

Responsibilization as a return to collectivity? Legitimizing the responsabilization of preparedness: the case of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how communication is used by a Swedish public authority to legitimate the responsabilization of preparedness, i.e. how the state encourages individual citizens to take more responsibility for their security.

Design/methodology/approach – A multimodal discursive approach drawing on multimodal narrative analysis of video clips and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is used to examine how the responsabilization of preparedness is legitimated in video material published on Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's (MSB's) YouTube channel.

Findings – The study finds that the responsabilization of preparedness is legitimated through an ongoing but evolving normalization of threat. The findings also show how responsabilization is legitimated in moralizing terms of individual contribution to society, which may indicate a return from neo-liberal values to more traditional Swedish collectivist values.

Originality/value – The study shows how communication around preparedness and responsabilization is discursively constructed and legitimated through multimodal features, while previous research has mainly focused on verbal or written communication.

Keywords Preparedness communication, Responsibilization, Legitimation, Public authority, Multimodal critical discourse analysis

Paper type Original article

Introduction

Communication is a crucial tool to gain and maintain legitimacy for organizations *per se* as well as for their tasks (cf. Aggerholm and Thomsen, 2016; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2013). This is especially important for public sector organizations, as these organizations are accountable to society and need to show agreement with societal values (Wæraas, 2010, 2020). This study investigates how communication is used by a Swedish public authority, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) [Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap], to legitimate an ongoing change of political direction in matters of preparedness.

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The present paper is a part of the DURCOM project, which studies risk and preparedness communication in the digital urban society. This paper has received external funding for proofreading from The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) (No. 2020-09584).



Preparedness has been a previously rather backgrounded – to some even controversial – topic that has been increasingly prominent on the Swedish political agenda. MSB, a public authority consecrated to risk, crisis and preparedness established in 2009, is in itself a very tangible example of this increasing focus, as well as a leading actor in shaping the Swedish preparedness discourse. Therefore, how MSB communicates long term to try to create legitimacy around these issues is a highly relevant research topic, since previous studies tend to focus on the characteristics or effects of specific communication campaigns (e.g. [Johansson and Vigso, 2016](#)). In a greater context, the study highlights how public state institutions use communication to try to mobilize citizens and demand a change in behavior in preparedness issues. This is an increasingly significant task for public authorities globally as health crises, security crises and climate crises succeed one another.

A changing discourse: normalizing threat and responsabilization

The establishment of MSB can be seen as a turning point in Swedish politics. In the late 1900s and early 2000s, for example, the Swedish defense forces were being dismantled ([Agrell, 2010](#)), and preparedness was not at the forefront of the average Swedish citizen's mind or a trending topic in media. However, during the short time since MSB's establishment, the global security situation has changed dramatically. Russia has invaded Ukraine (twice!), and there has been a global pandemic. These dramatic events have certainly put matters of preparedness at the fore, and [Larsson \(2021, p. 319\)](#) describes how discourses of threat, war and crisis have become the “normal way of life” in Swedish society. Where such situations once were associated with exceptional measures, they are now referred to in terms of “civil preparedness” and moral obligations. For example, the Swedish Supreme Commander has recently stated that the Swedish people should prepare for war ([Schau and Granlund, 2024](#)), and national newspapers continuously publish articles on how to improve one's individual preparedness (e.g., [Cato, 2024](#)). The increasing focus on preparedness and warnings about war in Sweden has also been noted internationally ([Henley, 2018](#)).

However, even before this, in the 2000s, a shift to a more materialistic and individualistic focus in the Swedish preparedness discourse has been noted and quite criticized by several scholars (e.g. [Asp and Sjölund, 2014](#); [Girtli Nygren and Olofsson, 2020](#); [Kvarnlöf, 2020](#); [Larsson, 2019, 2021](#); [Petridou et al., 2019](#); [Sparf, 2015](#)). These changes are regarded as a reflection of an ongoing responsabilization of the individual in matters of security and preparedness, which refers to how the state seeks to delegate responsibility for security issues to its citizens (e.g. [Kvarnlöf, 2020](#); [Larsson, 2021](#)). It has furthermore been argued that this new individualistic approach to preparedness is contradictory to the strong role of the Swedish state and the extensive welfare system ([Larsson, 2021](#)). As [Kvarnlöf \(2020, p. 28\)](#) means, while preparedness used to be a “joint project involving the state and citizens” (translated from Swedish), preparedness discourses now seem to be more concerned with communicating what the state is *not* capable of doing. Furthermore, there seems to be a discrepancy between what people expect from the public sector and what the public sector expects from its citizens (e.g. [Asp and Sjölund, 2014](#)).

Responsibilization and the role of communication

The discrepancy just mentioned could be problematic, since studies have shown that public opinion and perceptions can pose a threat to the legitimacy and stability of existing risk government ([Lidskog, 2016](#), cf. [Tampere et al., 2016](#); [Wiese and Van Der Westhuizen, 2023](#)). This connection between public opinion and legitimacy can be explained by both the overload theory and the normative script theory. According to the overload theory, the success of welfare state expansion has caused people to rely (too) heavily on the state, and consequently, this has led to claims that any societal problem is a state responsibility. If the

state cannot meet these claims, it will lead to public dissatisfaction and eventually legitimacy loss (Kumlin, 2007). The normative script theory, in turn, means that people have certain, predetermined scripts about the world – for instance about how to behave during a crisis – and to achieve behavioral change the state must change those scripts. Only then can the “new” way to act become legitimate (Lebel and Masad, 2021). Delegating the task of preparedness from the state to the individual could thus potentially have negative effects on legitimacy, which makes the role of communication around this matter even more crucial. Despite this, little is known about *how* the ongoing responsabilization of preparedness is discursively legitimated in Swedish public communication. Previous Nordic scholars have, for example, investigated discursive argumentation in relation to terrorist threats (Rasmussen, 2015), but the present study is an attempt to highlight the ways in which different discursive elements can be used by public communicators to legitimate preparedness more generally, a research area which deserves further attention.

Specifically, focus is on how the responsabilization of preparedness is discursively legitimated through linguistic, visual and audio features in video material published on YouTube from MSB’s founding to the present time. Scholars have requested such a multimodal emphasis, as previous research on organizational legitimacy has mainly focused on verbal or written communication, even though legitimation depends on different communication modes (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Vaara *et al.*, 2024). The same applies for studies on preparedness and responsabilization, which have mainly focused on text analysis and interviews (e.g. Hobbins, 2017; Larsson, 2021; Rådestad and Larsson, 2020).

The study has been guided by the following research questions: (RQ1) What themes have dominated MSB’s audiovisual communication from its founding to the present time? (RQ2) How does MSB’s communication legitimate the responsabilization of the individual through multimodal resources? By answering these questions, the study contributes to the knowledge of how communication around preparedness is discursively constructed and legitimated, especially in relation to responsabilization – a topic that has become highly relevant again in the last decade.

Literature review

The term “responsibilization” refers to the “strategic effort on the part of the state to persuade individuals to shoulder greater responsibility for their own security” (Larsson, 2021, p. 307). The concept is tied to Foucault’s idea of governmentality, where legal regulation and coercion are replaced by ideas of individual autonomy (Foucault and Senellart, 2008). The idea behind shifting responsibility from the public level to the individual is that increasing individual awareness about risks and dangers will give individual citizens a greater incentive to undertake the necessary preparedness measures (Garland, 2001). This focus on individual choice in the responsabilization of security is seen as a reflection of neo-liberal ideas of freedom of choice and responsibility. In the neo-liberal view, governments that are too powerful create dependent and unfree citizens, so there is a desire to reduce the role of the state in issues such as security, for example, and replace it with free market processes, where entrepreneurship and competition are valued (Davoudi, 2016). In the process, individuals are disconnected from the state, and the role of the state is obscured (Larsson, 2021).

Criticism of responsabilization

While some see responsabilization as a way of empowering citizens by giving them agency and resilience (Clarke, 2005), others see it as a way of transferring public responsibility to individuals, adding a moral obligation to personal and societal security that also often imposes economic costs on individuals (e.g., Bergstrom, 2018). In this way, discourses of

individual responsibility are normalized and represented as free choices, when in fact they are based on moral judgments (Giritli Nygren *et al.*, 2015). The process of responsabilization also opens up the possibility of dividing people into “capable” and “incapable” individuals, with the former being considered responsible and the latter irresponsible (Rådestad and Larsson, 2020).

Responsibilization in Sweden: demands and distrust

Bringing the focus back to Sweden, as mentioned above, several scholars point to an ongoing process of responsabilization by Swedish public authorities. However, it has also been noted that the authorities in question often distrust the ability of citizens to handle this responsibility, which means that they make demands regarding preparedness measures and capabilities that they do not believe can or will be met (Asp and Sjölund, 2014; Hobbins, 2017; Lidskog and Rabe, 2022; Rådestad and Larsson, 2020). For example, Rådestad and Larsson (2020) note that although public authorities such as MSB devote a lot of effort and resources to pursuing responsabilization, they mainly see individual participation as a limited, supplementary function to reduce their own burden when necessary. Another paradox is that while these authorities spend much time and money on campaigns to increase individual preparedness, they also emphasize the limitations of public funding when it comes to assisting citizens. The limited resources of public authorities is a recurring theme in these campaigns, and in MSB's communication, individual responsibility for preparedness is paradoxically framed as the only way to contribute to the security of society as a whole.

The discursive legitimization of responsabilization

The present study contributes to this literature on the responsabilization of preparedness, in particular by focusing on the discursive legitimization of the responsabilization process. In doing so, the study relies on a number of generally accepted categories defined by Vaara *et al.* (2006) that are useful for revealing how the legitimization process is carried out discursively. The first one, normalization, is to present something as normal or natural. Authorization invokes authorities (tradition, custom, law or persons) as legitimating factors. Rationalization provides specific rational arguments to establish legitimacy by highlighting the utility of specific actions. Moralization uses moral arguments or specific value systems (e.g. religion) to provide a moral basis for legitimization. Finally, narrativization achieves legitimacy by telling stories or constructing narrative structures that show how the issue in question relates to the past or future. The study makes use of these legitimization strategies because they make it possible to find underlying meanings and reveal discursive complexities and contradictions, as well as foregrounded and backgrounded actors, behaviors and attitudes (Vaara and Monin, 2010; Vaara *et al.*, 2006). By investigating the discursive strategies used in this communication, it is thus possible to get a deeper understanding of how legitimacy is established (cf. Vaara *et al.*, 2024).

Method and material

A multimodal discursive approach is used to examine how the responsabilization of preparedness is legitimated in video material published on MSB's YouTube channel. A discursive approach to this issue is useful because discourses have both constitutive and reflexive roles in the surrounding society (Fairclough, 1992). Due to the circular relationship between discourse and society, where discourse can both shape and be shaped by society, discourse analysis is an important tool for understanding and identifying the emergence of certain topics, attitudes and behaviors in society. Furthermore, a multimodal discursive approach can show how different discursive features are used individually and in combination

to foreground certain aspects and consequently background others and what potential legitimacy dilemmas that could arise because of this. It may also reveal the ideological foundations behind Swedish preparedness communication (cf. [Machin and Mayr, 2023](#)).

Material

The material consists of videos posted on MSB's YouTube channel between 2011, when the first video was posted, and September 2023, when the analysis work began. The video format was selected because it allows for rich and complex communication, involving the interaction of multimodal features such as image, text and sound (cf. [Iedema, 2004](#)). MSB has also been a very prolific video producer over the years, and its YouTube channel, with 12,000 subscribers, contains an extensive, publicly accessible archive of material, including in-house productions intended for educational purposes and national campaigns distributed on social media or television. MSB appears to use YouTube specifically for these archival and distributional functions, as comments are turned off, and the videos cannot be accessed on MSB's own website. Thus, there is no interaction with the audience about the studied communication. Although the reception of some specific MSB campaigns have been evaluated during this time (e.g. [Johansson and Vigso, 2016](#)), there is no information from the material about how these video messages were received by the audience. While such a reception analysis would certainly have been interesting to include in the discussion, it was not possible as the present study covered MSB's long-term strategic communication and not just specific campaigns.

The material was collected in February and October 2023 by systematically searching MSB's YouTube channel from the top to the very bottom of the page. During the period studied, MSB published over 900 videos, so certain selection criteria had to be applied to keep the material manageable. To be included, videos had to have a clear focus on preparedness, as this is MSB's main task and reason for existence. This includes topics such as potential disasters and how to prepare for them, issues related to military, civil or total defense, preparedness measures such as ensuring the continuity of material supply chains and the devolution of preparedness responsibility from the public to the individual level. The material includes campaign videos that have been distributed on national television and social media, as well as informational and so-called infotainment videos mainly intended for YouTube. In total, they amount to 50 videos (see [Appendix](#)). This may seem like a small sample, but one should consider that MSB appears to use this channel as a sort of digital archive, and much of its diverse contents are not relevant to the present study. For example, webinars and recordings of meetings were excluded from the sample, as were duplicates, reruns and different versions of the same campaign (e.g. in other languages or adapted for the visually impaired), news reports on local events such as an explosion in a fireworks warehouse, educational videos on how to deal with cold weather and the like, videos promoting specific occupations such as chimney sweeps, videos describing the work or training of MSB and rescue services that do not address preparedness aspects, instructional videos on educational resources, technical equipment and software and audio podcasts posted on YouTube.

Multimodal narrative analysis

Methodologically, the paper draws on [Bouvier and Rasmussen's \(2022\)](#) framework for multimodal narrative analysis of video clips. In this approach, one is interested not only in how issues or people are represented linguistically and visually but also in how "sequences of scenes and shots [are] placed in relation to each other" ([Bouvier and Rasmussen, 2022](#), p. 103) and how this affects the representation. For instance, video clips may be used to juxtapose and contrast settings to convey a particular message. In such an analytical work, one usually refers to five basic stages that can help reveal what is happening in the video: orientation,

action, complicating action, resolution and coda (see also [Ledin and Machin, 2018](#)). [Bouvier and Rasmussen \(2022, p. 108\)](#) define these stages as follows:

- (1) Orientation – Who is involved and what is the time and setting?
- (2) Action – What is next?
- (3) Complicating action – What is the problem?
- (4) Resolution – How is the problem resolved?
- (5) Coda – What is the evaluation or ending thought?

Furthermore, [Bouvier and Rasmussen \(2022\)](#) identify three different types of video clips: those with a problem-solution structure, recounting of events and projection narratives. In the first type, typical of advertising, a problem is presented and then solved. Recounting of events is also used in advertising, but it is more about aligning the product with certain values or ideas than about solving a problem. It begins with an orientation stage, then recounts scenes in a coherent manner and usually concludes with a coda that gives meaning to what has just been seen. The last type, the projection narrative, neither solves a problem nor recounts events, but it does have an orientation stage and usually also a coda. In between there is a rapid succession of scenes that are not connected in time or place. This structure can be used in more symbolic ways and is common in branding material.

[Bouvier and Rasmussen's \(2022\)](#) approach is based on multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), which is useful for understanding how linguistic, visual and audio features interact to create meaning. The basic idea is that communication consists of a combination of language, images, sounds, gestures, etc. and should therefore be analyzed in these terms ([Machin and Mayr, 2023](#)). In the present study, this means looking at (1) how people are represented, (2) what kinds of social action and social interaction are represented and (3) what settings are used. This means considering discursive elements such as images, language (spoken and written) and agency (the ability to act), as well as the connotations that these discursive elements may have – the feelings, thoughts and associations that the act of communication evokes ([Machin and Mayr, 2023](#)). It also involves considering how audio features like music can be used to signal such things as intensity or drama ([Machin, 2010](#)).

Approach

To get an overview of the material and identify recurring themes, an initial coding process took place. All 50 videos were tabulated according to basic information about their title, length, etc. together with four analytical categories regarding theme(s), message, legitimization strategy and attribution of responsibility for preparedness. Inductively defining topics in the way described is an essential first step in any discourse analysis (cf. [Krzyżanowski, 2010](#)), and this coding process was carried out twice by the author to ensure the consistency of the analysis. For example, the video with ID no. 1 does not appear to have a structured storyline but instead consists of various clips and interviews about floods, landslides and forest fires. Because of this, its main theme has been coded as “natural disasters”, and because of the variety in the character, geographical setting and severity of these disasters, the main message of the video has been interpreted as the randomness and severity of such events. There are no explicit arguments as to why it is necessary to be prepared for such events, but the uncommented presentation of the numerous disasters without any other context implicitly normalizes them and gives the impression that they could happen at any time, anywhere. Furthermore, there is no explicit or implicit reference to responsibility, either at the public or individual citizen level, so the responsibility for preparedness box has been filled in with “none assigned”. After this initial analysis, the

results of the coding were summarized according to the main themes and their occurrences over the years to be able to identify overarching trends and changes over time (see [Table 1](#)). Finally, to illustrate how legitimization is discursively achieved in the material, a more detailed analysis based on [Bouvier and Rasmussen's \(2022\)](#) framework was also carried out on the most significant examples. Three of these examples are presented below.

Results

This section provides a descriptive overview of the results in order to visualize the dominant trends and changes over time. [Table 1](#) shows the main themes in the videos and their occurrences by year, as well as the total frequency of the themes. As can be seen, total defense is the dominant theme (occurring 13 times). This is followed by individual preparedness (8 times), responsibility (8 times) and COVID-19 (7 times). The theme of total defense, which is limited to the later years of MSB's history, includes descriptions and stories about what it is and why it is needed. The theme of individual preparedness becomes more prominent over the years and includes topics such as material preparedness and stockpiling supplies, as well as more general calls to increase one's preparedness skills and knowledge and statements equating individual preparedness with solidarity. The other two dominant themes are closely related, with appeals to follow public health recommendations during COVID-19 being framed as a matter of responsibility.

From this summary and the coding process described above, three distinct periods in the history of MSB can be identified that help to show how MSB's communication has evolved over time: the crisis normalization period, the intensified responsibilization period and the re-

Theme	Occurrence (year)	Total frequency
Total defense (including civil defense and voluntary defense organizations)	2019, 2019, 2019, 2020, 2020, 2020, 2020, 2020, 2021, 2021, 2021, 2022, 2022	13
Individual preparedness	2014, 2017, 2020, 2020, 2021, 2021, 2022, 2023	8
Responsibility	2012, 2020, 2020, 2020, 2021, 2021, 2021, 2022	8
COVID-19	2020, 2020, 2020, 2021, 2021, 2021, 2022	7
Natural disasters (floods, forest fires, etc.)	2011, 2012, 2013, 2013, 2019, 2019	6
Preparedness exercises	2014, 2015, 2019, 2021, 2022	5
Information/communication work (promoting websites, pamphlets, handbooks, etc.)	2016, 2018, 2018, 2021	4
Threats (diverse and accumulating, apocalyptic world and undefined sense of disaster)	2015, 2020, 2022, 2023	4
Preparedness on a general or national level	2015, 2021, 2021, 2021	4
Public preparedness (municipalities and private companies)	2021, 2021, 2022	3
Conceptualization of preparedness	2014, 2020	2
Terrorism	2014, 2021	2
IT/Cybersecurity	2014, 2022	2
MSB as an institution (operations, campaigns and tasks)	2013, 2020	2
Violent attacks in schools	2023, 2023	2
Criticism of (online) sources	2022	1
Note(s): Some videos combine two or more main themes, for example preparedness and threats, or COVID-19 and responsibility		
Source(s): Table by author		

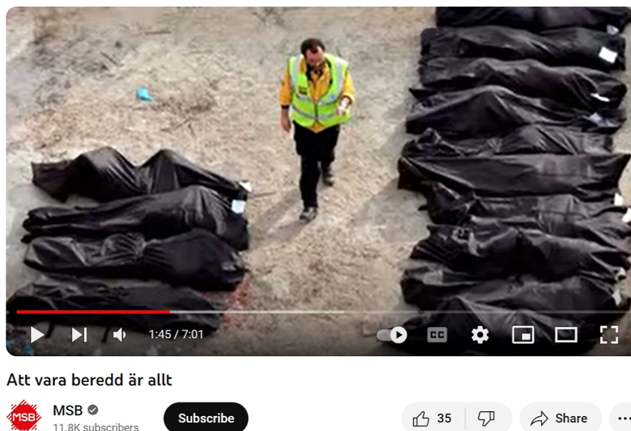
Table 1.
Main themes

intensification period. These three periods and their videos are presented below. Due to the number of videos, this presentation is rather cursory; however, one video from each period that illustrates a particularly noteworthy point is presented in more detail, with screenshots showing how the argument is made visually.

2011–2015: the crisis normalization period

The first period in MSB's communication history is largely about setting the tone and normalizing the issue of preparedness. This is mainly done through a normalization of natural disasters, with floods dominating the narrative. Here, MSB indirectly but powerfully demonstrates how such crises create a need for action and responsibility. Visually, this is often done through dramatic images of raging waters, flooded properties, stormy weather and damaged roads. The images are accompanied by catastrophic-sounding instrumental music, often with an intense and suspenseful tone that signals gravity and threat (cf. [Machin, 2010](#)). Altogether, this creates a sense of imminent disaster.

At the end of the period, in 2014–2015, a new trend emerges where external actors get more airtime, illustrated by information technology (IT) attacks and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism. Interestingly, there is no mention of Russia's annexation of Ukraine. A video titled "The readiness is all" (ID no. 10) takes the message of heightened threat to the next level, making it suitable for deeper analysis. The video has what [Bouvier and Rasmussen \(2022\)](#) call a projection narrative structure. It has a brief orientation stage that explains the premises of the video – a written caption stating "The readiness is all" – which is repeated in the coda at the end. There is no actor in this video, making this message of preparedness a general call that also includes the viewer. The rest is a 7-min series of clips of apocalyptic nature, showing random disturbing images such as the burning World Trade Center on 9/11, out-of-control forest fires, tsunamis, coffins wrapped in the Swedish flag and countless anonymous body bags. As there is no complicating action or resolution, the video can be understood as a "branding" of preparedness as such (cf. [Bouvier and Rasmussen, 2022](#)). As [Plate 1](#) shows, the video uses naturalistic video clips from real events. There is thus



Note(s): Disturbing images of global disasters legitimate the need for preparedness, soundtracked by apocalyptic and suspenseful music that heightens the sense of acute threat

Source(s): Figure by author

Plate 1.
Screenshot from the
MSB video "The
readiness is all" (ID
no. 10)

a sense of truthfulness to this depiction of the world as a dangerous place, and by juxtaposing graphic images of catastrophes from different times and places, the video contributes to normalizing unique and unusual disasters that were extremely shocking when they occurred. It is all soundtracked by intense, catastrophic-sounding music such as “O Fortuna” from the opera *Carmina Burana*, which enhances the apocalyptic atmosphere and constantly reinforces the need for action and responsibility.

Plate 1 further illustrates two of the three ways in which people are represented in this video: as victims and as doers. The first category includes dead, injured or mourning people, as well as immigrants crawling ashore on sunny beaches. The second category, the doers, includes those who are given agency in the video, mainly rescue workers and, to some extent, European Union (EU) politicians. In the latter case, however, the reality of their agency can be questioned, since the images are rather passive, e.g. EU politicians in suits having a group photo taken or holding a press conference. Instead, their agency is signaled linguistically through rather abstract captions like “cooperation”, “coordination” and “knowledge building”. Thus, little is conveyed about actual actions, such as plans or operations.

The third way in which people are represented in the video is as the evil other, which occurs several times in connection with angry Muslims, as in images of Muslim protesters burning the Danish flag and a Muslim cleric shouting at the burning Danish embassy in Beirut. Combined with written captions such as “Openness under pressure”, this has a meaning potential that depicts Muslims as the enemy, supposedly because they are anti-Europe and anti-democracy. However, there is also a representation of the evil other as anti-EU more generally – for instance, in images of masked protesters burning the EU flag during an EU summit, with the caption “Democracy is tested during a crisis”. Here, the images and captions emphasize that democratic and EU values are under attack, creating an us-versus-them divide between the EU and other parts of the world. Interestingly, despite the many visual references to the EU, it is also implied that other EU countries cannot be trusted (presumably by Sweden) when it comes to things like sharing resources and handling immigration. This is expressed with images of a customs checkpoint on the Polish border and hands reaching up toward a blue flag with a yellow star on it, along with the caption “Can we trust our neighbors?” The result is some very mixed signals about the EU’s role and credibility. Furthermore, there is no mention of MSB’s or any other Swedish public authority’s role in preventing similar disasters. This lack of clear agency at the Swedish public level, including within the MSB, is typical of the crisis normalization period. Instead, at the end of this period, we see the first tendencies toward explicit responsabilization of the individual, where individual preparedness is equated with having an emergency kit so that one can feel more comfortable in a crisis and be able to help others (ID no. 9).

2016–2019: the intensified responsabilization period

The second period is characterized by an intensified focus on responsabilization, e.g. with the launch of a new official website for crisis information and the distribution of a pamphlet called “If crisis or war comes”, based on a similar pamphlet from Second World War titled “If war comes”. In addition to the normalization of threats, and therefore of preparedness, there is now a focus on the rational and moral aspects of preparedness, often in combination. In the first case, it is argued mainly through linguistic formulations that both “you” as an individual and “we” as a society will be better off, i.e. more comfortable and closer to normality during a crisis, if people are properly prepared, for instance by having material supplies such as a power bank and an emergency radio during a power outage. These physical items are also visually presented to the viewer (e.g. ID no. 13). Meanwhile, from a moral perspective, cooperation and contribution are emphasized both linguistically and visually as key values. For instance, people dressed as representatives of different volunteer

organizations physically gather one by one in a dark warehouse, signaling that they will work together for each other (ID no. 20). Here, agency is given to “regular” people who have chosen to take responsibility for their own and the whole country’s preparedness. Higher values such as democracy, freedom and human rights are also put forward, for example, in a spoken dialog accompanied by images of Stockholm City Hall (ID no. 18).

It is furthermore telling how national romanticism is used to convey the moral aspects of individual contribution, for example, in a campaign to recruit part-time firefighters (ID no. 17). This video was a response to the summer of 2018, when several uncontrolled forest fires ravaged large areas of Sweden, and is deserving of closer analysis, as it illustrates how MSB alludes to moral values such as nature, family and traditions to legitimate the responsabilization of preparedness. The video has most of the elements of the problem-solution structure, although it is not a typical example of this kind of video. It has few linguistic features and instead relies heavily on the interaction and poignant contrast between audio and visual features. The background music is a popular song about summer by the Swedish singer and national icon Lill-Babs, and its cheerful lyrics and tone allude to a season that is the highlight of the year for many Swedes. At first, this fits well with the imagery: cows grazing in hilly meadows, people dancing around a maypole and a quiet neighborhood surrounded by greenery (see [Plate 2](#)). There is no clear orientation stage where the problem is presented; instead, these pastoral video clips in soft color tones are simply juxtaposed. Next, there is a complicating action as the music fades and is replaced by the sound of thunder, a squeaking noise as of trees about to fall over and rain and stormy winds. At the same time, the imagery becomes ominous and threatening. The color tone gets darker. Blowing trees seen from below against a gray sky create a sense of vulnerability, water flooding into an empty hallway with shoes of different sizes on the floor signals an abrupt end of normality and a young girl in a car looking worried as smoke envelops her in a gray haze signals an acute threat. The cheerful song resumes, but is now contrasted with smoke over yellow grass, smoke and wind blowing in over the neighborhood we saw earlier and cows running in panic across a meadow surrounded by a smoky haze. The clash between



När sommaren förändras behövs det fler som rycker in



MSB
11.8K subscribers

Subscribe

11



Share



Note(s): The importance of preserving national traditions is used as a moral argument to legitimate individual responsibility for preparedness

Source(s): Figure by author

Plate 2.
Screenshot from the
MSB video “When
summer changes more
people are needed to
help out” (ID no. 17)

audio and visual features makes the imagery even more disturbing, as it highlights what is under threat. At the end, the solution to the problem appears in a written caption: “when summer changes more people are needed to help out”, followed by a link to a website about part-time firefighters, which both normalizes these kinds of events and moralizes everyone’s responsibility to help prevent them.

Lastly, the end of the intensified responsabilization period also sees the start of an intensified campaign about the importance of a strong Swedish total defense. This campaign was launched with a video (ID no. 18) presenting the necessity of a military total defense exercise in 2020 (which was canceled due to COVID-19) and continued with videos stressing the importance of civil defense and voluntary defense organizations. Compared to the crisis normalization period, it thus seems as though MSB’s communication has evolved from relying mainly on fear rhetoric to including calls to action and the delegation of responsibility, and there is greater emphasis on agency than before. However, this agency is still mainly attributed to individual citizens rather than to public authorities such as MSB.

2020–2023: the re-intensification period

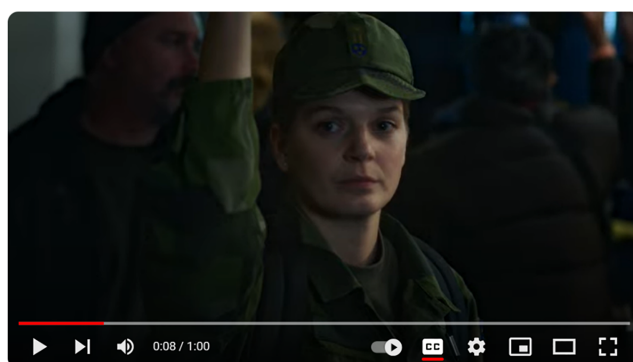
The third period is in many ways unique in modern times, with the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, several videos from this period normalize the idea that Sweden is under constant threat and the responsabilization of individuals in response to these circumstances. One way they do this is with linguistic formulations such as “society is constantly facing trials” and “false information is used to mislead us”. Again, there is little explicit reference to Russia; instead, there are references to unspecified changes in global politics and the global security situation, fake news and cybersecurity (ID nos. 24, 41 and 43).

COVID-19, on the other hand, gets more attention. The beginning of the pandemic is also special because it is one of the few times that MSB addresses its own role and responsibility in a crisis. This is done in an informational video featuring a statement from the department manager (ID no. 22). However, this approach is an exception; elsewhere, the topic is dominated by more campaign-style material covering the responsibility of the individual citizen (e.g., ID nos. 32, 38 and 40). These videos again play with visual elements such as light and shadow and color tone, and as in the previous examples, it is more about evoking emotions than reporting facts. Taking responsibility is equated here with following health care recommendations, for example, to make it possible to socialize with friends and family again. This moralization of compliance with national regulations is described linguistically with value-laden phrases like “thank you”, as well as moving music and heartbreaking images of people lying in hospital beds and health workers crying.

Apart from COVID-19, the strongest trend during this period is the continued campaign for total defense. This describes preparedness as a collaborative project involving civil society, private companies and the individual citizen. However, the primary focus is on civil defense and how the individual citizen can contribute, for instance by joining a voluntary defense organization (ID no. 27). This is argued using the same strategies of normalization, moralization and rationalization that are found throughout MSB’s material: crises and wars can happen, everyone is better off if society continues to function as normal during these events, and it is everyone’s responsibility to prepare for these situations and be ready to help. However, the moral value of contributing supplants the more rational arguments during this period. One video (ID no. 46) is suitable for further analysis, as it clearly illustrates this shift toward moralization. In the video, public service occupations that are important for national preparedness are presented as highly esteemed by other people in society. Visually, this is done by showing civilians of different ages looking at military and medical personnel in uniform and acknowledging their importance with a respectful nod. Two categories of people

are represented: the doers (service personnel) and the civilians (everyone else). However, as shown in [Plate 3](#), the environment (a rush-hour subway train and a shop open at night) suggests that these representatives of morality are also just regular people. The signal is therefore that anyone can become an esteemed doer. This implicit argument is strengthened at the end by the written caption “We have it in us. If crisis or war comes”, followed by “We are all part of the civil defense” and a link to MSB’s civil defense campaign website. Together with this call to action, the “we” refers not only to the people in the video but also directly includes the viewer. Meanwhile, natural sounds such as a subway train or children’s voices complement the visuals to create a realistic sense of everyday life. This is done in a poignant manner in the final scene, when children playing football are abruptly interrupted by the sound of an alarm. This normalization of the unexpected illustrates how crisis or war would affect everyday life for everyone. The video is difficult to classify as one of [Bouvier and Rasmussen’s \(2022\)](#) three structures; it does not have a clear orientation stage where the problem is presented, and the complicating action – the alarm – does not occur until the very end, but the video clips are clustered in groups that relate to each other, and there is a clear solution to the problem: civil defense.

Finally, there is a renewed focus on the normalization of threats, just as in the crisis normalization period. Instead of natural disasters, however, society is now being tested by threats from other people, like terrorist attacks and school shootings (ID nos. 30, 48 and 49). These are normalized by fictional images of teenagers running from a school shooting, while a voice-over gives a rational, step-by-step guide on how to act. There is also a return to the more general apocalyptic threat where an undefined catastrophe is dramatized as a negative game changer (ID nos. 45 and 50) through images of a girl walking through a neighborhood covered in a smoky haze, while a young narrator says that no one knows what has happened. This shows how lack of information and societal disarray are normalized in these videos. Again, the description of an overarching threat is used to legitimate the need for preparedness in different forms, while the role of public authorities is largely relegated to the background. Instead, there is a continued emphasis on individual preparedness, albeit in a



Vi har det i oss. Om krisen eller kriget kommer.



MSB
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91



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Note(s): The moral value of preparedness work is highlighted by presenting public servants, such as military personnel, as “regular people” who, for example, ride the subway during rush hour

Source(s): Figure by author

Plate 3.
Screenshot from the
MSB video “We have
what it takes. If crisis
or war comes” (ID
no. 46)

more nuanced way than during the crisis normalization period. While having access to material supplies is still considered a key factor, the importance of social networks is also emphasized (ID nos. 21, 26 and 34).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has shown how an increasing focus on responsabilization of individuals is reflected in the communication of a public authority that is dedicated to preparedness issues, MSB. It has further shown how MSB in turn contributes to this shift. In particular, the paper has focused on how the responsabilization of preparedness is legitimated.

First of all, as shown in the results section, the communication studied here is mainly about legitimating *the idea of preparedness*, while the legitimization of responsabilization is more implicit. Communicatively, this is mostly done through the normalization of various ominous threats (cf. [Larsson, 2021](#)). However, there is a noticeable change in the discourse during this relatively short period. In the early years of MSB's communication, threats are described in terms of natural disasters such as floods, but this gradually changes into a description of threats from other people. Terrorist attacks and violent attacks on schools used to be horrific events that happened in other countries, but in the 2010s, such incidents also happened in Sweden. Together with the war in Ukraine, this new physical proximity to man-made threats may make Swedes more susceptible than before to this kind of harsher discourse, and MSB more prone to use it in their videos (cf. [Fairclough, 1992](#)). Using the normative script theory as a possible explanation, MSB might also use these times of turbulence to try to change the audience script of threat. However, by focusing on these kinds of still rather unusual events, MSB's communication also contributes to the normalization of them. This could create more distress and suspicion among people, which in turn will be reflected in the discourse of threat. The recursive potential of public communication such as that from MSB is something that needs to be addressed but that the communicators perhaps fail to see in their eagerness to create engaging content.

When it comes to legitimating the ongoing responsabilization of the individual, MSB's communication relies on a small number of dominant strategies. The first is normalization. In this approach, taking responsibility for preparedness is not something that needs to be explained or justified explicitly; it is something that can just be expected. Although it is not unreasonable to expect capable people to be prepared for crises to some extent, a normalization of preparedness could put pressure on those who cannot live up to these expectations, and MSB's communication may therefore contribute to a division of people into "capable" and "incapable" (cf. [Rådestad and Larsson, 2020](#)). Secondly, there is a strong moralization of responsabilization in MSB's communication (cf. [Giritli Nygren et al., 2015](#)). As seen in the examples, people who take responsibility, for example by joining the military, are presented as valuable and admired by their peers. Responsibilization is thus associated with solidarity, pride and loyalty and is presented as a way of contributing to society as a whole. It is also linked to ideological values that many Swedes cherish, such as nature, family and traditions. Thirdly, rational arguments are still made for types of responsabilization that are tied to personal comfort, including the material aspect of stockpiling supplies (cf. [Asp and Sjölund, 2014](#); [Kvarnlöf, 2020](#); [Larsson, 2019](#); [Sparf, 2015](#)). However, the present study shows that in MSB's communication, preparedness is increasingly linked to contributing at an individual level through social action rather than material preparedness. The clearest example of this is the increasingly prominent focus on total (and civil) defense.

The focus on responsabilization in MSB's communication could, as mentioned in the introduction, be a sign of the Swedish state being overloaded with claims it cannot handle. With this perspective, the delegation of responsibility for preparedness thus becomes a way of avoiding dissatisfied citizens and ultimately legitimacy loss for the state. However, a more

positive way of interpreting this latter trend of social action is as an indication of a gradual return to the historical discourse of Swedish preparedness as “a joint project” between the individual and the state (cf. Kvarnlöf, 2020). Perhaps what we see here marks another turning point in the history of Swedish preparedness, with a return to the traditional collective society after a period of neo-liberal focus on the individual. However, there is still more focus on the role of the individual in this communication (cf. Larsson, 2021). If preparedness is to be a joint project again, it may be counterproductive to relegate the responsibilities of MSB and other public actors to the background. Carefully crafted communication could and should play a leading role in the delicate matter of appointing responsibility without public authorities coming across as if shying away from their duties.

The study is of course limited by its focus on video material, which means that a great deal of MSB's other communication has been excluded. As mentioned in the materials section, much of the material on MSB's YouTube channel was not included in the study because it was not relevant to the aim and research questions. This and other MSB material may be relevant for other purposes, and future studies could complement the study's results by using a different research design. Additionally, one should consider the affordances that come with this kind of multimodal communication, as well as what challenges that YouTube as a medium entails. One challenge, for example, is to get the target audience to stay on the video and not move on to other content suggested to them by YouTube's algorithms. They might also get distracted by commercial ads and lose focus on the stories about preparedness and responsabilization. The nature of the medium itself might thus prevent the audience from receiving the message, something which this study does not cover. Studies focusing on the impact of this type of communication, both in terms of behavioral outcomes for the target audience and the effects on legitimacy for the organization, could therefore provide interesting insights that build on the knowledge of responsabilization of preparedness.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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