside the country not being in line with the current national recommendations (Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). Some samples also saw social media usage in general – without specifying the type of usage – as central. However, citizens also highlighted the need for caution when interpreting content, as it may include false information (Ojwang, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2021).

Moving on to interpersonal communication strategies, as stated in the section above, such communication with family, friends, colleagues, or other peers was seen as very important during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many benefited from younger peers with better language skills who translated and provided more relevant cultural meaning to the content (Brekke, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021). However, the Norwegian sample in Storstein Spilker and colleagues'

(2021) study experienced that – since the available authority information was sometimes of poor quality or did not include the most current information – it was difficult to initiate grassroots information-spreading initiatives.

Information ambassadors – community representatives with the task of distributing pandemic information to citizens – were a form of peer communication that citizens experienced as relevant for both interpersonal and organisational communication. Several authors (Brekke, 2021a; Finell et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021) listed traits that, according to their samples, describe a good ambassador or similar voluntary key person: having knowledge of and respect for the local minority community; having insight into how society in general and the healthcare system works; and having good language skills.

Brekke (2021a) underlined the importance of such ambassadors for bridging the gap between hard-to-reach citizens and authorities. However, a negative aspect mentioned by Storstein Spilker and colleagues' (2021) Norwegian sample was that, at least when such work was voluntary, too much responsibility was put on the ambassadors or volunteers to coordinate the activities and keep themselves updated with the most current developments.

The third subcategory of communication strategies was organisational efforts, when information is disseminated between the citizens and organisations. One such form was structured organised meetings arranged, for example, in the local community. A Finnish sample saw such meetings as relevant for enabling collaboration with the authorities (Finell et al., 2021). Swedish minorities mentioned that activities where minority organisations acted as a go-between were positive, as such actors were easier to trust (Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

Furthermore, some in the samples also experienced unstructured meetings – such as being in contact with organisational representatives at healthcare institutions or when participating in school or leisure activities – as a relevant form of communication. These unstructured meetings were seen as beneficial because they provided opportunities to engage in direct discussion regarding central topics with varying organisations (Ekblad et al., 2021; Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021).

The above-mentioned citizen information ambassadors were, in some studies, highlighted as central figures in organisational communication strategies. Brekke (2021a) mentioned organised meetings with citizens arranged by a local association and in which ambassadors participated. They were seen as very useful, as the forums included both spreading information to minority citizens and feedback about how to further improve communication from the authorities, with ambassadors acting as mediators.

Best practices for pandemic communication with vulnerable language minorities

RQ3 focused on which pandemic communication efforts for vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden have been suggested as best practices by scholars and experts in the field. This part of the results section thus aims to add professional communicator viewpoints to the experiences of minority citizens – while it does not aim to give a complete description of all the information-spreading activities that have been conducted by authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section follows the same layout as the first part of the results, going through the best practices within mediated, interpersonal, and organisational communication efforts. Suggestions for the best practices related to interpersonal and organisational communication were, in the reviewed studies, usually presented together and are thus presented in the same section below.

Before presenting communication efforts within the three communication ecology framework categories, some general conclusions can be made. Documents showed that the key for best practices in future minority communication seems to be to combine established routines with new, proactive, and creative ways of reaching out. Proactive planning should be done together with representatives for central minorities in the region to design well-working communication strategies *with* them, not only *for* them (Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021). Planning in advance is central, as relevant strategies and stable technology need to be in place and ready to use in the acute phase of a crisis and include an infrastructure that allows rapid updating during crisis developments (Esaiasson et al., 2020; IMDi, 2020; Rolig, 2021; Skogberg et al., 2021).

Regarding mediated communication efforts, identifying the specific language-related needs, preferred media usage patterns, and cultural conditions (e.g., authority trust issues) of the regional minority groups is important. This enables communicators to choose the most relevant mediated channels (e.g., social media, easily accessed web pages, leaflets) and formats (e.g., short texts, videos, animations, audio-based material), and to identify trustworthy “faces” to convey messages (e.g., minority representatives) (Brekke, 2021a, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Orderud et al., 2021; IMDi, 2020; Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Furthermore, chosen mediated channels, such as dedicated web pages or social media accounts, should be easy to find and navigate (Madar et al., 2022; NOU, 2021). To avoid misunderstandings, communicated messages should include simple and clear language and symbols and, when possible, relate to everyday issues relevant to the target group (NOU, 2021; Rolig, 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

However, minorities are heterogeneous groups, and what works in one minority community may not necessarily work in another (Diaz et al., 2020; IMDi, 2020; Svenonius, 2020). Close contact with the groups is therefore needed. Furthermore, resources may become a problem as “hidden” work related to translating information, mapping receiver group needs, and constructing culturally relevant information directly addressed to the groups can be costly and time-consuming (Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Regarding the other dimensions in the communication ecology framework, interpersonal and organisational communication, experts in the reviewed studies clearly see a need for more focus on such strategies in the future. Several studies highlighted the relevance and strength of collaborating with the networks of minority citizen volunteers and ambassadors that arose during the pandemic (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Brekke, 2021a; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Orderud et al., 2021; IMDi, 2020; Valeriani et al., 2020).

Engaging and working together with influential representatives from the communities, as well as community organisations such as nongovernmental organisations or religious groups, has many benefits. Studies have shown that such efforts allow for translated, culturally or linguistically addressed, and honest two-way information strategies (e.g., regarding preventive measures or regional virus exposure in the subgroup) (Ekblad et al., 2021; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Orderud et al., 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, Ekne Ruud, & Søholt, 2020; Valeriani et al., 2020) and for distributing information equally across citizen subgroups (Ekblad et al., 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Furthermore, studies showed that collaboration is central to avoid content or strategies where minorities are stigmatised (Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021), to allow for coordination of suitable face-to-face campaigns in the community (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Brekke, 2021b; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.), and to increase trust towards authorities among minority communities (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

However, volunteer communication work comes with limitations regarding, for instance, readiness to act swiftly when needed, capacity to design well-working information content, and level of knowledge about the topics communicated. It is also difficult to get objective data regarding the reach of, and response to, information disseminated by volunteers or information ambassadors, and the benefits of voluntary efforts need to be weighed against needed resources (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Diaz et al., 2020; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021).

Therefore, authorities must have the official responsibility and coordination of interpersonal and organisational collaboration efforts and outreach infrastructures. They should include minority citizen representatives and organisations in a way that takes these limitations into account but still allows

for flexibility and thinking “outside the box” (IMDi, 2020; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Svenonius, 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021). The economic resources needed for such collaboration and voluntary work should also be proactively planned for (Diaz et al., 2020).

Conclusions

Drawing on communication ecology frameworks (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Broad et al., 2013) in contexts of complex vulnerability (Bowleg, 2020), this chapter investigated how language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis built on secondary data: a systematic review of scientific research published before March 2022.

We used the communication ecology framework approach, as this allowed communication efforts to be divided into three defined subgroups (Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022) as well as positioning efforts in relation to a specific communication goal: “to meet the goal of coping with the threat and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Houston, 2021: 888). We examined which communication activities were included in the communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable language minorities (RQ1) and which activities they experienced as well-functioning or requiring further improvement (RQ2). Moreover, we summarised scholarly and expert suggestions for best practices regarding pandemic communication efforts targeted to these groups (RQ3).

The analysis of vulnerable language groups’ own experiences showed that mediated activities were the most common communication effort referred to in the data. In general terms, such information provided by authorities or mass media was considered relevant and trustworthy. However, access to and use of public health information mirrored the socio-political position of receivers in society. This was linked to proficiency in the majority language, patterns of media use, and a sense of trust and societal belonging. Thus, the results supported previous research on the vulnerable position of minorities who lacked contact with social networks or had limited skills in the country’s main language (Ahmed et al., 2020; Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

Our study showed that translated public information in one’s mother tongue provided broader access but did not resolve issues of sender legitimacy and cultural barriers to information. Language barriers seemed to make news media from former home countries and in one’s mother tongue important for many groups. Interpersonal contacts emerged as significant and easily accessible, referring to face-to-face contacts as well as social media interaction.

Particularly in a social media context, receivers also appeared as senders, blurring the traditional sender-receiver nexus. However, bridge-builders with a more explicit information-distribution mission received specific attention in the

studies. These communication ambassadors were well-received by communities since they simultaneously possessed language skills, local knowledge, and societal expertise. Despite that, the division of responsibility between bridge-builders and authorities was sometimes unclear or unspoken.

Organisational contacts were conceived of as important for receiving information at local levels, ranging from formal and informal authority-arranged outreach activities to bureaucratic or institutional encounters and ad hoc communal gatherings. The benefit of organisational and interpersonal contacts was that the interactional nature of these communication efforts enabled the asking of questions and clarification of uncertainties in a different way than mediated activities.

Our results illustrate how the complexity of crisis communication in the current media landscape (Austin et al., 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008) was experienced in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic among vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Competing voices (Sellnow & Veil, 2016) affected citizens' understanding of the crisis, both via the varying sources used for taking in information from authorities and the mass media and due to citizens themselves acting as both receivers and senders of information (Houston, 2021; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018).

Finally, in addition to examining the latest bottom-up experiences, we analysed recommendations for the future as proposed by researchers or experts in the reviewed publications. The key to future best practices seems to be combining established communication routines with novel, proactive, and creative outreach activities, planned together *with* community representatives, not only *for* them. That way, traditional distinctions between not only sender and receiver, but also between professional communicators and citizens, are increasingly fluent and shifting.

Future research should thus focus on how collaborations and interactions between authorities and citizens may take form and in which ways the actors can benefit from each other. Furthermore, scholars should ensure that the vulnerable minority perspective is included in studies. The results from our analyses illustrate this need to broaden the scholarly perspective: Only 13 documents were identified that included the minority viewpoint.

To conclude, when addressing vulnerability in the public realm, it is important to ask who is vulnerable, why they are vulnerable, and what they are vulnerable to (McLaren et al., 2020). While age and certain medical conditions have caused health-related vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic, being a linguistic minority has also emerged as a disadvantaged social category. Indeed, while efficient communication strategies must recognise language diversity, communication formats, and the legitimacy of the senders, it is also important to secure socioeconomic resources for the wider population to enable equal participation in an increasingly digitised public life. Hence, in the context of the Covid-19

pandemic, linguistic vulnerability describes a complex set of processes and circumstances that creates disadvantages in relation to health communication. These complex vulnerabilities highlight the need for diversified communication initiatives to secure equal access to information and social and healthcare services (Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Zechner & Romakkaniemi, 2020).

Some limitations regarding the results of this chapter should be pointed out. As the results are based on secondary analyses of published studies and other documents, they are limited by the data inclusion choices made by the original authors. Furthermore, parts of the analysed content were, in the original publications, described in general or neutral terms, while the surrounding text allowed for interpretation. We carefully reviewed how we interpreted such material, but it is reasonable to reiterate that less information was available about such content in the original texts. Thus, interpretation of this chapter's results should have these limitations in mind.

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