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Public Relations and Communications during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Ana ADI
Professor, Quadriga University of Applied Sciences
GERMANY
e-mail: ana.adi@quadriga.eu

Thomas STOECKLE
Lecturer, Bournemouth University
UNITED KINGDOM
e-mail: tstoeckle@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has provided rich learning opportunities for public communicators: from positive, and unfortunately too often, also from negative examples. From the difficulties of relaying scientific information to publics and political partisanship colliding with public health interests, to the ‘misinfodemic’ (in particular, but not only, on social media) exacerbating the pandemic, to HR departments and managers struggling with the work-from-home dynamic: communicators around the globe were affected by, as well as affecting the repercussions of the pandemic. In this special edition, researchers from Belgium, Estonia, France, Morocco, Portugal and the UK explore impacts of the pandemic on media communication, internal and external communication of public as well as

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private sector organisations. They present studies and findings on the mediatisation of science, the evolving role of institutional communication, organisational spirituality, the stakeholder perspective of internal publics, the role of solidarity communication and third places in urban centres. Together, they provide a fascinating and diverse view of academic engagement with an evolving topic of local as well as global significance. In a time of growing uncertainty, this diversity of perspectives provides opportunities to consider the topic from a variety of angles – and hopefully this open-mindedness will contribute to the exploration of alternatives, where the trodden paths often seem to lead into dead ends.

Keywords: COVID-19, misinformation, mediatisation, internal publics, organisational spirituality, solidarity communication

Relations publiques et communication pendant la pandémie de Covid-19

Résumé : La pandémie de COVID-19 a fourni de riches opportunités d'apprentissage aux communicateurs publics : à partir d'exemples positifs, et malheureusement trop souvent, également à partir d'exemples négatifs. Des difficultés de relayer l'information scientifique auprès des publics et de la partisanerie politique se heurtant aux intérêts de santé publique, à la « désinfodémie » (en particulier, mais pas seulement, sur les réseaux sociaux) exacerbant la pandémie, aux services RH et aux managers aux prises avec le travail-de-dynamique domestique : les communicateurs du monde entier ont été touchés par, ainsi que les répercussions de la pandémie. Dans cette édition spéciale, des chercheurs de Belgique, d'Estonie, de France, du Maroc, du Portugal et du Royaume-Uni explorent les impacts de la pandémie sur la communication médiatique, la communication interne et externe des organisations des secteurs public et privé. Ils présentent des études et des résultats sur la médiatisation de la science, le rôle évolutif de la communication institutionnelle, la spiritualité organisationnelle, la perspective des acteurs des publics internes, le rôle de la communication solidaire et des tiers-lieux dans les centres urbains. Ensemble, ils offrent une vision fascinante et diversifiée de l'engagement universitaire avec un sujet en évolution d'importance locale et mondiale. À une époque d'incertitude croissante, cette diversité de perspectives offre des opportunités d'envisager le sujet sous divers angles - et nous espérons que cette ouverture d'esprit contribuera à l'exploration d'alternatives, où les chemins tracés semblent souvent mener à des impasses.

Mots-clés : COVID-19, désinformation, médiatisation, publics internes, spiritualité organisationnelle, communication solidaire

1. PR and Communications, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the “Golden Hour”

While linguists question the assertion¹ that in the Chinese language, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters, the first one representing danger and the second one, opportunity, it is evident that the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to wide-ranging changes in the way we live and work, in the way we communicate.

A concern with how we communicate and how we receive, process and act upon information received has been at the centre of various journal editions including the *Humanities and Social Sciences Communication*, *Science Communication*, the *International Journal of Business Communication* or *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*. Scientific communication and the need for scientists to both verify information and communicate in an authentic manner for instance has been at the centre of Matta’s (2000) article. In assessing the framing of Covid-19’s origins, Bolsen et al. (2020) reiterate the need to find ways to “combat the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories related to this global pandemic”. In this context, attention on trust in various societal actors has returned. In this sense, Batova’s (2021) analysis of social media messages during the three months after the first report Covid-19 case in the US is relevant as it shows how trust depreciates as anger rises. Trust is also at the core of Kim et al.’s (2020) study on the effects of exposure to misinformation. “Information insufficiency”, they argue, lead “to greater information avoidance and heuristic processing, as well as less systematic processing of COVID-19 information.

These contributions are certainly valuable to PR and communications practitioners providing information and inspiration into how to craft effective messages. They also discuss the worrying developments stemming from politicization of information resulting in higher degrees of societal polarization (Hart et al., 2020). What these studies however do not do is discuss the role of communication professionals in planning, disseminating and/or responding to such information. The PR and communication work and advice, remains either unseen or unacknowledged.

The various lockdowns in 2020/21 confronted us with sudden change, working from home and interacting virtually through collaboration tools and video conferencing software. Were we experiencing a ‘new normal’? For communicators this has been dubbed as a “golden hour”, with demand for communication services increasing during the past months (ReportLinker, 2021).

Will this change last, or will we revert back to pre-pandemic conditions? What will the post-pandemic reality look and feel like, once the dust has settled?

A previous special issue of this journal that we edited jointly addressed the future of communications and public relations against the backdrop of the pandemic (Adi

¹ <http://www.pinyin.info/chinese/crisis.html>

and Stoeckle 2021). In our introduction to that issue, we stated that “imagination exercises are necessary and have to be repeated.”

In this new issue, the imagination exercises continue, with the authors addressing the various impacts of COVID-19 on public communication directly and innovatively, exploring topics ranging from mediatisation to solidarity communication, from organisational spirituality to changes in internal and government communications.

2. The Current Edition

In their study on the mediation of science, comparing COVID-19 discourse in quality newspapers in the US, France and Estonia, Marling and Käsper explore the “importance of language and affect in effective strategic communication.” They find that traditional media remain an authoritative source of information, though to varying degrees in the three countries. While US public health discourse appears more politicised than France, where “science stands on its own as a crisis explainer”, in Estonia science coverage appears “respectful and not politicised.” Marling and Käsper describe mediatisation as a “metaprocess in which the media can no longer be effectively separated from the social.” Their recommendations for communication professionals include focus not only on strategic communication but also on language choices more broadly, as well as the need to be attentive to the strength of cultural patterns and cross-cultural variation.

A second paper exploring the role of traditional media is by Kabbadj and Bendahan, who analysed Moroccan public service television in the early stages of the pandemic (March/April 2020). Starting from the role of public communication in a public health crisis – curbing both the spread both of the virus, and the related misinformation proliferating especially on social media – they conclude that “COVID-19 marked the comeback of traditional television”, with audience increases of almost 50% for the two analysed national TV stations in March 2020. They describe how public TV in Morocco modified and adapted their programming to raise awareness and inform about the pandemic, with politicians giving interviews in Darija, a Moroccan Arabic dialect, using plain rather than technical medical language. Another unusual step was university courses being broadcast on TV channels, to support students without the technical means to continue studies online during lockdown. Though the case for the ‘comeback of TV’ is strong, the authors concede that this might only be temporary.

It is not only traditional media that appeared strengthened through the pandemic, but also institutional communication as Forbes’s analysis of the UK Government Communication Services (GCS) shows. Applying Bourdieu’s Field Theory and conducting qualitative interviews, the author describes how GCS practitioners moved closer to the political centre during the pandemic, practising public communication as a strategic management discipline and applying social capital and symbolic power. Forbes suggests that the GCS might be repositioned on a par with other government

management functions and professions such as finance or HR. However, to sustain such an enhanced role, it needs to be embedded in the political field through ongoing investment in knowledge and skills of practitioners.

Institutional communication is also the focus of Pacheco et al. in their study of communication in a higher education institution in Portugal. Their research starts from the observation that, traditionally, Higher Ed communication is unidirectional and asymmetrical, focused on branding rather than on stakeholder relationships with current and prospective students, beyond bureaucratic and informative transactions. Their analysis of digital COVID communication from three perspectives – institutional, public health and emotional – explores digital public relations in the context of “organisational spirituality”, suggesting a shift in purpose to address uncertainty by going beyond institutional functioning, toward promoting and facilitating participation, interaction and union among stakeholders.

Horlait and Lambotte’s research into internal communication in Belgium during the pandemic highlights the need for a more differentiated and diverse view of internal publics. They suggest to move away from considering employees as a homogenous public that can be addressed in a generalised way, and instead segmenting internal publics to address the increasing diversity of workforces. They identify the emergence of a “new typology of internal publics” as a consequence of the pandemic, and recommend conducting internal communications from a stakeholder perspective: In particular, they highlight the role and responsibility of the immediate (line) manager, and consequently the role of the internal communication function in providing guidance and training for managers.

Lastly, Magkou and Lambert’s exploration of third places, between home and work, builds on Ray Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place* (1999), of public communication in local communities. Through interviews and participant observation in community institutions around Europe, they show how crisis leads to reconsideration, repositioning and reinvention: “the relationships of societies to their environment have been profoundly transformed.” Their discussion of the in-betweenness of third places has echoes of a metamodern perspective (Meyer and Barker, 2020; Meyer, 2021). The perception of a “preponderance of solidarity communication”, finding new ways to overcome digital divides to continue meeting even in lockdown, is distinctly optimistic and sets the scene for the development of new frameworks for communication professionals and public engagement.

3. This Edition’s Legacy

One theme running through all the contributions to this COVID edition, from over-mediatization and the comeback of public service television, to the enhanced role of government communication, to organisational spirituality, segmented internal stakeholder communication and the rise of public solidarity communication, is the necessity to find new and better ways of coping in a post-pandemic VUCA world

(Worley and Jules, 2020), of embracing uncertainty in the face of wicked problems (Lilleker and Stoeckle, 2021).

With regards to communication scholarship and traditions, this edition, like the one we previously edited, shows (still) how varied both research and thinking traditions are in the world. On the other hand, this current edition, like many others that emerged during this pandemic seem to have been more international both in scope and reach.

Questions of work-life balance are being reconsidered, and attitudes to work (how much, how, where) are changing, fuelling trends such as The Great Resignation (Allman, 2021; Hirsch, 2021). How will businesses respond? How will the communication function respond to the pandemic disruptions? We don't pretend to have the answers to these broad and complex questions. However, we are confident that the questions raised and perspectives provided in this edition will help pave the way for subsequent explorations.

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Communicating Covid-19: Framing Science and Affect in U.S., French and Estonian Traditional Media

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Raili MARLING

Professor, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, University of
Tartu
ESTONIA
e-mail: raili.marling@ut.ee

Marge KÄSPER

Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, University of
Tartu
ESTONIA
e-mail: marge.kasper@ut.ee

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has also been accompanied by an infodemic, which has made effective public communication increasingly difficult. This article compares the mediation of science at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in quality newspapers from the USA, France and Estonia. We will analyse texts from March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as the most important public health challenge in all three countries. We will perform a quantitative and qualitative lexicometric analysis of discourses evoking science and expertise to identify the

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dominant explanations of science in the context of the crisis. The results will be discussed as manifestations of broader affective practices that shed light on public authorities' attempts to communicate science and to direct public behaviour. The article shows the importance of language and affect in effective strategic communication.

Keywords: science communication, coronavirus, media discourse, cross-cultural analysis, lexicometry

Communiquer la Covid-19 : Science et affect dans la communication publique et médiatique en Estonie, aux États-Unis et en France

Résumé : La pandémie COVID-19 s'est également accompagnée d'une infodémie, qui a rendu de plus en plus difficile une communication publique efficace. L'article compare la médiation de la science au début de la pandémie de COVID-19 dans des journaux de qualité des États-Unis, de France et d'Estonie. Nous analyserons les textes de mars 2020, lorsque la pandémie de COVID-19 est devenue le défi de santé publique le plus important dans les trois pays. Nous effectuerons une analyse quantitative et qualitative des discours évoquant la science et l'expertise pour identifier les explications dominantes de la crise et de la science dans le contexte de crise. Les résultats seront, à leur tour, discutés comme des manifestations de pratiques affectives plus larges qui mettent en lumière les tentatives des autorités publiques de communiquer la science et d'orienter le comportement public. L'article montre l'importance du langage et de l'affect dans une communication stratégique efficace.

Mots-clés : communication scientifique, coronavirus, discours médiatique, analyse interculturelle, lexicométrie

Introduction

Societies across the world have been overwhelmed by the discussion of and response to SARS-CoV-2, popularly known as the coronavirus. While the disease emerged in China already in 2019, it became a matter of grave public concern in Europe and North America in February 2020 (WHO, 2020). What had previously been considered a distant issue became an immediate crisis. The crisis had to be communicated to the public, generating a variety of policy statements, scientific recommendations and sanitary guidelines. In addition, there was a proliferation of mis- and disinformation (Cinelli et al., 2020; Shahsavari et al., 2020). In other words, the pandemic also became an infodemic, which is explained by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the abundance of information, including false information, that creates not just confusion but also harm (WHO, n.d.). Questionable information often reached countries before COVID-19 infections and this created the need for “misinformation mitigation” (Gallotti et al., 2020). The early scientific uncertainty about the nature of the disease created a knowledge gap where the lack of an established consensus sent

many people to unverified information shared on the Internet and social media. A study by the WHO and the University of Melbourne showed that young people considered science content the most shareable information on their social media feeds. However, although they were aware of the proliferation of misinformation, they did not challenge such content (WHO, 2021). Similar complacency has also been reported in China (Zou & Tang, 2021).

In some ways, this is not new. Cook, Pieri & Robbins (2004) argue that science communication has always been filtered through people's personal experiences and worldviews. Wolfgang Wagner (2007) has called the result of this filtering "vernacular science knowledge". This vernacular knowledge helps people find practical tools for making sense of complex and contradictory information (Wagner et al., 2002). COVID-19 is an excellent example of such sense-making.

Thus far, the majority of research on COVID-19 pandemic and communication has focused on social media, because of their centrality in today's news ecosystem (e.g. Chen et al., 2020). Social media have also become important in science communication (Huber et al., 2019; Luzón, 2013). We, in contrast, will analyse traditional media as "crisis explainers" (Kutter, 2014).

As the WHO study from 2021 showed, even young people used national newspapers, television and radio as the most reliable sources of COVID-19 information (WHO, 2021). A study from Spain demonstrated that the elderly population relied on the traditional media but was also critical of it for failing to provide sufficient and clear information (Eiguren et al., 2021). We argue that traditional media are still an authoritative source of information for different age groups. They also act as key mediators between the scientific community and the authorities, becoming a source of the culturally specific vernacular knowledge that needs to be addressed in misinformation mitigation (Galotti et al., 2020). At the time of writing, although there are analyses of the politicisation of COVID-19 coverage (e.g., Hart, Chinn & Soroka, 2020; Zhang, 2021), the question of the role played by newspapers in a science communication context remains under-researched. However, previous studies have provided some useful insights. For example, Iranzo-Cabrera and López-García (2021) studied the mediatisation of Spanish science experts in the media and identified what could be called a pop-star effect that science experts acquired during the crisis. We want to gain a broader picture and thus will not focus on individual experts but scientists as a group.

As Martín-Barbero (1993) has shown, the receiving socio-cultural context filters incoming knowledge and frames it into culturally specific representations. This is why we are comparing the mediation of science about the COVID-19 pandemic in newspapers from the USA, France, and Estonia. The three countries are the target of this study and as well of our broader research project because of their distinct value systems which impacts science communication as well: the individualist and decentralised US (Bevan & Smith, 2020) in contrast to the tradition of a strong state in France (Bergeron, 2020), with Estonia between these two poles in its combination of