
Unconventional Communicators in the Corona Crisis

FINAL REPORT

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Project information

Project name

Unconventional Communicators in the Corona Crisis

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Principal Investigator:

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Other research team members:

Researchers: M.Soc.Sc. Tuomas Heikkilä, M.Soc.Sc. Juho Pääkkönen, Dr.Econ/Docent Essi Pöyry, M. Phil. Hanna Reinikainen, Dr. Emily Öhman. *Collaborators:* Professor Vilma Luoma-aho (Jyväskylän yliopisto), Docent Mikko Jauho (sociology/CCSR/Uni Helsinki), D.Soc.Sc. Anna Rantasila (Uni Tampere), D.Soc.Sc. Joonas Koivukoski (Helsingin yliopisto), Docent Laura Olkkonen (LUT University), Assistan Professor Tijs van den Broek (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) . *Research assistants:* B.Soc.Sc. Hilma Anttila, M.Soc.Sc. Nuppu Pelevina.

The project also collaborated with projects *Koronakriisin julkinen dynamiikka* (HSS Foundation, professor Esa Väliverronen, M.Soc.Sc. Elina Uutela, Uni Helsinki) and *Crisis Narratives* (Academy of Finland, professor of practice Nitin Sawhney and professor Teemu Leinonen, Aalto University; Jonas Sivelä, THL).

Project summary:

The UnCoCo project investigated how information and stories related to the coronavirus circulated and were framed in networks of unconventional messengers. We conceptualize the communication by unconventional communicators, such as social media influencers and anonymous accounts, as a societal discussion that aims to legitimize or delegitimize official communication by authorities and the media. The project used large social media datasets and studied them with digital research methods and language technology approaches.

Project goal:

UnCoCo asked, in what ways did unconventional communicators challenge and support official corona communication and the institutions that produce it? What kind of communicative activity did they engage in? How did different communicative framings and forms of digital communication function in this process?

In accordance with the original plan, we focused on three different groups of actors:

- (C1) social media influencers in campaign cooperation with authorities;
- (C2) spontaneously organized collectives producing data-based information and data visualizations (Eroonkoronasta.fi and Pandemia.fi); and
- (C3) anonymous messengers on Twitter and anonymous online services (e.g. Jodel).

The goal was achieved (on a scale of 1-5; 1=badly, 5=excellently): 4

Main results

💡 **Social media is a key channel for evaluating the actions of those in power and authorities - both for individuals and collectives. Communication is often emotional and the means vary from direct criticism to creative humor.**

- Using computational methods, we analyze the online discussion about THL during the first two corona waves in Finland. In the analysis, we combined sentiment analysis, which measures emotional intensity, and topic modeling, which identifies themes. **The discussion about THL was quite lively and emotionally charged throughout**, especially during the first Covid-19 wave. The preliminary results show that vocabulary expressing trust was used relatively more in the discussion related to mask recommendations and corona guidelines than in the discussion directly about THL's operations. Vocabulary expressing fear and anger was relatively used the most in discussions related to deaths and infections. (C2/C3)
- During the pandemic, pseudo-anonymous Twitter users have excelled as very productive Covid-19 messengers who fiercely challenged key corona actors and selected methods of action – for example, restriction measures, infection tracking, and vaccination. The accounts were also cooperating with each other. **Instead of lone activists, we found large pseudo-anonymous communities** whose members share the same goals, resources and tactics. The three largest communities—suppressors, expert questioners, and anti-government—also support and seek recognition from more established civic movements and political parties. (C3)
- In spring 2020, parody accounts performing authorities responsible for corona appeared on Twitter. The accounts used verbal and visual online communication to undermine the credibility of authorities. They commented on the corona measures in an ironic tone, presented the authorities as incompetent and ineffective by means of parody, and aimed for a direct conversation with their targets. As the pandemic progressed, the tone changed from humorous to direct criticism. The overall goal of the accounts seemed to have been to promote stricter corona measures. (C3)

💡 **Social media influencers have their place as shapers and mediators of social debate, especially in an emotional crisis situation. With their help, target groups that have been difficult for official communication - for example, young people - are targeted.**

- We investigated the communication campaigns implemented by public authorities in 2020, which utilized social media influencers. They wanted to reach, among other things, young people, who may be difficult to reach with more traditional means. Social influencers were also believed to be able to influence citizens' behavior and appeal to their emotions. A closer analysis of the “#coronafacts” campaign showed that social media influencers offered their followers peer support and acted as role models during various restrictions. The posts of medical influencers generated the most interaction. Social influencers can influence social norms thanks to emotional and relatable communication. (C1)

💡 **Anonymous social media is an important channel for collective processing of a crisis situation and also offers room for peer support.**

- The anonymous discussion on the corona channel of the Jodel application was a mixture of collective handling of the pandemic everyday, criticizing and moralizing the behavior of others, and intensively following the epidemic. Strict restrictions were supported in the discussions, but there were also opposing views. The channel was a platform for peer support, where symptoms and own activities were discussed and mental well-being was taken care of. Thanks to anonymity, it was possible to share feelings that would not be socially acceptable to show in public. (C3)



A popular final report of the project was produced jointly with the “Koronakriisin julkinen dynamiikka” project.

Report is available only in Finnish:

https://blogs.helsinki.fi/uncocoproject/files/2022/11/report_UnCoCo-KJD-lores.pdf

Project output

Publications, articles and other writings (with links)

- Pöyry, E., Reinikainen, H., & Luoma-Aho, V. (2022). The Role of Social Media Influencers in Public Health Communication: Case COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16(3), 469–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2042694>
- Laaksonen, S-M., Uutela, E., Pöyry, E. & Jauho, M., (2022). Asiantuntijan uudet housut: lääkärit vaikuttajina Instagramissa. *Duodecim* 138, 24, 2225-2230. <https://www.duodecimlehti.fi/lehti/2022/24/duo17175>
- Laaksonen, S-M., Pääkkönen, J. & Öhman, E. (2023, *in press*). From hate speech recognition to happiness indexing: critical issues in datafication of emotion in text mining. In: *Handbook of Critical Studies of Artificial Intelligence*. Lindgren, S. (toim.). Edward Elgar Publishers.
- Heikkilä, T., Laaksonen, S-M., Väliverronen, E. (2022). Contesting the Covid-19 Consensus: Connective Action of Pseudoanonymous Accounts on Finnish Twitter. In *Proceedings of AoIR 2022*, available via *AoIR Selected Papers for Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2022i0.13017>
- Reinikainen, H.; Laaksonen, S-M., Pöyry, E. & Luoma-aho, V. (2022). Conquering the liminal space: Strategic social media influencer communication in the Finnish public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. In: Niininen, O. et al. (Eds.), *Social media for progressive PR*. Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003177791-15/conquering-liminal-space-hanna-reinikainen-salla-maaria-laaksonen-essi-p%C3%B6yry-vilma-luoma-aho>
- Laaksonen, S-M. & Rantasila, A. (2021). Rocketing sheep: Affective discipline in anonymous mobile social media Jodel during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of AoIR 2022: AoIR Selected Papers for Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12198>
- Väliverronen, E., Laaksonen, S-M., Jauho, M. & Jallinoja, P. (2020). Liberalists and data-solutionists: redefining expertise in Twitter debates on coronavirus in Finland. *Journal of Science Communication*, 19(5). [[open access](#)]
- Koivukoski, J. & Laaksonen, S-M. (*submitted manuscript*). Parody accounts as symbolic sanctioning of institutional actors in the Covid19 pandemic.
- Heikkilä, T.; Laaksonen, S-M. & Pohjonen, M. (*submitted manuscript*). Covid-19 content moderation and platform accountability.
- Laaksonen, S-M.; Pääkkönen, J. & Öhman E. (*manuscript in preparation*). Affective delegitimization of the health authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Uutela, E.; Jauho, M., Pöyry, E. & Laaksonen, S-M. (*manuscript in preparation*). Doctors of Instagram: How formal expertise is utilized in social media communication.
- Laaksonen, S-M.; Olkkonen, L. & van den Broek, T. (*manuscript in preparation*). Pandemic Corporate Citizens: Communicative accomplishment of risk, safety and responsibility by Nordic companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Short paper presented in *2023 Preconference International Communication Association (ICA) Preconference: Organizing in the Face of Global Crises*.
- Reinikainen, H. & Pöyry E. (2021). Somevaikuttajat koronaviestinnässä – Faktaa koronasta -kampanjan analyysia. Blog post on Rajapinta and Ilmiö (ilmiomedia.fi) <https://rajapinta.co/2021/12/09/somevaikuttajat-koronaviestinnassa-faktaa-koronasta-kampanjan-analyysia/>
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2021). Koronavirus ja numeroiden tenho. Blog post on Rajapinta. <https://rajapinta.co/2020/03/17/koronavirus-ja-numeroiden-tenho/>

Presentations in academic conferences

- Laaksonen, S-M. (June 2023). Continuums of identity and anonymity on social media platforms. *NordEthics NOS-HS workshop*, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2022). Tracing discussions on anonymous, ephemeral and mobile social media: Adventures in the Jodel app. Presentation at the *Digital Research Data and Human Sciences DRDHum 2022*, Jyväskylä, Finland, Dec 1-3, 2022.
- Heikkilä, T. KJ., Laaksonen, S-M. & Väliverronen, E., (November 2023). Contesting the Covid-19 consensus: connective action of pseudoanonymous accounts on Finnish Twitter. Presentation at the *AoIR 2022 conference*, Dublin, Ireland.
- Heikkilä, T. KJ., Laaksonen, S-M. & Pohjonen, M. (October 2022). COVID-19 content moderation and platform accountability. Presentation at *ECREA 2022 conference*, Aarhus, Denmark.
- Heikkilä, T., Laaksonen, S-M. (2022). Connective Action of Pseudoanonymous Accounts on Finnish Twitter. *Centre for Sociology of Democracy Workshop: Democratic futures: New spaces, practices and approaches*. 16.6.2022.
- Heikkilä, T., Laaksonen, S-M., Pohjonen, M. (2022). Covid-19 content moderation and platform accountability. Presentation at the *MEVI-päivät 2022*, 22.-23.4.2022, Turku, Finland.
- Heikkilä, T., Laaksonen, S-M., Väliverronen, E. & Anttila, H. (2022). Contesting the Covid-19 Consensus: Connective Action of Pseudoanonymous Accounts on Finnish Twitter. Presentation at *Sosiologipäivät 2022*, University of Jyväskylä / Zoom.
- Uutela, E; Pöyry, E; Jauho, M; Laaksonen, S-M. (February 2022). Lääkärit Instagramissa: perinteisen asiantuntijuuden puolustamista vai laajentamista? *VAKKI-symposium*, University of Vaasa.
- Laaksonen, S-M. & Rantasila, A. (2021) Sheep and rockets: Peer surveillance and affective discipline in Jodel during the Covid-19 pandemic. Paper presented in *Nordmedia 2021 Conference*, Online/Reykjavik, Iceland, August 2021, and *ICA22*, Paris, France, May 2022.
- Reinikainen H., Pöyry E., Laaksonen, S-M. & Luoma-aho, V. (2021). Crisis communication through social media influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paper presented in *Nordmedia 2021 Conference*, Online/Reykjavik, Iceland, August 2021.
- Koivukoski, J. & Laaksonen, S-M. (March 2021). Parody accounts for the symbolic sanctioning of institutional actors in the Covid19 pandemic. Presentation at *Sosiologipäivät 2021*, Helsinki/online.

Other public talks, lectures and trainings

- Laaksonen, S-M. (2022). Unconventional communicators on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic: from influencers to pseudoanonymous voices. [Crisis Narratives Research Day](#) on 9th of May 2022, THL, Finland.
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2022). Kuka päättää mistä verkossa keskustellaan? Informaatiovaikuttaminen ja alustayhteiskunta. *IT-oikeuden yhdistyksen webinaari: Informaatiovaikuttaminen verkossa - mitä seuraavaksi?* 29.3.2022
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2021). Kuka päättää, mistä verkossa keskustellaan? Alustojen ja algoritmien vaikutus mediatodellisuuteen. Disinformaatio ja asiantuntijuuden muutos -seminaari Turun kirjastoille 4.11.2021
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2021). Vaihtoehtoiset viestijät koronakriisissä. Lecture on a course Poliittinen viestintä -kursilla, Helsingin yliopisto, 13.10.2021.
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2021). Tieto ja valetieto teknologisessa mediaympäristössä. Mikkelin Tieteen päivät 13.4.2021.
- Laaksonen, S-M. (2021). Unconventional communicators in the corona crisis. Presentation in the *TINT Perspectives on Science seminar* 19.4.
- Pöyry, E. (2021). Lecture on a course *Sociotechnical (re)construction of consumer society* (Helsingin yliopisto)

Theses finished or in progress

- Heikkilä, Tuomas. *Combating online misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond*. PhD dissertation, media and communication studies, University of Helsinki.
- Hilma Anttila, Master's thesis, Environmental change and Global sustainability -program, University of Helsinki

Media coverage (newspaper, tv, radio, other media)

- Helsingin Sanomat 24.1.2023. ["Vedettiin vitsi vähän liian pitkälle" – Lääkärit jakautuivat kuppikuntiin, jotka syyttävät toisiaan somessa armotta.](#)
- Helsingin Sanomat 17.1.2023. ["Dosentti harmittelee THL:n päätöstä lähteä Twitteristä: "Tarvitaan järjen majakoita".](#)
- STT 16.1.2023. Yli lääkäri Hanna Nohynek harkitsee viestipalvelu Twitterin hylkäämistä, THL päätti jo lopettaa Twitter-julkaisut. Text available for example on [Salon Seudun Sanomat](#)
- Times Higher Education 24.5.2020. [Science 'risks coronavirus backlash' as it is drawn into politics.](#)
- YLE Uutiset 4.1.2022 [Jos sinulla on Kela-huolia, vero-ongelmia tai jopa ulosotto vaanii, ei hätää! Virastot auttavat nykyään anonyymissä Jodelissa.](#)
- HS 23.5.2021 [Kuntavaalit "Älkää antako tälle apinalaumalle mitään näkyvyyttä" – Toimittaja Minja Rantavaara vietti viikon Jodelissa](#)
- Project website can be found on <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/uncocoproject/> and project updates have been shared on Twitter with hashtags #uncoco ja #uncocoproject

Research material produced

Social media data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social media messages related to Faktaakoronasta- ja virtuaalivappu campaigns from Instagram ja Mohawk database (in total circa 3,500 messages). (C1)• Instagram posts by actively communicating Finnish medical doctors on Insagram during 2020-2021 (n=2,136) (C1)• Over 4,2 million tweets from 229 pseudoanonymous account between 1/2020-10/2021 (C3, C2)• All social media messages than mention THL tai @THLorg during 2020-2022, collected from the Mohawk database (C3, C2)• Tweets from eight central parody accounts targeting the authorities responsible for the Covid-19 response during 2020-2022 (circa 29,000 messages) (C3)• Finnish language tweets that mention Covid-19 related keywords and contain an image or a video (n=282 221) (C2, C3)
Other media data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online and press material related to the public communication campaigns that collaborated with social media influencers (C1)• News blog posts by Facebook, Google and Twitterin related to Covid-19 (n=896)• Twitter tweets, website screenshots and scrapes from Endcoronavirus.org, Eroonkoronasta.fi, Pandemia.fi (C2)• Online ethnography data collected in Jodel 30.11. - 31.12.2020 (C3)
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews of the public authorities involved in the communication campaigns that collaborated with social media influencers (n=5) (C1)

Storage location for the data for possible further use

The materials are personal data, which is why sharing them as open data is not possible due to GDPR regulation and research ethics. However, you can inquire about public social media materials from the project manager.