



The Role of Expert Networks in Pandemic Governance and Recovery

SPECIAL ISSUE**RESEARCH****JOHANNA VUORELMA** **PINJA LEHTONEN** 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic era witnessed an intense competition for knowledge, which was essentially a contest over whose knowledge becomes authoritative. In this article, we focus on the role of expert networks in contesting the official pandemic policy. We study specifically an expert network in Finland, consisting of researchers from different disciplines ranging from law to economics and medicine. What makes the case so intriguing is that the network's communicating style was affectively charged and alarmist, setting it apart from traditional expert language that is articulated in a style that aims towards neutrality and objectivity. Similar networks were formed across the world under the loose umbrella term 'Zero Covid' during the intensive pandemic years 2020 to 2022. Our aim is to increase knowledge on the role of such spontaneous networks during a health crisis that is characterised by epistemic instability. The pandemic era was particularly conducive to the formation of such networks, but they have been less active in the recovery phase. We argue that these networks were energised by the epistemic void in the intensive phase of the pandemic but lost their impetus in the recovery phase, which has been characterised by more robust knowledge and a less acute sense of threat. We employ frame analysis to identify two dominant frames – the national battle

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Johanna Vuorelma

1Associate Professor,
University Researcher,
Centre for European
Studies, University of
Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

johanna.vuorelma@helsinki.fi

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frame and the urgency frame – that the Finnish network used in public communication. We also briefly review its public reception to illustrate how the network managed to generate authority in the pandemic era. Finally, we discuss the tricky nature of policy advice by scientists who are urged to step into the political sphere to offer their advice to politicians but, as a result, can be labelled as political actors rather than as scientific experts.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic era witnessed an intense competition for knowledge, which was essentially a contest over whose knowledge becomes authoritative. The COVID-19 pandemic was the most mediated health crisis in our history, occurring in the age of a heavily mediated public sphere that involves rapid knowledge flows travelling globally in numerous online platforms and media arenas (Vuorelma 2022). The pandemic occurred in ‘the era of epistemic instability’ (Harambam 2020), quickly leading to repeated warnings about an ‘infodemic’ (Pian et al. 2021) and various forms of disinformation. Being forced to respond to a serious health crisis in a chaotic epistemic environment in which policymakers, public officials, experts and journalists competed with emerging epistemic authorities posed a challenge that many traditional authorities were not prepared for. Social media enabled the quick proliferation of unofficial epistemic authorities that gained popularity by challenging public authorities and claiming to have more accurate knowledge about the virus as well as the right policy option to tackle it. Dawson & Mäkelä (2020, 28) describe such ‘emergent narrative authority’ that social media gives rise to through the logic of virality: ‘The narrative environments of social media are crowded with tellers that have no a priori authority’.

The bombardment of authoritative claims in online discussions and civil networks meant that the classical-modernist authority could not simply rely on its bureaucratic routines, institutional positions and governance rituals to proclaim legitimacy (Hajer 2009; Seabrooke 2006). Instead, public authorities had to constantly perform authority to convince the public that their knowledge claims are the most authoritative epistemic grounds upon which to build the pandemic policy. Hajer emphasises that ‘in contemporary policy-making, we experience how even familiar and strongly ritualized forms of governance can lose their communicative capacity to generate authority’ (Hajer 2009, 23). Hajer’s analysis of how authority is successfully performed in the heavily mediated public sphere provides an apt theoretical lens to study the contest for epistemic authority during the COVID-19 pandemic. In pandemic governance, the role of expertise was amplified because governing a serious health crisis requires extensive scientific research and collaboration in various fields. Skidelsky (2020) even argues that the COVID-19 pandemic was ‘the first major global crisis in human history to be treated as a mathematical problem’ (Skidelsky 2020). This means that to successfully perform expert authority during the pandemic, one had to convincingly employ the genre of science and scientific expertise. However, expertise in virology or epidemiology did not automatically translate to *de facto* authority in the pandemic era. One can be a scientific authority in the academic field but still fail to gain authority in the mediated public sphere because it is not simply about what an expert says but

how it is said, in which context, and to which audiences. In other words, one needs to frame the question in a persuasive way to generate authority.

The pandemic scene in which public authorities were drawn into contests over whose knowledge is the most authoritative has been often reduced to situations where the opponent is a popular conspiracy theorist who shares ‘alternative facts’ about the pandemic or a cunning politician who circulates hostile propaganda about vaccines or face masks. The proliferation of such aggressive techniques was certainly a notable feature during the pandemic, increasing polarisation and epistemic instability during the pandemic (Graham et al. 2021; Gupta et al. 2022; Ogola 2021; Pummerer et al. 2022; Romer & Jamieson 2020; Soveri et al. 2021). Less scholarly attention has been paid to other types of epistemic conflicts that public authorities had to respond to during the pandemic. In this article, we focus on a more unusual case of expert networks contesting the official pandemic policy. We study specifically the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network in Finland, consisting of researchers from different disciplines ranging from law to economics and medicine. Similar expert networks were formed across the world under the loose umbrella term ‘Zero Covid’ during the intensive pandemic years 2020 to 2022. The global End Coronavirus network lists various ‘Zero Covid’ groups whose goal is to eliminate local transmission of COVID-19. These groups call themselves, for example, ‘Zero Covid’, ‘Covid Zero’ or ‘No Covid’. Finland’s ‘Eroon koronasta’ network is listed as an affiliate of the global End Coronavirus network (End Coronavirus 2023).

During the intense phase of the pandemic, these networks strongly advocated for stricter pandemic measures than the adopted policies, using a set of public strategies to reach as wide an audience as possible and to ultimately assert their knowledge as authoritative. Allgaier (2012, 310) argues that there are coalitions and assemblages that are formed ‘at particular times to achieve specific goals; often they are tenuous in substance, need constant (rhetorical and practical) reproduction and are liable to fall apart at any moment’. We approach the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network as a spontaneous assemblage of researchers who formed a collaborative network ‘in order to pool resources and enhance their credibility and influence in public debates’ (Allgaier 2012, 310). Expertise should be understood not only in reference to individuals as in experts versus ‘lay actors’ or ‘counter-experts’ but also in ‘collective and networked terms’ (Allgaier 2012, 310). Drawing from Hajer’s (2009) theorisation concerning policymaking in the age of mediatisation, we understand the formation of these networks as an attempt to impose network governance that ‘involves interactions among researchers and practitioners searching for efficacy and salience in a non-orchestrated and dispersed process of trial and error. At times the interaction around particular public problems produces new forms of politics, in which the public is defined anew and a new authority seems to become established’ (Hajer 2009, 30). More specifically, Hajer describes network governance as ‘public problem-solving in which we no longer simply rely on the state to impose solutions, but instead conceive of problem-solving as a collaborative effort in which a network of actors, including both state and non-state organizations, play a part’ (Hajer 2009, 30–31). Such network formations can take place, for example, as a response to a particular political issue or in a crisis setting when there is a scarcity of knowledge and public authorities are unable to govern the new situation. As Hajer (2009, 31) notes, ‘most of the time, actors do not turn to governance out of conviction but because “old” classical-modernist strategies have failed them or new arrangements are thrust upon them’.

The pandemic era was particularly conducive to the formation of such networks, but they have been less active in the recovery phase. We suggest that these networks were energised by the epistemic void in the intensive phase of the pandemic but lost their impetus in the recovery phase, which has been characterised by more robust knowledge and a less acute sense of threat. To increase knowledge on how the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network tried to generate authority during the pandemic, we employ frame analysis to identify the main frames that it used in public communication. We also briefly review its public reception to illustrate how the network managed to generate authority in the pandemic era. Our aim is to increase knowledge on the role of such spontaneous expert networks in a health crisis that is characterised by epistemic instability. The article is structured in the following way. We will first locate the article in the wider theoretical and empirical discussions about knowledge production and the role of experts during crises. We will then introduce the main characteristics of the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network, followed by our frame analysis to map out the dominant frames that the network employed to persuade the public. Finally, we will analyse the findings as well as the role of these networks in pandemic recovery.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The modern state is dominated by scientific culture, which is manifested in the heavy reliance on scientific advice in policymaking (Jasanoff 2004). This reliance is complicated since scientific knowledge is uncertain, contested, and subject to various disagreements (Pamuk 2022). In modern societies, scientific knowledge and political power are tightly interwoven, producing a culture in which science assumes an omnipotent yet dependent role. As Jasanoff (2005, 210) argues: ‘Only by continually reaffirming its utility in expanding domains of application can science assert sustained claims on the public till. At stake, therefore, is a deeper right to define how, when, by whom, and to what extent science will be integrated into the solution of public problems, and who, indeed, will frame those problems in the first place’. Scientific knowledge used for authority-affirming purposes is traditionally disseminated from a distant position, striving towards objectivity and rationality. In contrast, political discourse is more affective and openly ideological. In practice, however, this juxtaposition is complex and messy since the leap from scientific knowledge to policy recommendations always involves interpretation. Scientists’ attempt to increase their epistemic authority in public debates adds to this complexity because their authority performances might involve various affective practices to persuade the audience.

Hajer illustrates the ‘authority problem of governance’ generated by the mediated nature of contemporary politics by analysing the public reception of Al Gore, the former vice-president of the United States, receiving the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize together with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Hajer asks what explains that Gore suddenly became a Nobel-winning authority on climate issues, although the facts in his documentary were questionable and he presented roughly the same message as he had presented already years ago. Hajer explains: ‘It seems that it is not *what* Gore said that explains his new status. It has more to do with other factors, such as *how* he said it, where and when he said it, and to whom’ (Hajer 2009, 16, *emphases in original*). He continues by dissecting Gore’s successful authority performance:

He employs the genre of science and scientific expertise. Graphs, figures, and presentations of paleontological findings are crucial components of

the argument he delivers. Gore presents no new facts, but something in what he says is new. He ‘performs’ the case for action on global warming using presentation tools that give the science of climate change a dramaturgical effect (Hajer 2009, 17).

Hajer also analyses the case of the IPCC as a climate authority, which seems more self-evident than the case of Gore. After all, the IPCC assessment reports are compiled and reviewed by leading scientists in relevant fields. Nevertheless, the IPCC had to generate authority performatively to gain its authoritative status. As Hajer (2009, 21) argues, ‘the IPCC was put “in authority” by the UN but – given the political controversy surrounding climate change at the time – this institutional fact was not sufficient to be respected as “an authority”’. This is because ‘there are situations in which those who have politico-administrative functions cannot rely on the rational-legal authority they derive from the institutional position they have been given. In addition to this *de jure* authority, they have to create *de facto* authority by acting out their role in a sequence of concrete situations’ (Hajer 2009, 21). The ability to invent convincing metaphors, frames and narratives and present them in a persuasive manner can grant an authoritative status even to people with no expert background. This is especially the case in crisis situations when there is an epistemic void because the new threat is still relatively unknown.

One of the most famous cases of such spontaneous epistemic authority during the COVID-19 pandemic was the viral ‘hammer and dance’ metaphor introduced by Tomas Pueyo, who had no expertise in any relevant scientific field. Pueyo simply combined ‘data, emotion and urgency, with charts taken from a range of credible sources placed alongside evocative (but unverified) descriptions from social media of the havoc being wrought in Chinese and Italian hospitals’ (Pearce 2021; see also Kangas 2023; Vuorelma 2022). Pueyo did not only gain worldwide fame as people frantically shared his blog post and urged governments to immediately adopt its policy recommendations. He also got an invitation to a Channel 4 News programme as a COVID-19 expert alongside a traditional expert authority, epidemiologist John Edmunds. The case of Pueyo illuminates the power of viral narratives in the making of emergent narrative authorities in the context of societal crises. While the media presented Pueyo as a credible authority, Edmunds tried to signal in the programme that he questioned Pueyo’s authority by shaking his head ‘vigorously’ and placing his hands over his face ‘in horror’ when Pueyo was speaking (Pearce 2021).

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the lines between ‘neutrally’ performed expertise and affectively charged political persuasion became increasingly blurred. The pandemic witnessed two contrasting trends in the representation of knowledge. On the one hand, the pandemic was depicted as a thoroughly scientific question that can be only solved with science and expertise. On the other hand, the mediatised public sphere was overcrowded with emergent epistemic authorities who relied on narrative forms, personal experiences, and metaphors to render the pandemic knowable (Vuorelma 2022). The trends of treating the pandemic as a purely scientific problem and constructing the pandemic knowable in a richly storied form were not entirely separate but overlapping trends. For example, scientific data about the pandemic was often represented in narrative or metaphorical forms to gain visibility and authority. War-related metaphors, for example, have been popular in rendering the pandemic meaningful in scientific and popular science contexts (Musolff 2022, 308; see also Pankakoski in this issue). This shows how scientists also engage in practices that bring

them more public visibility, which ‘has become a central channel of recognition as an expert authority’ (Väliaverronen et al. 2020, 5).

Historically, scientists have played a key role in crisis situations, serving not only as epistemic authorities but also as moral authorities. One of the most famous cases is the ‘Manifesto of the Ninety-Three’ in which 93 prominent Germans, including Nobel Prize laureates, physicians, chemists, theologians and philosophers, proclaimed their support for German war efforts in the First World War. In the 1914 manifesto, the signatories used their authority to frame Germany’s actions as rightful and legitimate. It is not an uncommon practice among scientists to form a loose network of like-minded individuals to start petitions, campaign publicly, issue policy recommendations and give media interviews to support or contest public authorities during societal crises. What is noteworthy about these action groups is that scientists are not just citizens who voice their personal opinions. In modern scientific culture, networks of scientists often represent epistemic, moral and cultural authorities, which means that their public statements and actions are interpreted in light of this position. Societies and their institutions, such as parliaments, have ‘accorded science a moral authority’ as an ‘objective representation of reality’ (Qadir & Syväterä 2021, 287–288). The action groups of scientists typically form around a particular issue area to demonstrate that the signatories have found consensus. Allgaier (2012, 309) argues that this consensus ‘can be particularly credible and effective if experts from different areas are seen to agree on a position concerning a controversial issue, for instance, when scientific and religious experts together sign a petition’. These action groups can also include a more unusual combination of different types of experts to gain visibility in the media (Allgaier 2012, 309).

The media is not only an arena where experts can perform their authority once they gain access to it. It is also an important arena for ‘struggles over the symbolic legitimacy of expert authority’ as scientific experts need to ‘compete for public recognition of their expertise, authority and credibility’ in the media (Väliaverronen et al. 2020, 3). In other words, the media is an arena where various epistemic contests take place between official and unofficial authorities. In the COVID-19 pandemic, scientific disagreements about the pandemic reported in the media amplified the already existing trend to challenge the cultural authority of science (Crabu et al. 2021, 15). The pre-pandemic debates centred around notions such as ‘post-truth’ or ‘fake news’ as well as around fears that conspiracy theories and disinformation are replacing expertise and science. The pandemic intensified such epistemic instability and created an immense void of knowledge, coupled with an intense race to fill the void. The epistemic void overlapped with an institutional void that has emerged as a result of the changing environment of policymaking as ‘solutions for pressing problems cannot be found within the boundaries of sovereign polities’ (Hajer 2003, 175). An institutional void in policymaking refers to a situation in which ‘there are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon’ (Hajer 2003, 175). The COVID-19 pandemic was a manifestation of an institutional void *par excellence*. In most countries, the existing legal framework, institutional boundaries, governance networks and policy processes were unable to deal with a health crisis of this magnitude.

Facing the pandemic threat, then, policymakers had to cope with both epistemic and institutional voids, witnessing the rise of collective forms of expertise and ‘formations of heterogeneous alliances between different kinds of experts and citizens’ (Allgaier 2012, 301). As Väliaverronen et al. (2020, 5) argue: ‘In the pandemic situation, under

conditions of uncertainty but with a high demand for information to guide action, established institutional borders are perceived as too rigid and there emerges calls for new ways of organising knowledge production as well as new types of expertise claims'. This networked expertise is based on 'crowdsourcing, open knowledge and data science' (Väliverronen et al. 2020, 2). This is in line with Hajer's conceptualisation of 'new political spaces' created by networks that react to the institutional void by producing new practices, arenas and forms of interaction to influence policymaking. New political spaces refer to 'the ensemble of mostly unstable practices that emerge in the struggle to address problems that the established institutions are – for a variety of reasons – unable to resolve in a manner that is perceived to be both legitimate and effective' (Hajer 2003, 176). In recent years, health-related scientific knowledge and its interpretations have been especially prone to contestations, conspiracy beliefs and disinformation, which further added epistemic cacophony concerning how to interpret the pandemic data and what conclusion can be drawn from science to craft sound policies. As the pandemic progressed, it soon became clear that, in addition to the health implications, it 'affected almost every aspect of society, culture and the economy, creating a need for many kinds of expert knowledge and advice on how to react and adapt to the changing situation' (Väliverronen et al. 2020, 2). It was in this epistemic, political and social environment that the 'Eroon koronasta' network first appeared in public.

When the news about a cluster of pneumonia cases began to circulate in January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) represented the key epistemic authority to disseminate knowledge about the outbreak in Wuhan, China. On 4 January 2020, WHO reported on social media about the outbreak and noted that there are 'investigations under way to identify the cause of this illness' (WHO 2020). Only 2 months later, WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic: 'WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction. We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic' (WHO 2020). In the early months of 2020, various action groups began to be formed around COVID-19 to articulate a set of demands concerning pandemic policies in different countries. Public debates were largely framed around the question of how to tackle the pandemic, as some argued in favour of allowing the virus to run its course until herd immunity was reached and others demanded that the virus must be fiercely suppressed or eliminated. These policy options did not emerge organically but were framed by different pandemic authorities who tried to persuade both policymakers and the public to accept their policy recommendations as the most authoritative ones.

The competition for authority was not only an individual or institutional undertaking but quickly assumed a collaborative nature as experts, activists and other actors united in their demand for more effective pandemic policies. In the early months of the pandemic, the debate centred around the notion of 'Zero Covid', which referred to a pandemic policy based on eliminating the virus. States such as China and New Zealand were singled out as successful examples of a 'Zero Covid' policy. To facilitate the adoption of a 'Zero Covid' policy, various action groups began to campaign to push governments to the 'Zero Covid' direction, using states like Sweden and the United Kingdom as examples of a dangerous 'herd immunity' policy. The term 'herd immunity' quickly became a metaphor for a misinformed and even cunning political idea advocated by irresponsible and untrustworthy politicians and experts. In Finland, the term was used in public debates to articulate distrust in authorities

who were supposedly deliberately spreading the virus and letting the population get infected (Vuorelma 2022). In parallel with action groups that pushed for stricter pandemic policies, there were action groups that protested pandemic restrictions and demanded lifting restrictions that constrained their personal freedoms. Some of these action groups began to disseminate conspiracy theories about the pandemic, claiming that restrictions were part of a wider secret plan by governments to take away citizens' personal freedoms.

The proliferations of various networks, ranging from those groups that demanded complete lockdowns to groups that denied the existence of the virus, added to the epistemic instability of the pandemic age. At the same time, they gave citizens an active agency in an environment that left many citizens feeling powerless and at risk of losing their lives. Finland's 'Eroon koronasta' network formed in April to May 2020 with the shared aim of persuading policymakers and the public that the virus must be suppressed as effectively as possible. The network first called itself the 'Free from coronavirus' working group (*Vapaaksi koronasta -työryhmä*) and later changed its name to the 'Get rid of coronavirus' expert network (*Eroon koronasta -asiantuntijaverkosto*). In this article, we refer to the group as the 'Eroon koronasta' network to avoid confusion. On its website, the network identified itself as a group consisting of 'worried physicians, scientists, and experts who found each other on social media' (Eroon koronasta 2020a). Explaining its motive for forming an action group, the network explained that many of the network members 'felt in Spring 2020 that complementary or summarising perspectives were not heard or listened to. A shared worry about the ever-changing situation and the ideal of free and scientific citizen action united the founding members of the expert network'. The network published its first memo online in May 2020, encouraging the government to engage in 'determined action to suppress the epidemic' because Finland had 'reached a crossroads' (M1 2020, see Appendix 1).

The 'Eroon koronasta' network motivated its action in response to the policy performance of the classical-modernist authority represented by the government, local authorities and official experts advising the government. The classical-modernist authority was seen as being too moderate or ill-informed to craft an efficient pandemic policy that forcefully suppresses the virus. This aim required strict restrictions because, as the network's slogan declared, 'Finland must suppress the coronavirus'. In the first memo, the network emphasised that the aim is 'realistic' and means that infections are 'quickly and determinedly driven around zero' (M1 2020, see Appendix 1). A deep disappointment with the official pandemic policy was regularly articulated by the members of the network, positioning them as vocal challengers to the classical-modernist authority. One of the members of the network voiced his disappointment in affective and strong language when he described in his blog that he had shouted at the television when the Minister for Social Affairs and Health spoke in a press conference in late February. He further noted that the head of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health made an 'idiotic blurt' during the press conference (Gråsten 2020). These critical remarks were widely reported in the journalistic media and also presented to the public authorities in an early March press conference in 2020. This micro setting illuminates the dynamic of the competition for epistemic authority during the pandemic more widely: the classical-modernist authority communicates publicly in official press conferences, while the emergent authorities use other channels such as blogs and social media posts. In the next section, we introduce our research data and methods, followed by our research results.

To better understand how the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network attempted to perform authority and persuade its audiences during the intense years of the pandemic, we examined the six official memos published by the network on its website (see Appendix 1). While the network also issued press releases, petitions and other content, the majority of those materials was written only by some members of the network. The memos, in contrast, represent a negotiated and consensual view of the network. We utilised frame analysis to qualitatively tap into the communicative style of the network more closely. More specifically, we first identified the main discursive frames that are used in the memos to articulate the message. Second, we mapped out the dominant metaphors in those frames. Because the pandemic occurred in an epistemically unstable information environment, the power of persuasive framing and convincing narration was particularly prevalent. This is why we approached the memos with the lens of frame analysis, understanding framing as a practice involving primary frameworks that allow their users to ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms’ (Goffman 1974, 21).

The pandemic era required constant sense-making because the intense bombardment of conflicting information by various epistemic authorities meant that one had to navigate through different interpretations, which underlines the importance of convincing and persuasive framing. There were both biological and social logics at play, as the virus itself is an infectious microbe, but the way in which it transmits is socially determined. This means that when we describe and interpret pandemic reality, we use both natural and social explanations to make sense of it. As Goffman (1974) writes, ‘In daily life in our society a tolerably clear distinction is sensed, if not made, between two broad classes of primary frameworks: natural and social’. To frame a particular occurrence during the pandemic, then, was not simply a matter of describing how viral infections transmit. These frames organise our experiences, which involve moral, political, historical and social assumptions (Edelman 1993; Entman 1993). In other words, the unexpected and threatening pandemic fits into our existing system of beliefs and cultural imagery. Goffman argues that ‘in our society the very significant assumption is generally made that all events – without exception – can be contained and managed within the conventional system of beliefs’ (Goffman 1974, 30).

RESULTS

There are two dominant frames that we identified in the memos: (1) the national battle frame and (2) the urgency frame. These frames define the situation in terms of ‘the principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them’ (Goffman 1974). The national battle frame defines the situation in terms of a setting in which we are situated as agents: we as a nation are fighting an aggressive enemy – a virus – that is trying to destroy us. We need to fight back as strongly and fiercely as we can. The national battle frame is organised around the ‘what’ question: what is this situation about? The urgency frame defines the situation in temporal terms and frames it as acutely threatening with the need to respond immediately. The urgency frame is organised around the ‘when’ question: when should we act? These frames recurred in the memos and formed an interpretative horizon through which the network articulated pandemic reality and persuaded the audience to rapid collective action. In the following section,

we will introduce these frames in more detail and show what types of metaphors they contain.

The national battle frame represents the pandemic as a fierce and patriotic fight against an enemy, which requires constant preparation to battle. There are historical and cultural references to Finnish collective perseverance when faced with tough challenges: Finland ‘has brought down tougher opponents during its history, so we will surely be able to handle this situation as well’ (M2 2020). The title of one of the memos refers to a famous quote – ‘a road leading to the least nuisance’ – in the Finnish classic *The Unknown Soldier* (1954) by Väinö Linna, which depicts Finnish soldiers in the Second World War (M3 2020). In the book, the quote refers to a situation in which one of the key characters is being persuaded to comply with a punishment to avoid a more severe punishment. The same historical metaphor is used in another memo when swift action is urged (M4 2021, 4). In another memo, the title draws from a similar cultural repertoire when it calls for ‘sisu’ to tackle the tough ‘corona autumn’ (M6). The term ‘sisu’ is deeply rooted in the Finnish cultural stock of meanings, referring to unique and mythic national resilience and stoic determination when facing extreme adversity. In 2021, the network published a memo in which it strongly urged the government to adopt a ‘Zero Covid’ strategy that would ‘bring the Finnish nation a shared destination towards which to fight together’ (M5 2021). This imagery is prevalent in the vocabulary of the memos: the situation is defined as a matter of ‘crushing’ (M2 2020, 31) and ‘aggressively eliminating’ (M4 2021, 4) the virus, ‘determinedly forcing down infection rates and keeping them there’ (M3 2020, 3), stopping the virus ‘vigorously and courageously’ (M2 2020, 27), and finding no justification to control the epidemic in a ‘feeble manner’ (M2 2020, 7). In a memo published in August 2020, the title defines the situation as ‘the second round of the fight against the pandemic’. The message is amplified by the visual imagery of the cover page featuring a mask-wearing person determinedly putting gloves on, activating visual references to a boxing match (M2 2020).

The urgency frame is motivated by an urge to push the government to more rapid and effective action. A memo published in 2020 laments that ‘Finland’s strategy is not working fast and efficient enough, thus we present more ambitious, concrete goals and means to increase their effectiveness’ (M2 2020, 4). In the memo, the urgency frame is communicated through the metaphor of being in a leaking boat, which is illuminated both discursively and visually (M2 2020). In the memo that includes a visual image of a leaking boat, the network explains that the pandemic situation resembles being in a rowing boat that leaks, which requires rapid action to prevent the vessel from sinking. ‘If we are not quick, the boat fills with water and the rower sinks together with the boat’, the memo warns (M2 2020, 6). The memo also presents a threatening scenario in which the leaking boat goes unnoticed: ‘At worst, the society does not notice the leaks. The rate of infections grows increasingly fast. When actions are finally taking place, one cannot avoid the slowing down of the economy and the overloading of the healthcare system. The rower is in distress’. There are also other maritime metaphors in the memos. Screening measures during the pandemic are compared to bailing water from a leaking boat (M2 2020, 37). The COVID-19 is described as having ‘come ashore in Finland’ (M3 2020, 8).

The sense of an immediate danger is communicated throughout the memos. In the first memo, the network warns that we must ‘prepare for the worst’ (M1 2020, 4). In another memo, the network underlines that the pandemic ‘will *not be over in a long time* and the virus is *spreading forcefully* in almost all countries that have not adopted

the goal of suppressing it' (M3 2020, 4, emphases added). The urgency frame is motivated by the nature of COVID-19, which 'bursts back in', 'floods back' and 'spurts', which requires urgent action (e.g. M1 2020, 19; M2 2020, 30; M3 2020, 4). The urgency frame is also communicated by situating Finland at a 'crossroads' (M1 2020, 2) and 'at a watershed' (M1 2020, 10). The situation is presented as a 'race against time', which means that we have to act 'immediately' with 'no time to waste in waiting for more accurate results' (M4 2020, 1; 3). The urgency frame and the national battle frame together construct an image of the pandemic as an era that requires constant and urgent fight against an enemy. This type of framing draws from a cultural repertoire of sense-making tools to render the pandemic intelligible while marginalising other possible framings. Framing the pandemic as an urgent battle provides an answer to the question of what this is about. In the following section, we discuss these findings in more detail and review some of the network's public reception.

DISCUSSION

What makes the case of the 'Eroon koronasta' network so intriguing is that its communicating style is affectively charged and alarmist, setting it apart from traditional expert language that is articulated in a style that aims towards neutrality, objectivity and 'distancing passion' (Emihovich 1995). The notion of scientists as omniscient is reflected in the public language of scientists, who typically avoid expressing emotions, political opinions or colourful language. What also sets the 'Eroon koronasta' network apart from traditional scientific authorities is that its conclusions were already fixed rather than open to scientific evidence that might prove its earlier stance incorrect. Throughout the pandemic, scientists were debating the advantages and disadvantages of roughly three different pandemic strategies: aggressive containment or elimination, suppression and mitigation of the virus, analysing and comparing them in light of the rapidly increasing data (Walker et al. 2020; Wu et al. 2021). Instead of continuously reviewing the benefits of these strategies in light of the growing knowledge about the virus and its societal implications, the 'Eroon koronasta' network cemented its conclusion from the very beginning. The network's *raison d'être* seemed to be to oppose the mitigation strategy and to present it in a threatening light.

The network's communicative logic was to challenge the official policy and to assert the network's knowledge as more authoritative than the knowledge relied upon and generated by the classical-modernist governance structures. To achieve this aim, the 'Eroon koronasta' network employed strongly persuasive and dramatic language laden with emotional undertones. Furthermore, it had a more antagonistic than cooperative style towards public authorities, motivating its collective action as a response to the allegedly inadequate governance by official representatives. This is one of the most noteworthy findings of this study: the way in which the 'Eroon koronasta' network communicated in public seemed to be more conducive to conflict than cooperation with public authorities, which means that Hajer's (2009, 30–31) idea of network governance as a 'collaborative effort' and 'public problem-solving' did not materialise in its ideal form. Instead of becoming collaborators, the 'Eroon koronasta' network and public authorities become competing epistemic authorities that were also framed as such in media commentary. The 'Eroon koronasta' network drew authority from international networks and distanced itself from Finnish policy circles, which contributed to the image that there was an epistemic clash between an internationally oriented independent network of researchers and nationally oriented

representatives of state governance. The network justified its position by juxtaposing it with the official policy and gave the impression that it has more accurate knowledge through international networks. The network also emphasised its independence from official policy networks, which arguably gave it more freedom to voice its views compared to official governing actors.

The ‘Eroon koronasta’ network can be analysed as a reaction to the absent political debate concerning the handling of the pandemic in Finland. The first months of the pandemic in Finland were characterised by a ‘Covid Consensus’ (Ahtiainen 2021; Sirén 2020), which referred to a wide agreement among parliamentary parties on how to govern the pandemic. It was only later that pandemic governance was politicised by political parties, which meant that in the early phase of the pandemic there was a notable absence of political debates concerning the pandemic. This void created conducive conditions for non-political actors with adequate authority to politicise the official policy by simply offering an alternative course of action. These societal conditions can explain the alarmist tone in the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network’s memos; the network essentially substituted the missing political debate that would have allowed citizens to properly evaluate different policy options. This raises a broader question of whether the act of offering policy advice by scientists is always a political act because it contributes to the politicisation process in case the advice is contradicting with the official policy. This illuminates the complex nature of the widely shared ideal that encourages scientists to actively engage in policy advice. When scientists step into the political sphere by offering their advice to policymakers, they might be labelled as political actors rather than as neutral experts. This tendency is accentuated by aggressive efforts to politicise expertise. Koskenniemi (2019, 11) describes this tendency as a backlash against expertise, which includes antagonistic claims that ‘what passes as “fact” is no different from opinion, that the resulting humiliations and deprivations are born with the bad faith of the experts, their cynical use of their opinions as fighting words to consolidate their authority’.

The ‘Eroon koronasta’ network gained nationwide visibility in July 2020, when there was a fierce public debate about the need to have a face mask recommendation in Finland. Face mask mandates began to be imposed in several countries in the first part of 2020. In Finland, there was hesitation to even recommend the use of face masks in public, which caused criticism as reports from various other European countries showed that face masks were not only recommended but made mandatory. The government eventually mandated the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to draw up a scientific report on the benefits of using a face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The report was published on 29 May 2020, and concluded that ‘the effect of the use of face coverings on the spread of respiratory infections among the population is minor or non-existent’ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020). In public, the report was not received as the highest authoritative knowledge on the issue and did not end the critical debate on the need to introduce a face mask recommendation. Instead, experts, politicians and citizens kept asking why the WHO, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control as well as various other scientific authorities recommended the use of face masks if the effect was next to nothing. Following the publication of the report, the government nevertheless followed the conclusions of the report and decided not to issue a face mask recommendation.

The ‘Eroon koronasta’ network managed to generate authority with its response to the ministerial report that had failed to gain authority as the ‘final word’ on the issue of face masks. On 30 July, the network issued a press release titled ‘Finnish study: the

benefits of face masks are significant' ([Eroon koronasta 2020b](#)). In the press release, the network explained that their members had conducted a meta-analysis of the same data as the ministerial report relied on and arrived at a completely opposite conclusion: the use of face masks significantly decreases the risk of infections. In the press release, the network referred to their study as 'new findings' that can guide Finland's pandemic governance. The study was uploaded to a preprint server for health sciences to be peer-reviewed and was still in preprint status more than 3 years later, in 2023. Nevertheless, the 'new study' was widely reported in the journalistic media, even covered as the top story of the Finnish Broadcasting Company's (*Yleisradio*) evening TV news. *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest subscription newspaper in the Nordic countries, published an op-ed by two members of the network, amplifying the message disseminated in the network's press release a day before ([Helsingin Sanomat 2020](#)). The public debate concerning the face mask recommendation began to be framed around two prominent authority figures. There was, first, the classical-modernist authority symbolised by the governmental report that concluded that the effect of using face masks was almost non-existent and therefore no recommendation was needed. Then there was the newly emerged and internationally oriented network authority symbolised by the new study that invalidated the conclusions of the governmental report by presenting its own interpretation of the data.

The intensity of the debate became apparent when the scientist responsible for compiling the ministerial report said that she had received very aggressive feedback and threats because of her association with the report ([Hujanen 2020](#)). She was accused of spreading 'propaganda' and putting forward politically motivated conclusions dictated by the ministry. Only 2 weeks after the 'Eroon koronasta' network had publicised its findings, the government reversed its earlier stance and publicly recommended the use of face masks. Two months later, in October 2020, representatives of the National Coalition Party in parliamentary expressed their lack of confidence in the government's earlier actions concerning the issue ([Eduskunta 2020](#)). When the intense debate was taking place, journalists were not asking what it meant that the study was not peer-reviewed. Instead, the preprint version was simply referred to as 'new findings', 'new study', or 'new research'. In this particular case, the 'Eroon koronasta' network managed to successfully perform authority, contesting the official policy and gaining unprecedented visibility in the mediatised public sphere. It was only later that the network began to gain more critical and even hostile public reception as researchers and journalists started asking questions about its role and communicative style as a pandemic authority.

In September 2021, a research professor at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare called the 'Eroon koronasta' network a 'club of lunatics' (*hörhöjen päiväkerho*) that spreads conspiracy theories and nibbles away trust in public authorities ([Tikka 2021](#)). Another research professor from the same institution publicly criticised the network and argued that its public actions were more ideological than scientific ([Hiilamo 2021](#)). He noted that the network members did not recognise the limits of their scientific expertise and ended up decreasing trust in public authorities, energising those who denied the very existence of the virus. There was one particular 'open letter to policymakers' published in December 2021 that he criticised and was thankful that the government did not follow its policy recommendations. The network published the open letter on its website, dramatically warning that there might soon be 100 000 infections per day and urging the government to impose immediate

restrictions to save the healthcare system from a total collapse (Eroon koronasta 2021). A journalist called this estimation ‘absurd’ and noted that the figure would be ‘an absolute record in Europe’ (Nuoska 2021). He further noted that the open letter presented ‘a horror scenario of an exponential growth that is against common sense and very unconvincing’. In 2021, *Helsingin Sanomat* publicly criticised the network by noting in its editorial that the face mask study of the network was poorly conducted while praising the ministerial report for its accuracy. The newspaper lamented that the public debate on the benefits of wearing a face mask was a ‘failure’ (Helsingin Sanomat 2021). Such critical remarks about the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network became frequent when the pandemic progressed, which meant that the successful authority performance in the face mask debate did not cement its role as a credible pandemic authority.

The ‘Eroon koronasta’ network describes its role as ‘sharing interdisciplinary observations and views about how to stop the coronavirus crisis and recover from the crisis’ (Eroon koronasta 2020a). Although crisis recovery is listed as the network’s key concern, there is remarkably little about the topic on its website. The most recent memo was published in August 2021, when the pandemic was still active. Once the pandemic began to fade away, the network seemed to lose its impetus. No new memos were published in the crisis recovery phase, which indicates that it was the intensive pandemic phase that energised the network to demand quicker and tougher action. Once the acute phase of the pandemic started to fade away, the global ‘Zero Covid’ movement began to increasingly focus on demanding tough action against the threat of long COVID-19, which is a post-COVID condition with a wide range of symptoms. The action groups that demanded strict ‘Zero Covid’ measures during the pandemic began to raise awareness of this post-COVID condition and demanded that governments take the threat seriously. Although members of the ‘Eroon koronasta’ network warned policymakers and the public about the threat that long COVID-19 poses to the population, there were no new memos published about the topic. Overall, the network did not seem as willing to politicise the crisis recovery phase as the pandemic phase.

When it comes to more aggressive action groups during COVID-19 such as the anti-vaccination conspiracy groups, many of them curiously leaned into pro-Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine immediately after Russia’s war of aggression began in 2022 (Kayali & Scott 2022). Such conspiracy groups seem to get energised by the intense epistemic instability during crises, which offers them an opportunity to fill the epistemic void created by uncertainty and fear. This shows that our current era of epistemic instability is not limited to action groups around COVID-19 but is a defining feature of our hybrid media system that witnesses various types of spontaneous networks seeking – and sometimes successfully gaining – epistemic and moral authority in online environments and journalistic arenas. The nature of the highly fragmented public sphere poses a serious challenge to the classical-modernist governing actors, who cannot simply rely on their *de jure* authority to successfully perform authority. The disorderly nature of our epistemic environment also means that it can be difficult to distinguish between credible epistemic authorities and hostile disrupters who only seek to destabilise the established order. As the Finnish case shows, even a network of researchers can end up being labelled as a controversial and aggressive group when it challenges the official policy by resorting to alarmist and emotionally laden language.

CONCLUSION

Science-based policy and evidence-informed policymaking have long been keywords that dominate debates around good governance and the role of scientists in policymaking. The epistemic competition around the governance of COVID-19 showed that the dynamic between policymakers, scientists and citizens is far from unproblematic. The promise of network governance as a collaborative and non-orchestrated problem-solving practice that allows us to escape the paradox of authority in mediated politics (Hajer 2009) did not materialise in its ideal form during the COVID-19 crisis. Its potential of increasing societal resilience and the quality of governance was hampered by the mediated nature of the public sphere, which encourages scientists to compete with other epistemic authorities to gain visibility and status. In the process, scientists might employ discursive techniques that capture the attention of public audiences while provoking critical questions about their style of communication and commitment to high epistemic standards. In the heavily mediated public sphere, an expert network can quickly gain visibility by presenting dramatic and threatening scenarios that induce collective fear, but such communicative techniques can end up decreasing trust in experts if the scenarios seem exaggerated and intentionally dramatic. Such fear-inducing scenarios can also reduce collective resilience if they depict the public authorities as utterly incapable of responding to the urgent threat. This is because trust in state institutions is an essential societal element in successful pandemic governance (Oksanen et al. 2020).

This is the tricky nature of spontaneous expert networks during crises: the networks can increase the quality of governance by suggesting alternative policy actions, but by publicly challenging the state authorities, they might end up decreasing trust in them. This observation can lead to the conclusion that expert networks should interact with public authorities at the 'back stage' rather than the 'front stage' (Goffman 1959) to avoid decreasing public trust in them and causing further epistemic instability, but this conclusion would be in conflict with the democratic ideal of transparency. To create a more resilient model for network governance in future crises, this paradox should be disentangled. The somewhat messy experiences of science-policy interaction during the pandemic raise questions about the role of network governance in the governance and recovery of future crises. Elements of network governance are already integrated into the official governance structures of modern states, which means that the line between classical-modernist governance and network governance is not clear-cut. The experience of the pandemic era shows that the tension is particularly strong between official and unofficial networks – between those who are included in the official governance network and those who are excluded from it. The key question, then, is who gets to be invited and included in the official network that is integrated in the classical-modernist governance structures.

APPENDIX 1

Eroon koronasta memos:

M1 2020

Vapaaksi koronasta -työryhmän muistio, 14 May 2020

M2 2020

Eroon koronasta -tutkijaryhmän muistio: Pandemian torjunnan toinen erä, 4 August 2020

Pienimmän riesan tie: Koronaepidemian tukahduttaminen turvaa terveyden ja talouden, 11 November 2020

Muistio: Koronavirusmuunnosten leviäminen Suomessa on estettävä välittömästi, 10 January 2021

Muistio: Koronasyksy vaatii vielä sisua, 11 August 2021

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Johanna Vuorelma  orcid.org/0000-0003-1291-6430

Associate Professor, University Researcher, Centre for European Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Pinja Lehtonen  orcid.org/0000-0003-1173-1813

Postdoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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