EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION IN THE PERIOD OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC (COVID-19)

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Abstract: *In contemporary and interconnected society, public health risks can expand rapidly, at a great distance from the starting point. Information flows on the same principle, influencing the perception and automatically the actions of the population. The attention of the authorities is directed towards the communication field in order to ensure the access of the population to authorized sources of information and its persuasion in the adoption of prevention measures against Covid virus infection. Infodemic 19-Covid runs daily in parallel with the worst public health crisis of this century. Unregulated platforms have become digital megaphones that infect viral health through misinformation and manipulation, threatening the accuracy of online content. Internationally, the fight against this phenomenon has been implemented by the authorities. Effective communication is the key to possible control and resolution. The appearance of the disruptive, unexpected factor also brings challenges in terms of communication attitude to achieve the proposed objectives. Chaotics communication is the proposal of research as an emergency communication alternative.*

Keywords: effective communication, COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation, infodemic, chaotics communication

1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2 virus infection has led to severe respiratory diseases, which through interaction with other diseases is often fatal. Current research places the origin of the first outbreak of coronavirus in Huan Province, China. Due to the rapid movement of the population and the interaction of travelers, the virus transmitted very quickly, crossing China's borders, causing a global pandemic of coronavirus (COVID-19), with major consequences in modern society.

The World Health Organization (HOW) together with the governments of the countries have taken a stand in preventing and limiting the transmission of the virus, in treating the sick and in minimizing the social and economic impact. This virus is

the new challenge for the entire research community, which is trying to elucidate the origin, characteristics of the virus, transmissibility, treatment, vaccine and mortality rate [1].

In this “risk society” the population feels threatened by all sorts of invisible risks that exist only in terms of knowledge, which means that everything depends on the social construction of this risk [2]. In the current crisis, the world has come to a standstill, but information is circulating at a fast pace. Therefore, the authorities must pay more attention to the communication space, so that the population has quick access to credible sources, for professional information and the correct adoption of preventive measures.

The risk can be manipulated, amplified, hyperbolized or minimized. The media can act effectively, it can go through the event, the threat, but it can also lead it. It reports, communicates events and disseminates information to the public, and in so doing, the media has a major role in the social construction of a threat.

It is essential to promote appropriate behavior, protection and prevention in the transmission of information to the public, leaving aside the sensational aspects of the news. The public is advised to carefully select their sources of information, to avoid speculative messages and to limit their media exposure.

2. Research Methodology

In this research based on the literature we analyzed the role of communication in the context of the pandemic, its threats and consequences, we characterize the evolution of public discourse and explore theoretical frameworks regarding the process of amplification or minimization of risks. Such a time frame is a good reference point for studying the dynamics of content consumption around critical events, in which the accuracy of the information is threatened.

3. Management of 2019-nCov Infodemic

With the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic (COVID-19) and the spread of the virus (2019-nCov), they were accompanied by “*a massive infodemic*” [3] an overabundance of information, some real, some false, of course from various, authorized or less credible sources.

WHO has taken a stand in this regard and made clear statements in the Situation Report-13: “Due to the high demand for timely and trustworthy information about 2019-nCoV, WHO technical risk communication and social media teams have been working closely to track and respond to myths and rumors. Through its headquarters in Geneva, its six regional offices and its partners, the organization is working 24 hours a day to identify the most

prevalent rumors that can potentially harm the public’s health, such as false prevention measures or cures. These myths are then refuted with evidence-based information. WHO is making public health information and advice on the 2019-nCoV, including myth busters, available on its social media channels (including Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest) and website” [4].

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”, said WHO Director-General

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the Munich Security Conference on February, 15.

The high flow of information can influence the behavior of the population and their reaction to the measures imposed by governments. Thus, the prediction of the spread of the virus must take into account the behavioral attitude of the population in response to the information content received [5]. The large volume of information about this pandemic sometimes created a misperception on the subject and in this way the search for answers was a big mistake. The danger of a crisis situation is not measured by the huge amount of information.

4. Misinformation-Viral Health Infection

The transmission of the virus has manifested itself in a dynamic society, in which the population has different levels of culture, education and is easily influenced by the media and social media.

The effectiveness of disease prevention and spread must be reported to each vulnerable group. The population’s interest in information is unlimited in times of crisis, becoming vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. This way of infecting viral health is found in the media and social media practiced by certain theorists of conspiracies, political entities, hucksters, trolls, etc.

Disinformation campaigns, fake-news or other alternative narratives are disseminated through social networks, certain websites or even media enterprises. Those who practice

manipulation and misinformation take advantage of mass panic by validating fear and bringing suspicion into the perception of the population. The way misinformation becomes viral is very fast, for example on the social platform Facebook, in February, fake news from one sample were distributed 1.7 million times and read 117 million times [6].

These viral threats affect the psyche and public health, divert people's attention from the real aspects of the danger and reduce the application of disease prevention measures imposed by officials.

False news topics address topics in the areas:

- disease prevention (e.g. false claim that chlorine dioxide kills the virus or the use of a hair dryer can be used to prevent contact with the virus);
- anti-vaccination (for example the statement: Italy was severely affected by the pandemic due to influenza vaccination campaigns);
- promoting health, false cures and alternative treatments (for example the method of treatment with hichoxychloroquine or promoting the false way of diagnosing the existence of COVID-19 in the body by "*taking a deep breath and holding your breath for 10 seconds*" if difficult breathing occurs, the presence of the virus is confirmed);
- expressing distrust in health and state institutions;
- amplifying the fear by saying that the virus is created by man against certain communities (for example, the hypothesis that the virus was created in a laboratory at the Institute of Virology in Wuhan, but also the opposite hypothesis that it was created in America);
- discrimination against minorities (advancing the idea that migrants spread the virus or that people with black skin are more resistant to the coronavirus) [7].

At many critical times, misinformation campaigns have been spread even by certain governments, in order to achieve

their political goals and to destabilize other competing states.

According to an EU report by the Strategic Communications Division of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Russia and China are coordinating a disinformation campaign around the coronavirus pandemic, to undermine public confidence in Western governments and lift sanctions [8]. The Strategic Communications contributes to effective communication and fights to combat misinformation and strengthen information security in the media. EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, has warned of the disinformation phenomenon, which will intensify after the pandemic and must be treated as a hybrid threat.

Another example of fake news was the effect of 5G technology on the immune system and the spread of Covid-19. This hypothesis began in New Zealand, when a woman launched a petition calling for its ban in her community. Ungrounded information about the health risks associated with 5G and coronavirus has spread rapidly through all channels of communication around the world. In early April, several 5G mobile towers were set on fire in the UK. In this regard, British officials have taken the necessary measures and blame the digital platforms for spreading misinformation. "We have received several reports of criminal damage to phone masts and abuse of telecoms engineers apparently inspired by crackpot conspiracy theories circulating online," Britain's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport told the BBC. "We must also see social media companies acting responsibly and taking much swifter action to stop nonsense spreading on their platforms which encourages such acts" [9].

The misinformation spread on social media amplifies the perceived risk and fear of the pandemic. These social media platforms (Facebook, Google, WeChat, YouTube, Amazon and Instagram) allocate resources to remove misinformation, manipulation,

trolls, because they come along with these conspiracies.

Lately, credible, authorized sources are being promoted and false, distorted news is being suppressed. An example of this is the Silicon Valley coordinators who have understood the importance of promoting accredited official sources and take very serious control of virus and pandemic content. *“When you’re dealing with a pandemic, a lot of the stuff we’re seeing just crossed the threshold,”* Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told The New York Times. Instagram chief Adam Mosseri relayed that message to CNN: *“Given the reach our platform has, and given how intense this crisis is, and how serious it is ... we wanted to take the opportunity to point more people toward good information,”* he said. *“We have clear policies against COVID-19 misinformation and we quickly remove videos violating these policies when flagged to us. We have manually reviewed and removed thousands of videos related to misleading and dangerous coronavirus content,”* a YouTube spokesperson said. *“We’re also committed to providing helpful information at this critical time, including raising authoritative content, reducing the spread of harmful misinformation and showing information panels, using [World Health Organization] data, to help combat misinformation”* [10].

Like all other businesses affected by the pandemic, the activity of social media companies has been changed by social distancing. Thus, in the fight against this problem content, companies are making intense use of artificial intelligence technologies.

5. Effective Communication in a Pandemic

Effective communication can be a useful means of preventing the transmission of the virus. Observing social dynamics following the consumption of social media content

can facilitate the design of effective epidemic models that implement efficient communication strategies in times of crisis. The main recommendation during this period is to stay isolated at home. Under these conditions, the majority of the population chooses to get information from the media, increasing the level of dependence on this choice. Exposure to information provided by the media causes individuals to implement protective behaviors, reducing the likelihood of transmission per contact [11]. The media signal can be used successfully employing real data. Therefore, it is mandatory that the sources of information be authorized and provide real risk assessments and constructive recommendations, in order to build a true perception of the receiver.

Otherwise, lack of clear information, inefficient communication or misinformation lead to ambiguity and increase the level of threat, causing fears, anxiety, mental stress and depression. That is why ubiquitous media exposure can cause the public to perceive the risks of their community inaccurately. The purpose of effective, risk-based communication must be to frame the problem, define the threat, interpret the causality, assess the recommendations and resolve the issue. The information is provided in a balanced framework, in which the risks are exposed in a useful and preventive context.

But very often the media do not respect the deontological norms and follow certain social and governmental actors, leading to manipulation and misinformation or even the so-called “*media hypes*”. Excessive media coverage is perceived as disproportionate, in order to create shock. The stress and concern of the public come in response to a collective trauma, which sensitizes the population.

It has been noticed that when individuals’ interest and attention to media threats increase, they will be risk factors for future responses to problematic events. For example, “*following the 2014 Ebola public*

health crisis, worry about contracting Ebola was strongest for individuals who reported both high distress about a prior trauma and greater exposure to Ebola-related media coverage”[12].

If communication and response to this threat had been effective and timely, the spread of this virus would probably have been slower or at least slower to allow authorities and the healthcare system to prepare. There are examples of this: if Chinese officials had reported the first cases of Sars-Cov2 infection in time, the course of this threat would have been different. If the mobilization had been more careful and prompt in the total quarantine and rapid testing of the persons on board the cruise ship “Princess Diamond”, the spread of the virus would have been completely avoided when the passengers returned home.

The negligence and lack of a concrete approach delayed the reporting of the pandemic by the Beijing government, which coincided with the Chinese New Year, when the population was in full swing, thus facilitating a widespread spread of the coronavirus.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are other examples where communication has not been effective, where the press and social media are censored. Thus, the communication of risks was diminished and an attempt was made to convince the population that the situation is stabilized. Despite the fact that the Deputy Minister of Health of Iran, Iraj Harirchi, infected with Covid-19, was very affected by the symptoms of the virus during the interview, Iran has opposed quarantine, saying that this practice dates back to World War I *“to the plague, cholera, stuff like that”* [13]. Saudi Arabia suspends visas for pilgrims visiting Mecca and Medina.

Another example comes from the Western world, where the US government’s distrust and slow response to the huge threat of the virus has led to a major impact of the disease on American society [14].

The response to such a challenge, such as the pandemic, depends on cooperation between central government, public authorities, businesses, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, individuals, the media and social media. The collaboration and involvement of these groups must be based on an effective and two-way communication strategy. Health and social work experts have an important role to play in explaining and calming the population by providing relevant information about the impact of the virus. The objectives of this communication strategy are:

- information and risk definition;
- identification and isolation of the risk of contamination;
- identifying the population’s perception of the risk of infection;
- ensuring confidence in government capacity and health services that they properly manage the situation for the optimal functioning of society;
- awareness of the risk of infection (adoption of a preventive behavior and the ability to recognize symptoms in case of illness and the role of a possible medication);
- managing public expectations;
- combating the pandemic;
- identification of risk groups, based on epidemiological criteria (the elderly, pregnant women, people with chronic diseases, health and safety staff).

The messages sent must be addressed in particular to risk groups and make a specific appeal to their motivations. Scientific and technical information is not enough, for example the motivation of a pregnant woman to comply with preventive measures is to protect her pregnancy. Awareness and responsibility are important in order to comply with preventive measures in reducing the potential for the spread of the virus and its social and economic impact. Proactive information through the voice of community leaders is recommended in these situations.

6. Chaotic Communication

The coexistence of individuals in an interconnected and interdependent society, in an extensive and technology-dependent globalization, in which information circulates quickly and in real time is always exposed to threats of all kinds. The current turmoil has shaken global health and automatically the socio-economic field, causing a period of decline.

The research proposes an alternative variant of communication, borrowed from the field of management and economics, necessary in the correct management of the transmission of information in times of crisis, the novelty would be the chaotics communication. Current issuers need to adapt quickly to change, the complexity of the problem and the escalation of risks. The internal communicative capacity of a good communicator is to assume the unpredictable. Chaotics communication captures the complexity, uncertainty and dynamics of discourse adapted to the moment of global crisis. The concept of chaotics advanced by Kotler and Caslione (from the field of management) [15] is a suitable term to characterize the current communication environment.

Thus, in the chaotics communication, the turbulences, risks and strategies determined by the chaos are noticed and analyzed, followed by the choice of appropriate answers. This communication strategy identifies opportunities to be exploited and identifies vulnerabilities to be minimized and removed. The chaotics communication capability develops and activates the system of invested public relations with a high degree of trust. Managing this situation requires increasing awareness and education of the population and organizations, who must act quickly. The risks do not arise because they were not reported early, but because there is no culture for open and prompt dialogue.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the current pandemic has exposed society to a real major risk, in which the prevention and safety of public health is very much related to the communicative competence of transmitters. HOW warned that the pandemic is accompanied by infodemia, which makes it difficult for people to access credible sources of information. The population is assaulted with various distorted, false or exaggerated information, which affects their mental and physical safety. The perception of the individual in the face of such a threat is decisive, it helps him to accept and implement the prevention measures recommended by the authorities and medical specialists. The population is prone to conspiracy theories and panic. Officials and communicators must properly control and manage this issue.

The major effect of misinformation and conspiracy theories is the reduction of trust in the authorities, the lack of involvement of the population, the lack of risks and the lack of solidarity.

In this sense, the media and social media are urged to be transparent with their users when ensuring that a computer content goes viral. "We believe that the understanding of social dynamics behind content consumption and social media is an important subject, since it may help to design more efficient epidemic models accounting for social behavior and to implement more efficient communication strategies in time of crisis" [16].

It is recommended to use transparent and systematic communication from the authorities and leaders, and for the population to adopt a reserved behavior and develop information verification capabilities. The perpetuation of a strategic and well-coordinated communication develops solidarity, competence and discipline. Fast and efficient communication between the authorities and also to the population ensures effective measures to combat misinformation

and the infodemic phenomenon, protecting public health. Communication skills are the tool that can handle risk and the population alike, this

field offers opportunities to study the various avenues of persuasion of the masses and assess possible threats.

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