

Keep Calm & Carry On: Ministry of Health' Activity on Instant Messaging Apps during 'Iron Swords' War: A Case Study of a Warfare Health Crisis

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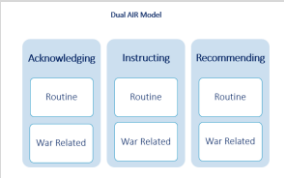
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Background: The World Health Organization (WHO) previously emphasized the role of health communication in crisis management. Over the years, health ministries and organizations have increased their use of social media to communicate with the public, while misinformation has spread through these platforms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media and instant messaging apps were used to communicate health behaviours and reduce the spread. Israel, a country accustomed to dealing with crises, and the Ministry of Health (MoH), which is already using social media and instant messaging apps, faced a new challenge due to the events of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Iron Swords war.

Aims: To identify and evaluate MoH's communication strategies during the war by assessing and comparing its use of the instant messaging apps Telegram and WhatsApp.

Methods: A mixed-methods content analysis assessed quantitatively and qualitatively the messages MoH sent in both channels during the first two months of the war (07.10.2023-07.12.2023).

Findings: To categorize the messages issued by MoH throughout the war, the **Dual Communication AIR model** was established, identifying three primary types: *Acknowledging, Instructing, and Recommending (AIR)*. This model also differentiates between war-related communications and standard messages, emphasizing the dual nature of the information.



Findings indicate that 75% of Telegram messages and 69% of WhatsApp messages focused on war-related topics. Furthermore, the unique characteristics of each application result in distinct messaging policies. Out of 216 messages exchanged on Telegram, 153 (71%) were categorized as acknowledgments, 52 (24%) served as instructions, and 11 (5%) were classified as recommendations. Whilst on WhatsApp 29 (53%) messages acknowledged; 18 (33%) included recommendations and 8 (14%) were of instructional type.

Conclusions: The Ministry of Health used the Telegram channel mainly as a means of acknowledging, while the WhatsApp channel was used to elaborate on public health recommendations for a large audience, in a friendly and engaging manner. This strategy encouraged a shared sense of belonging and awareness within the audience. Therefore, it is essential to establish a formal policy that aligns the nature and substance of the communications issued by the Ministry with the specific characteristics of the application and the target audience.

