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Fighting COVID-19 with the team of 5 million: Aotearoa New Zealand government communication during the 2020 lockdown

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ABSTRACT

Aotearoa New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is considered one of the best in the world. A major component of the government response was the communication of public health measures. In this paper, we approach Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's daily press briefings with the Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield as a case study of government communication during a public health crisis. A reflexive thematic analysis leads us to identify three key themes: 1) open, honest and straightforward communication; 2) distinctive and motivational language; and 3) expressions of care. Situating our findings in the fields of crisis communication, science communication and psychology, we argue that the messages presented in the 2020 daily briefings supported the New Zealand Government's COVID-19 elimination strategy through building trust with the audience and framing the 'lockdown' as an urgent, collective and meaningful cause, mobilising New Zealanders to support public health measures.

1. A highly praised COVID-19 elimination strategy

Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy, which involved a March 26, 2020 to April 27, 2020 'lockdown',¹ has been commended worldwide. In June 2020, the *Economist Intelligence Unit (2020)* ranked Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 policy response as the best of 21 OECD countries. In November 2020, Bloomberg named Aotearoa New Zealand as the best country in the world to live in during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chang et al., 2020). Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been called an exceptional crisis leader (Wilson, 2020) and the New Zealand Government COVID-19 communications strategy has been referred to as a "masterclass" (Grieve, 2020).

Aotearoa New Zealand's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed by the Ministry of Health (2020) on February 28, 2020. On 15 March, Ardern announced border closures and managed isolation procedures in the first of a series of daily press briefings (referred to here as 'daily briefings') with Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield (see Fig. 1). On 21 March, with 52 cases of COVID-19, Ardern outlined a four-level alert system designed to slow the spread of the virus. Under Alert Level 2, people were asked to work from home if possible, cancel non-essential travel, and stay home if unwell or over 70. On 23 March, with 102

cases of COVID-19 and community transmission confirmed, Ardern announced an immediate move to a more restricted Alert Level 3 and gave 48 hours to prepare for Alert Level 4. A national state of emergency was declared, and COVID-19 testing and contact tracing was scaled up. The country's first death from COVID-19 was announced at the 29 March daily briefing. Daily cases peaked, at 89, on 5 April.

Restrictions began to be lifted once daily cases had fallen to single figures. An easing to Level 3 was made on 27 April, and to Level 2 on 13 May, which marked the last of this series of daily briefings. On 8 June, after 1504 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 22 deaths, but with no active cases, the country entered Alert Level 1, the only restrictions now at the border. Daily briefings resumed, for a period of 19 days from August 12, 2020, for three days from February 14, 2021, and for seven days from February 28, 2021, when community outbreaks of COVID-19 led to the re-introduction of Alert Level 3 in Auckland.

Many factors contributed to the success of Aotearoa New Zealand's public health response. They include the relatively late arrival of the virus (28 February as compared to 31 January in the UK, for example), the adoption of a science-led approach, the country's location as an island in the South Pacific which meant border closures were effective, and high levels of public trust in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership

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¹ Of four COVID-19 Alert Levels (<https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system>), Alert Levels 3 and 4 are frequently referred to, including by the Prime Minister in her daily briefings, as 'lockdown'.

following her management of previous crises (McGuire et al., 2020; Geoghegan et al., 2021). In this paper, we focus on the role of government communications in Aotearoa's New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy. Crisis communication scholars argue that effective government communication during a crisis can increase public resilience (Vardavas et al., 2020) and support policy initiatives (Quinn et al., 2013). Research into crisis communication and risk communication² in Aotearoa New Zealand has focused on national disasters such as the Canterbury earthquakes in 2010–2011, and international health crises such as the 2009–2010 H1N1 pandemic. This research shows that informational needs of those affected by a disaster or crisis develop over time (Becker et al., 2019), and communications should include key information about the crisis as well as offer self-care strategies and psychosocial support (Wein et al., 2015). Furthermore, New Zealanders assess communications that align with their values (Bürgelt et al., 2009) and respond to clear and accurate communication conveyed by leaders who they trust (Gray et al., 2012). Psychologist Sarb Johal, one of the researchers behind these studies, was a part of the government's overall communications campaign (see Unite against COVID-19 at Fig. 2, below), and worked to ensure that evidence-based research informed all government communications (Major & Dalton, 2020).

When analysing crisis communications, scholars argue that it is important to assess *what* is being communicated (e.g., key messages or content), *who* is speaking or delivering the message, and *how* the key messages are communicated (Quinn et al., 2013; Larson & Heymann, 2010). To address *how* government communications were delivered, we focus here on daily briefings³ between 15 March and May 13, 2020. The briefings, which typically started at 1pm and were broadcast free to air, were the primary forum through which the New Zealand Government communicated with the public: they provided audiences with details about COVID-19, gave information concerning the government's public health and economic response to the pandemic, outlined the requirements of each Alert Level, and answered questions from the media. *Who* delivered the messages in the daily briefings often varied. While



Wash & dry
your hands

New Zealand Government

Unite
against
COVID-19

Fig. 2. Unite against COVID-19 poster from <https://covid19.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/posters/>.

some briefings included the Ministers of Finance, Health and Education, and public servants from the Ministry of Health, Police and the National Emergency Management Agency, Ardern and Bloomfield were the most prominent spokespeople. Here we focus on Ardern and Bloomfield's addresses at the daily briefings, but also include one Prime Ministerial address, in which Ardern presented key information about the Government's alert level system. The full list of daily briefings and the Prime



Fig. 1. Jacinda Ardern and Ashley Bloomfield speaking at a daily briefing. Source: Getty images.

² It is worth noting that crisis communication and risk communication are distinct fields. The former tends to focus on immediate directives during a crisis, while the latter analyses the relationship between communication and long-term behaviour change.

³ While briefings were sometimes held twice a day, or not every day during the lockdown, they became colloquially known throughout New Zealand as 'daily briefings'.

Ministerial address that form our corpus are listed in the Supplementary file. And finally, to address the significance of *what* was being communicated, we ask: *what were the key themes of the communications presented by Jacinda Ardern and Ashley Bloomfield in the daily briefings during the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown? How did these communication themes support or undermine Aotearoa's New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy?*

In the next section we provide an overview of scholarly and popular

literature that discusses the New Zealand Government COVID-19 communications strategy, Ardern's leadership, and COVID-19 communications more broadly. We then outline our data collection and research methodologies before presenting our results and analysis. In section 4, we describe three key themes in the daily briefings: 1) open, honest and straightforward communication; 2) distinctive and motivational language; and 3) expressions of care. In section 5, we situate these themes in the fields of crisis communication, science communication, psychology and Māori studies, to critically assess how the daily briefings supported and/or undermined Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy. Firstly, we suggest that the open, honest and straightforward communication built trust with the audience, which is critical during a crisis where uncertainty is high. Secondly, the use of distinctive and motivational language, as well as expressions of care, framed public health measures as urgent, collective and meaningful, mobilising New Zealanders to provide support for it. While these approaches contributed positively to the strategy, the Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) centred communications approach meant trust was not built with all New Zealanders equally.

2. COVID-19 daily briefings: Aotearoa New Zealand's favourite reality TV show

The New Zealand media have called the 1pm briefings "appointment viewing" (Rae, 2020) and "NZ's favourite reality TV show" (Walls, 2020). In general, journalists and media commentators have been highly complimentary about the daily briefings (Nichol, 2020; Rawhiti-Connell, 2020), with Spinoff managing editor Duncan Grieve (2020) calling the overall communication strategy a "masterclass". More broadly, the New Zealand Government's communication of the COVID-19 crisis has been praised for 'co-creating' the COVID-19 crisis experience (McGuire et al., 2020) and framing lockdown as a moral issue (Graso et al., 2021) which encouraged compliance to lockdown measures. Jamieson (2020) suggests the daily briefings helped to develop national unity and suggests that the New Zealand Government communication was effective because policy initiatives were communicated consistently, and communications were clear, concise, and largely supported by the scientists who appeared in the media.

Jacinda Ardern has been called an exceptional crisis leader by mixing direction, empathy and meaning-making into her communication style (Wilson, 2020). Both McGuire et al. (2020) and Hafner and Sun (2021) assessed Ardern's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded that Ardern demonstrated excellent crisis leadership: she communicated decisively, motivated New Zealanders to support public health measures, and towards the end of lockdown changed to a more empathetic communication style to encourage solidarity among the public. These assessments suggest that the manner and style of Ardern's communication was key to encouraging public support for lockdown measures. Yet Ashley Bloomfield, the other prominent spokesperson at the daily briefings, is also worth studying, given his prominent role in communicating about COVID-19 and the fact that the public tend to trust the heads of public health agencies during times of great stress and uncertainty (Quinn et al., 2013; Sanchez & Dunning, 2021). Ardern and Bloomfield were not only seen as a trusted team, but were admired by the public, inspiring Internet memes, pop culture iconography and artworks, some of which have featured in collections at Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand (Ward, 2020) (see Fig. 3).

The response to Aotearoa New Zealand's daily briefings is particularly interesting when compared with broader international trends. Worldwide, public confidence in government information and scientific evidence is in decline as science, evidence and facts are more overtly politicised by parties and dismissed by voters (McIntyre, 2018). The loss of public trust in official communications is a sign – according to Horton (2020) – of political systems struggling to operate in times of great uncertainty. Public attitudes towards governmental actions against COVID-19 varied substantially across the G7 countries, particularly in



Fig. 3. Ardern and Bloomfield daily briefing made from recycling by Scott Savage and Colleen Pugh, part of a collection held by Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand. Te Papa staged an exhibition on the daily briefings (Ward, 2020) and the National Library of New Zealand has preserved daily briefings-inspired internet art as part of a snapshot of the country's response to COVID-19 (Corlett, 2020). Source: Museum of New Zealand image GH025635.

the United States where news coverage of COVID-19 was politicised and polarised (Hart et al., 2020) and trust in the government as a source for official information has decreased (Vardavas et al., 2020). It is therefore paramount to understand why the Aotearoa New Zealand COVID-19 daily briefings were popular with the public and how the briefings contributed to the country's COVID-19 elimination strategy.

3. Research design

We analyse the daily briefings as a case study of government communications during a public health crisis. Case study approaches are suitable for interdisciplinary research that seek to critically analyse notable real-life phenomenon within specific contexts (Norander et al., 2018). The primary goal of a case study approach is not to present generalizable findings for broader populations, but to offer deeper analytical insights about the event in question (Norander et al., 2018). Our interdisciplinary team included one researcher with a media studies background and one with a focus on science communication and the history of science. Acknowledging that a researcher's experience shapes every part of the research process (Gergen et al., 2008), we considered how our experiences as Pākehā New Zealanders during the nationwide 'lockdown' shaped our data collection and analysis methods and might on the one hand offer useful analytical insights but also restrict what we see. We were mindful of the popularity of the daily briefings and decided to undertake our analysis six months after they began. This enabled us to analyse the briefings not only as part of their audience but as researchers who were – now – somewhat removed from them.

3.1. Data collection

Our corpus includes 51 daily briefings and one Prime Ministerial address between 15 March and May 13, 2020. While the briefings were the major source of official information about the pandemic, Ardern's Prime Ministerial address on March 21, 2020 conveyed key information about the alert level system to the nation. Our focus was the briefings by Ardern and Bloomfield, but we also included media questions and answers in our corpus. Video recordings and transcripts were downloaded from <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speeches>. Eight videos, which lacked transcripts, we transcribed ourselves. A list of all communications analysed is included in the Supplementary file. The data

was stored and analysed in NVivo Mac version 12.

3.2. Analysis

We analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis, a variant of thematic analysis that allows for a more dynamic approach to identifying themes or patterns of meaning in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). While thematic analysis derives from a psychology tradition, reflexive thematic analysis is theoretically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and is used within different fields, including science communication (Wilkinson and Little, 2021). We adopted an inductive way of coding and developed a node hierarchy and themes as directed by the content of the data.

Initial node selection was driven by our prior understanding of the dataset as residents who had often tuned into the daily briefings and by the work of one of the researchers as part of a Te Pūnaha Matatini project on communicating complexity, risk and uncertainty (Soar, 2020). Both researchers worked on the data, with one coding Bloomfield’s communications and the other coding Ardern’s. Each set of coding was reviewed by the other coder, to test the accuracy of the coding and identify crossover themes. Additional nodes were developed in a collaborative coding session, and further nodes were developed and discussed by email while the researchers were working on the two datasets. Both researchers collaborated to group the nodes into three themes: open, honest and straightforward communication; distinctive and motivational language; and expressions of care. Nodes and themes, and the relationships between them, are presented in Table 1. These themes, along with quotes that illustrate them, are described in detail in section 4, and then are further analysed with reference to relevant fields of scholarly literature in section 5.

4. The major themes of the COVID-19 daily briefings

4.1. Open, honest and straightforward communication

The communication was distinctive for being open, honest and straightforward in its delivery. Ashley Bloomfield’s daily briefings

Table 1
Node hierarchy and relationship to themes.

Nodes	Sub-nodes	Theme
Transparency	Explanation of process or policy; justification of rules; provision of information or statistics	Open, honest and straightforward communication
Complexity, risk or uncertainty	Providing details about the virus; acknowledging complexity of science; acknowledging expertise and presenting evidence; acknowledging risk; acknowledging uncertainty	
Use of analogy or metaphor	Sports metaphor; military metaphor	Distinct and motivational language
Distinct vocabulary	Breaking the chain; bubble; flatten the curve; going hard and going early; other Kiwi vernacular; new normal; PPE; slow the spread; team of 5 million; unite against COVID-19	
Encouragement of behaviour change	Go to doctor, get tested; isolate; stay home; hygiene; wear a mask; be kind; shop as normal; protect elderly; physical and self-care; social distancing	Expressions of care
Demonstration of empathy or inclusiveness	Sharing stories; thanking essential workers; use of te reo Māori; expressions of empathy and understanding	
Use of frames	Personal; public; individual; collective	

regularly included case numbers, and advice on where to go for more information:

“So there are 50 new confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand as at 9.30 this morning. Forty-seven of those are confirmed cases, and three are probable cases.. . . More details of the cases, including the probable cases, will be provided on . . . the Ministry of Health website shortly and updated as new details emerge” (Bloomfield, daily briefing, 25 March 2020).

“Sadly, New Zealand has had its first death linked to COVID-19 . . . The death was a woman in her 70s who had initially been admitted for what was thought to be influenza complicated by an underlying chronic health condition” (Bloomfield, daily briefing, March 29, 2020).

Both Ardern and Bloomfield stressed the risks of COVID-19:

“Like the rest of the world, we are facing the potential for devastating impacts from this virus” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 23, 2020).

“... we’ve seen just how tricky this virus is and that it can spread quite rapidly” (Bloomfield, daily briefing, April 14, 2020).

Ardern also acknowledged the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, stating:

“The situation is constantly changing, and the future may feel uncertain, but as I said right at the beginning, we have a plan” (Ardern, daily briefing, May 13, 2020).

She was also open about government decision-making processes:

“Since we are all in this together, we need to all keep working together for success, and that means us sharing with everyone the factors we’ll be taking into consideration and the data we use” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 19, 2020).

The audience was frequently guided to sources for further information, such as COVID19.govt.nz, and Bloomfield provided daily facts and figures, and responded to questions, in a straightforward, knowledgeable and equable style that built trust with the audience. He was also up front when he lacked information and was honest when he did not know the answer to a question.

4.2. Distinctive and motivational language

The daily briefings included a set of distinctive and repeated key phrases. Over the corpus of data, there were 23 references to breaking the “chain” of community transmission, and nine references to the Aotearoa New Zealand public as a “team of 5 million”. In 10 instances there were references to “going hard and early,” a phrase that would go on to characterize the country’s COVID-19 elimination strategy (Jamieson, 2020). Other phrases encouraged specific behavioural change with New Zealanders being asked to “stay [at] home” 47 times. Ardern also urged New Zealanders to “Unite against Covid-19” – a phrase used in the government’s COVID-19 communications campaign (see Fig. 2). A distinctive aspect of the language, that we will focus on here, was Ardern’s use of military and sporting analogies and references.

4.2.1. Military analogies and references

Ardern mentioned the word “fight” or “fighting” 25 times in phrases such as “the fight against COVID-19” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 27, 2020), and “give our healthcare system a fighting chance” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 23, 2020). New Zealanders were told they were “doing their bit in our united fight to stamp out COVID-19” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 15, 2020). She used the word “battle” nine times, for example by saying “our battle with this virus is far from over” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 13, 2020) and “there is no widespread undetected community transmission in New Zealand. We have won that battle” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 27, 2020). New

Zealanders were told the public health measures were building “a nationwide wall of defence” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 9, 2020) that would help us to “win the battle ahead” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 25, 2020). The Government’s public health measures were also compared to weapons:

“Slowing the transmission of COVID-19 and focusing on the health of New Zealanders is our best possible weapon in securing our economy for the long run” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 15, 2020).

Aotearoa New Zealand’s lockdown included 25 April, the annual Anzac Day public holiday, which marks the anniversary of the 1915 landing of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian soldiers – the Anzacs – on the Gallipoli Peninsula (Ministry for Culture & Heritage, 2020). Ardern referenced this public holiday in one of her briefings:

“Decades ago [our forebears] came together in the most testing of circumstances, half a world away, and helped forge who we are today. It was a very, very different battle than the one we are in now, but the character of who we are as a country remains exactly the same” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 20, 2020).

Towards the end of Alert Level 3, a few days before Cabinet would make the decision to move to Alert Level 2, Ardern said:

“Every alert level, therefore, has its own battle, and even when you win one, it doesn’t mean that the war is over” (Ardern, daily briefing, May 7, 2020).

4.2.2. Sporting analogies and references

Ardern made numerous sporting references, with a focus on team sports (such as the “team of five million”), mountaineering and marathon running. Throughout the corpus, the lockdown was analogised as a sports fixture or battleground, with corresponding rules of engagement: “We do need tough rules to win the battle ahead” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 25, 2020). Ardern’s frequently used phrase “going hard” is used colloquially to describe working hard or playing sports at an intense level (Kemmer, 2008).⁴

On 9 April, the marathon became the key sporting analogy. Anticipating that people may be feeling tired, Ardern made multiple references to long-distance running:

“... this is going to be a marathon. Our plan for that marathon is to keep eliminating the virus from New Zealand” (Ardern, daily briefing, 9 April 2020).

“With these three pillars: border controls, rigorous testing and contact tracing, and making sure, of course, that we use all the technology available, we have what we need to win this marathon” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 9, 2020).

A few days later, and halfway through Alert Level 4, Jacinda Ardern compared the social distancing efforts of New Zealanders to both a race and the first half of a sports fixture:

“We’re coming around the bend but we can’t quite see the finish line, but our job this week remains the same and as important as ever. ... As the Minister for Sport recently said to me, ‘We can’t squander a strong half-time lead by letting up or getting overly confident.’” (Ardern, daily briefing, 13 April 2020).

In early May, Ardern compared the collective effort to a mountaineering expedition, referring to Mount Everest, which was first summited by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay

⁴ “Going hard” supposedly derives from the basketball neologism “going hard in the paint” that describes the high level of physicality and competitiveness that can occur underneath the basketball hoop (which is often a painted area of the basketball court) during a game (Kemmer, 2008).

(Ministry for Culture & Heritage, 2021):

“If we think of ourselves as halfway down Everest, I think it’s clear that no one wants to hike back up that peak. The descent is known to be even more dangerous, and so we need to proceed with caution ...” (Ardern, daily briefing, 7 May 2020).

Team sports and military metaphors continued throughout the briefings, right through to the anticipated return to relative normality that came with Alert Level 2:

“Remember that wall of defence we built together as a team now rests with every one of us. So when you’re out and about, acknowledge your fellow team mates, enjoy being out more and seeing others, keep it small, keep your distance, and be kind” (Ardern, daily briefing, May 11, 2020).

4.3. Expressions of care

The focus on tough measures – illustrated by sporting and military metaphors – was paired with soft measures, illustrated by empathy, inclusiveness and expressions of care. Ardern’s communication at the daily briefings was distinctive for its expressions of empathy – for individuals, households, families, businesses. Two days before the nation entered Level 4 Ardern stated: “I understand that self-isolation is a daunting prospect” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 23, 2020). A week later, describing the quarantine requirements for New Zealanders returning from overseas, Ardern said: “I know this is causing concern for their families, and I do acknowledge that concern” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 29, 2020). Two days later she said “I do not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge of being in Alert Level 4” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 31, 2020). Ardern also spoke to specific groups of New Zealanders, for example addressing those involved in organised religions:

“... Churches and other places of worship will remain closed over Easter weekend, and I know that will be an enormous disappointment to many New Zealanders of faith” (Ardern, daily briefing, 8 April 2020).

She also acknowledged those with concerns about the requirements of the Alert Levels and their financial impacts:

“I know there are some people who are feeling distressed, anxious, or worried at this time, and that is completely understandable” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 6, 2020).

“... we acknowledge New Zealanders who are reliant on wage subsidies, taking pay cuts, and losing their jobs as a result of COVID-19’s global pandemic. We feel acutely the struggle that many New Zealanders are facing” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 15, 2020).

Alongside the empathetic statements from the Prime Minister there were appeals for public empathy, with 19 references to kindness or “being kind”:

“Be kind. I know people will want to act as enforcers, and I understand that. People are afraid and they’re anxious, but we, we will play the role of enforcer. What we need from you, our community, is you to support others. Go home tonight and check on your neighbours. Start a phone tree with your street ... We will get through this together, but only if we stick together. So please be strong and be kind” (Ardern, daily briefing, 23 March 2020).

Ardern also asked New Zealanders to be kind to essential workers:

“... I urge everyone: shop as normal and be kind to the supermarket workers” (Ardern, daily briefing, 1 April 2020).



Fig. 4. Be kind COVID-19 poster from <https://covid19.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/posters/>.

Furthermore, Ardern notably demonstrated kindness to members of the press. On 16 April, a political reporter forgot a question and apologised to the Prime Minister. Ardern replied: “No, I will come back to you—no problem. I do worry about your sleep at the moment, though, Jason” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 14, 2020). Kindness was also a theme across wider government communications, as seen in Fig. 4.

Equally apparent were attempts at inclusive communication. Aotearoa New Zealand has three official languages: English, te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language. While press conferences were in English, they were simultaneously translated into New Zealand Sign Language, and had regular incidental use of te reo Māori, in particular from Ashley Bloomfield, for example “Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou”⁵ (Bloomfield, daily briefing, May 5, 2020) and “Kia kaha, kia māia, kia manawanui”⁶ (Bloomfield, daily briefing, May 12, 2020).

Both Ardern and Bloomfield explicitly thanked health professionals and other essential service workers, many of whose jobs were not visible to the public, and who were working under extraordinary conditions:

“I do want to make special mention of all our front-line workers: our nurses, our doctors, our police officers, our ambulance officers, our firefighters. They are joined now by a new front line: our supermarket workers, our bank tellers, our cleaners” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 26, 2020).

⁵ Thank you very much.

⁶ Be strong, be brave, be patient.

“Today, I want to single out our medical lab scientists—a workforce of 1823 in eight labs across the country” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 27, 2020).

“... I want to shout out to all the midwives ... as both lead maternity carers in the community and ... in hospitals and our primary birthing units” (Bloomfield, daily briefing, May 5, 2020).

Ardern also drew attention to teachers: “I want to also thank our teachers for putting in place the distance learning to help parents during the start of the school term under lockdown” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 14, 2020). She also thanked New Zealanders for staying at home, and Bloomfield thanked members of the public who were tested for COVID-19:

“More broadly, I would also like to thank New Zealanders for the way that they are treating the level 4 lockdown. The vast majority are doing a great job complying with the rules” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 30, 2020).

“I want to recognise everybody who has been tested, as well as the many, many people across the system who have facilitated that happening. It’s an incredibly important pillar of our response to COVID-19” (Bloomfield, daily briefing, May 13, 2020).

Ardern also framed the lockdown as a task that both the government and citizens were responsible for:

“As a Government, we will ... do everything in our power to protect you. Now I’m asking you to do everything you can to protect all of us” (Ardern, daily briefing, 23 March 2020).

“We will look after you, if you look after us. If you come here and have no intention of following our requirements to self-isolate, frankly, you are not welcome, and you should leave before you are deported” (Ardern, daily briefing, March 15, 2020)

Ardern acknowledged the roles that all residents played in practicing social distancing and staying at home:

“As a Government, we have had pandemic notices. We’ve had powers that come with being in a national emergency, but you held the greatest power of all. You made the decision that together, we could protect one other, and you have. You have saved lives” (Ardern, daily briefing, April 9, 2020).

In addition, Ardern shared specific stories to demonstrate the impact of New Zealanders’ support for public health measures:

“[A mother’s] young son has compromised immunity and as a result is on constant medication. When COVID arrived ... she was terrified, but she was writing to me out of sheer relief. There may be no cure, no vaccine, for COVID yet, but ... every single Kiwi who made the decision to stay home, to make sacrifices ... you did that for her boy. You did something for someone’s mother, for someone’s father, for someone’s child” (Ardern, daily briefing, 11 May 2020).

5. How the daily briefings galvanised the team of five million

5.1. Building trust with the Aotearoa New Zealand public

The daily briefings supported the New Zealand Government’s COVID-19 elimination strategy by building trust with the public. According to crisis communication scholars, trust between government and the public is paramount in a crisis when there are high levels of stress and uncertainty (Lee and Li, 2021). People look for information that can bring a sense of order, reduce uncertainty, and create a greater sense of control (Spence et al., 2016). A key feature of the daily briefings was Bloomfield’s straightforward and clear communication. Open and transparent communication can reduce public uncertainty (Seethaler et al., 2019) and, when coming from public health officials, can increase

public trust in that organization (Vaughan and Tinker, 2009). Bloomfield's straightforward communication and the regularity of the daily briefings offered the Aotearoa New Zealand public a sense of order by delivering information that appeared apolitical, and was free of journalistic editorialising or sensationalism, in contrast to the evening television news or newspapers who are typically considered the gatekeepers of information in a crisis (Spence et al., 2016). Across the population, there is evidence that public trust in government agencies is a major predictor of successfully implemented policies (Kowitt et al., 2017) including public health measures such as vaccination (Quinn et al., 2013; Poland, 2010). Lee and Li (2021) found transparent communication by United States' state governments positively increased attitudes towards COVID-19 public health measures such as social distancing.

Yet the daily briefings may not have built trust with all New Zealanders. Significantly, building trust during a crisis is important for cultural groups that, historically, have a tenuous relationship with the government. Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history, or more specifically, the dispossession of land, undervaluing of Māori culture and the imposition of colonial education has caused intergenerational mistrust between Māori and the New Zealand Government (Smith, 2021). While the daily briefings did not, and could not, begin to address the widespread discrimination against Māori or inequitable access to government services, there may have been attempts to build trust with Māori. For one, Ardern and Bloomfield's frequent use of *te reo Māori*, a demonstration of Aotearoa New Zealand's bi-culturalism, was acknowledged and praised.⁷ In addition, during the 16 March daily briefing, Ardern demonstrated the 'East Coast wave' (see Fig. 5), a distinctive greeting in Aotearoa New Zealand where eyebrows are raised and no physical touching occurs. When a Pākehā journalist asked her to define the East Coast wave, she declined to do so, and instead suggested it was "an excuse to visit Gisborne", a town on the east coast of the North Island with proportionally high population of Māori. However, while the recognition of Māori culture or the incidental use of *te reo* at the daily briefings is a positive move, its impact on developing trust with Māori was likely limited. According to Māori health equity experts, building trust with Māori and transforming public health outcomes for Māori will only happen when the voices of Māori are foregrounded (Haitana et al., 2020). However, there was a notable absence of Māori health experts or leaders speaking at the daily briefings, leading Rhys Jones (2020) to call the briefings an "exercise in

whiteness" or reinforcing the COVID-19 public health response as one that is designed around Pākehā culture and predominantly for Pākehā. It is also notable that – one year after the lockdown began – there was no communications strategy specifically focused on Māori (Maxwell, 2020). A communications strategy focused on Māori could draw from research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand that has documented the ways Māori cultural factors such as *kotahitanga* (unity), *whanau* (family) and *marae* (community centres) shape community responses to crises (Kenney et al., 2015). In order to develop trust with all New Zealanders, future government communication should recognise and represent Treaty partners and minority voices to better account for the heterogeneity of experiences of working and living under lockdown (Appleton et al., 2021).

5.2. Presenting lockdown as a meaningful and collective cause

The daily briefings framed the lockdown as a collective and meaningful cause through using distinct and motivational language. In the daily briefings and wider COVID-19 communications (e.g., Fig. 2) phrases such as "stay home" were deliberately paired with a justification (such as "saving lives") so the communication felt meaningful (Major & Dalton, 2020). Sports and military references were a feature of Jacinda Ardern's briefings. Analogies and metaphors can act as a "comfort blanket" to the public in times of uncertainty (Bleakley, 2017), as they help to make key messages more salient by connecting them to existing vocabularies that derive from broader cultures.

Sports and mountaineering have a rich history in Aotearoa New Zealand and have often united residents (Phillips, 2013). There is also a history of sports language appearing in local political discourse (Lacey et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 1996). Ardern's team sports, mountaineering and marathon references served to frame the lockdown, which was essentially a passive activity – "stay home and save lives" – as an active measure, involving all New Zealanders, in the fight against COVID-19. People were encouraged to see their support for lockdown measures as doing their part in the team, and as something acknowledged as being physically challenging. Moreover, framing the lockdown as "going hard" both informalised the stringent measures that were expected of residents and positioned Ardern and Bloomfield as sports coaches motivating their "team of five million" and the COVID-19 virus as an obstacle that required collective buy-in to overcome. Phrases such as the "team of five million" encouraged New Zealanders to develop a shared sense of identity or "us-ness" during the crisis. This aligns with research that describes 'identity leadership', where communications are designed to intentionally group leaders and followers together to co-construct the experience and response to a crisis (Haslam et al., 2021). "Go hard and early" asked New Zealanders to work hard on social distancing measures and differed from the communications of international leaders, who negatively framed or undermined their own lockdown measures. In addition, analogising the lockdown to a marathon or journey may have helped New Zealanders to understand the long and uncertain path to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Berentson-Shaw, 2020).

However, the use of military metaphors framed the lockdown with potentially problematic ideas. While military and war metaphors create a sense of urgency (Semino, 2021), and may have resonated with New Zealanders who feel connected to Anzac Day, they tend to call for obedience rather than appeal to solidarity and support for one another (Musu, 2020). Military metaphors can also normalise declarations of states of emergencies or lockdowns, which are otherwise extraordinary actions (Lacey et al., 2020). Perhaps most concerning, military metaphors can encourage an 'us versus them' mentality, where blame is attributed to specific actors or definable groups, particularly those perceived as 'outsiders' (Bates, 2020; Berentson-Shaw, 2020). While a study claims that Chinese and Asian people in Aotearoa New Zealand experienced lower levels of prejudice than in other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Croucher et al., 2021), groups of New Zealanders quarantining after travel from Pakistan and India were stigmatised, including by a member of Parliament (Fuller, 2020), and Māori and



Fig. 5. Ardern demonstrating the East coast wave. Source: The Spinoff.

⁷ The New Zealand media website *The Spinoff* published a video of Bloomfield saying 'kia ora' – a common greeting in *te reo Māori* – 44 times during daily briefings.

Pasifika people were subject to social media abuse following community outbreaks in Ōtara (Ma'ia'i, 2020).

Ardern's expressions of care may have helped to counteract any blame culture. New Zealanders were frequently told that "staying [at] home" and social distancing were protecting vulnerable people. Emotionally laden stories about anxious parents and children with compromised immunity demonstrated the impact of complying with public health measures, which in turn suggested a relationship of care between government and residents, and between residents.

The expressions of care meant that the daily briefings were used for more than knowledge transfer or dissemination of information – instead they attempted to engage audiences by appealing to shared values, and social and cultural norms, and to acknowledge the diversity of New Zealanders' experiences of, and concerns about, COVID-19 and the lockdown. According to Brian Trench (quoted in Stockmeyer et al. (2012)) this took the briefings beyond 'deficit' communication and into 'dialogue', as the Government was performing a duty and the information was provided in a time of public need: the briefings were used to communicate with, rather than to, the public.

According to the communication strategists behind the Unite against COVID-19 campaign, the entire campaign was centred around "people, not the virus" and – following conversations with psychologist Dr Sarb Johal – was underpinned by "structure and empathy" to provide "a really solid programme for behaviour change" in a time of anxiety and uncertainty (Major & Dalton, 2020). In an October 2020 interview, Unite against COVID-19 strategist Mark Dalton described their plan to find a voice that is "objective, reasonable and helpful" on a global issue around which "uncertainty, sensationalism, confusion and emotive responses were really, really common" (qtd. in Rawsthorn (2020)).

Emotionally sensitive and empathetic communication can engender public trust and encourage individuals to engage in behaviour change (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). Ardern and Bloomfield's combination of empathetic statements and actions with informal appeals for New Zealanders to "be kind" and "look after each other", presented ideals of national unity and social solidarity, where each New Zealander has a role to play and sacrifice to make. Lockdown was neither Ardern nor Bloomfield's sole responsibility, but 'ours', meaning the collective Aotearoa New Zealand public, a message in sharp contrast to United States President Donald Trump, who attributed the perceived strengths of the country's COVID-19 response to himself, and any weaknesses to his predecessors (Mazey and Richardson, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Aotearoa New Zealand has, as of March 2021 – when the Pfizer vaccine rollout began – avoided the major health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the keys to the success of the elimination and control strategy was the government's science-led approach, involving expertise from the fields of public health, infectious diseases, genomics, modelling and immunology (Geoghegan et al., 2021). But public understanding and support was essential for the strategy to be successful. A significant part of the overall communication approach was the daily briefings, in which Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, and Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield, directly addressed New Zealanders. In these briefings, they established trust with their audience through open and honest communications, inspired and motivated audiences, and established and maintained a duty of care relationship through inclusive and empathetic communications. Direct, honest and empathetic communication as well as empowering the public to act, are recommended strategies for effective government crisis communication (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021) and together, they inspired Aotearoa New Zealand's population as a "team of five million" to "unite against COVID-19" to "fight the virus". In an international landscape where there is an 'infodemic' of official information, misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 (Soar et al., 2020), where government communications have been criticised for being confusing, where leaders

are not trusted, the main themes from the Aotearoa New Zealand daily briefings could offer guidance for communications in future crises.

Author credit statement

Alex Beattie: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Rebecca Priestley: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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