

Ethical Communication in Medical Crisis

Ana-Maria Predilă
University of Craiova
prednews@gmail.com

Abstract

The major crises produced over the years have produced major changes in the way people communicate globally. The slippages that caused major economic consequences in the economies of states worldwide, were often due to the provision of false or erroneous information, malicious or not. The evolution of crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, has often been hampered by the spread of false information in the mass media. For a correct management of crises, it is necessary to establish ethics at the global level in the communication of medical personnel and in the communication of specialists from other fields with communication skills. The purpose of the article is to highlight the importance of ethical medical communication in times of crisis to eliminate false information and to eliminate the harm caused by communication in society and the economy worldwide.

Key words: medical crises, ethical communication, media

J.E.L. classification: M14, I14, I18

1. Introduction

The problem of communication is an essential problem facing modern society. This affects directly/indirectly, immediately, for an indefinite period the lives of individuals. It affects the life of communities as well as society. Communication, a specifically human characteristic, constitutes a binder of individuals in a collective. This offers the possibility of knowing their opinions. It offers the possibility of psychosocial homogenization. Communication ensures the normal functioning of a collective regardless of its size and nature.

The great crises over the years, whether of an economic, social, political or medical nature, cause the transformation in a very short time of the way we are taught to live. The COVID-19 pandemic, declared in February 2020, constituted an unprecedented collective challenge to the right to life and health of people worldwide. The global health crisis at the beginning of 2020 caused deaths all over the world. This locked us in our houses. It limited our rights and forced us to live differently. Thus one of the biggest challenges of national specialists and coordinators during the pandemic was related to how they had to communicate. The pandemic broke out in the middle of the information age where the mass media have an extraordinary power to influence the population in one way or another. That is why fair and ethical communication is absolutely necessary. This is all the more so since even representatives of the World Health Organization have stated that one of the most dangerous aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the "infodemic" of fake news (World Health Organization, 2020).

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 virus was ignored by many, being considered to be a simple flu. Despite the first warnings of the decision-makers, people continued their normal course of life. The serious alarm signals appeared when the number of deaths in Italy became very high and quarantine was instituted (European Union, 2020).

The presentation of deaths caused by COVID-19 is an important part of ethical communication during the pandemic. It is ethical the way in which this aspect was presented, compared to that used in the case of other conditions that produce as many or maybe even more deaths annually: cancer, hepatitis, etc.

The mass media in Romania focused on the communication of topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, numerous articles and radio and TV shows were made in which the virulence of the COVID-19 virus was debated as well as the actual incidence of cases. As can be seen from the press materials, public opinion was divided into two categories: those who believed and still believe in the existence of COVID-19 and its consequences, and those who denied and still deny the fact that it is a virus pandemic capable of causing mass deaths.

The mass media also covered the topic of anti-COVID19 vaccination. Vaccination is a controversial subject, especially in Romania, where in the last 10 years the vaccination rate among children has dropped a lot. The reaction of the population to vaccination was different according to the category in which each individual integrated. Those who became aware of the danger of the virus got vaccinated and respected the rules imposed by the authorities. Those who denied the existence of the virus did not get vaccinated. What's more, they also carried out disinformation campaigns and influencing individuals in the community.

The experience of the last two years has demonstrated the importance of ethical communication. Demonstrated the importance of ethical medical communication during medical crises. A correct management of communication leads to a correct management of the crisis which leads to favorable results in the society and the economies of the countries worldwide.

The purpose of the article is to highlight the importance of ethical medical communication in times of crisis to eliminate false information and to eliminate the harm caused by communication in society and the economy worldwide.

2. Theoretical background

Communication is a complex phenomenon. The definitions given to human communication all have some common elements. They have common elements regardless of the schools of thought to which they belong. They have common elements regardless of the orientations in which they are enrolled. Communication can be considered as a process of transmitting information, transmitting ideas, transmitting opinions. This transmission has the meanings given by an individual or by a group. Today, communication is an integral part of the activities of the individual/group (from the daily ones considered trivial to the complex activities).

Communication has also become essential for companies in the medical sector. Advances in the medical sector have increased medical knowledge regarding the management of diseases and problems that can often be life-threatening. Advances in the medical sector have led to better health management. Today we are witnessing changes in the demographic and epidemiological characteristics of society, globally.

Today's healthcare systems are making an inevitable migration from centralized to decentralized care practices. Advances in medical knowledge have introduced more specialty and subspecialty areas into medical practice. Today we are witnessing healthcare services established around areas of medical practice (World Health Organisation,2020).

Healthcare professionals are increasingly focusing on their area of expertise. They communicate with each other using terms specific to their medical field. It is often difficult for professionals from different medical fields to understand each other. This can lead to the deterioration of teamwork. It can lead to a difficulty in providing integrated patient care. It can lead to fragmentation in healthcare. In order to avoid them, an essential role is played by ethical and pertinent communication.

In recent years, several approaches and methods have been used to integrate the fragmented elements of patient care practices. The core component of any solution to meeting the challenge of fragmentation is an effective system of communication between stakeholders in patient care. In order to provide effective and quality care, effective and ethical communication is necessary. Ethical communication is urgently needed especially for those healthcare organizations and providers working on the same disease/patient group.

Currently, most of the time, medical organizations have a series of communication deficiencies. Failure to communicate accurate, complete and up-to-date information across healthcare interfaces is a major risk. The identified risk must be avoided for patient safety. In times of crisis it is vital that this risk is avoided or minimized. Recent studies have shown that

communication errors in healthcare organizations lead to a high rate of mortality and morbidity (World Health Organisation,2020).

Poor communication causes enormous failures in health systems. Significant time and resources are wasted due to ineffective communication within and between healthcare organizations according to the latest recent studies.

3. Research methodology

The purpose of the research was to analyze ethical medical communication in the pandemic to eliminate false information and to eliminate the harm brought by communication in society and economy worldwide.

The analysis of ethical communication in the pandemic was carried out by studying publications and specialist books in the field of ethics, communication, emphasizing the ethics of communication in the medical field. The COVID-19 (SARS-COV-2) pandemic, through the restrictions imposed by the regulations and legislation in force, influences communication and medical ethics for the entire medical staff in Romanian hospitals.

4. Findings

On March 5, 2020, the World Health Organization in the report issued announced that the COVID-19 pandemic was also followed by an "*infodemic*" of misinformation (World Health Organization, 2020).

On 26 March 2020, the members of the European Council agreed to issue a joint declaration of commitment to firmly combat disinformation through transparent, timely communication. The communication must be factual in relation to the actions taken. Communication must strengthen the resilience of societies in the European space (European Council, 2020a).

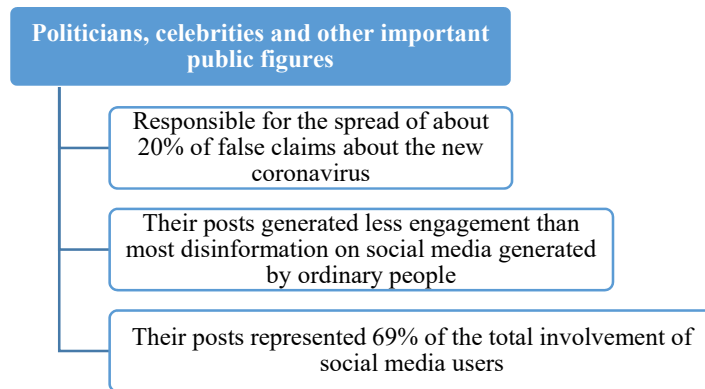
On 3 April 2020, EU foreign ministers expressed their concern about the issue of disinformation and misinformation. They believed that efforts were needed to counteract the negative impact on societies, on people's lives and on public health. They emphasized the need to intensify joint efforts to combat disinformation. They emphasized the need for close cooperation between EU institutions, between member states as well as between communication platforms (European Council, 2020b).

Upon the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing measures were imposed in all states of the world affected by the pandemic. These social distancing measures have been considered the only effective ones in the absence of a vaccine and/or treatment already in use for the COVID-19 virus. Reality has demonstrated that the distancing imposed by the authorities through legal regulations was only physical. The means of communication, mass media and social networks that have been extremely accessible have led to a massive connectedness of the population.

The influence power of these channels has proven to be extraordinarily high. With their help, information spread on a large scale. Actual and pertinent information for the pandemic has been disseminated. Unfortunately, more or more verified information and news were also spread as being correct or true. This has led to increased threats to comply with legal restrictions imposed by governments, even worldwide.

Opinion leaders played a decisive role in communication during the pandemic. Opinion leaders in various fields are people with great potential to influence their audience. Studies and research have been conducted in this regard. Some of these were carried out by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University.

Figure no. 1. The principal results of studies conducted by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism



Source: Own processing (Simon et al, 2020)

At the level of the European Union, a series of measures have been taken to limit the spread of fake news and disinformation to the population. The role of the European Union was and is to prevent and intervene to limit the spread of false information/news. The European Union has put in place a Common Communication strategy with five concrete actions to combat discrimination and false information.

In Romania, the ethical slippages of the Romanian media regarding the subjects related to the COVID-19 pandemic were unfortunately frequent. Violations of the ethical norms of communication were produced by the exaggerations used, by the use of expletives intended to alarm the population, as well as by the serious tone adopted by some presenters of the news bulletins/shows. The main role of the mass media to correctly inform the population was thus distorted in order to avoid the damage caused to society by alarming and misinforming the population.

Another type of ethical slippage that was recorded by the national press came from the desire for audience and traffic on as many online platforms as possible. Unfortunately, there have also been false headlines that distort the truth. An eloquent example was the closure of the first site in Romania. The spread of false information about the coronavirus pandemic led to the closure of a website in Romania. The Minister of Foreign Affairs requested the closing of the stiridemoment.ro website. Materials with expressions that can generate panic have been published on the site several times. The site used completely fake titles. The decision to close was taken by the Strategic Communication Group (PRO TV, 2020).

The media around the world played a primary role in the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with the help of the media have disseminated and continue to disseminate information regarding the pandemic across the globe. The data updated in real time. New alarms were sent in real time. New measures have been announced. At the national level, the information was transmitted on the website of the Romanian Public Health Institute (Institute of Public Health in Romania, 2022).

The information transmitted in the mass media has determined the emergence of a tendency among the population to respect hygiene rules as often as possible. Hand washing, disinfection and the use of a protective mask especially in closed spaces have been adopted by people from all corners of the world.

In the last two years, the messages distributed by the mass media on all channels, through information campaigns and broadcasts, have had a great positive impact in all communities globally.

New trends have also emerged. The rules of isolation and social distancing have led people to be more open to telemedicine services. Patients get a lot of information about their diseases, their symptoms and the treatments they should undergo from media sites and/or health shows. Thus, the role of the media in the area of health has become a major one with enormous responsibility

towards public health. Media tools have proven extremely useful for spreading information about COVID-19, as well as other medical conditions.

Social networks are a current means of communication. In addition to the classic media (TV, print media, radio) a lot of information related to the coronavirus pandemic was presented on social networks. Influencers played a major role in what it meant to get the word out. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, You Tube, etc. are means to which everyone has access and where everyone, regardless of training and preparation, can express their opinion. Both professionals from the medical system, the pharmaceutical market, who disseminate and create content based on scientific knowledge, but also people without training in this regard, can have an account on these networks. Social networks have an extraordinarily large informative role regarding the topics of health, nutrition, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals.

5. Conclusions

Communication in times of crisis, but especially in health crises, is vital for the evolution of crises. The spread of fake news as proven in the last pandemic increases the risk of negative health outcomes in health crises. The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has also brought a communication crisis, often causing chaos among the population. From one day to the next, new data was discovered. Some of these were erroneous. Others were uncertain. What is certain is that everyone has run into the unknown.

Always soliciting and presenting expert opinions and information is the most ethical course a media professional can take. Not to make assumptions related to a certain species, not to create panic among the population through alarmist stories, are simple rules related to deontology and media ethics.

In times of health crisis, there is a need for ethical communication of all responsible factors in crisis management. Medical communication must be ethical. Uncertainties caused by the lack of relevant information must be removed. A collaboration between all the responsible factors in the management of the health crisis based only on ethical communication must be imposed. Ethical medical communication is one of the basic pillars of the favorable evolution of society in times of crisis, at the global level.

6. References

- World Health Organization, 2020. *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 45*, [online] Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200305-sitrep-45-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=ed2ba78b_4
- European Union, 2020. *Tackling coronavirus disinformation, Getting The Facts Right, #FactsMatter, #EUvsDisinfo*, [online] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/corona_fighting_disinformation.pdf
- European Council, 2020a. *Joint declaration of the members of the European Council, Bruxelles*, March 26, 2020, [online] Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43095/26-vc-euco-statement-ro.pdf>
- European Council, 2020b. *Foreign Affairs Ministers' video conference*, [online] Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ro/meetings/fac/2020/04/03/>
- Simon F, Dr. Howard P.N., Prof. Nielsen R.K., 2020. *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*, Tuesday 7 April 2020, [online] Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>
- PRO TV, 2020. *The first site closed at the request of the Romanian Government. The article considered "alarmist"*, 19.03.2020, [online] Available at: <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/oficial-primul-site-inchis-la-cererea-guvernului.html>
- Institute of Public Health in Romania, 2022. *Information for the population*, [online] Available at: <https://www.cnscbt.ro/index.php/info-populatie>