

ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The SARSCOV 2 acute respiratory syndrome, named COVID 19, has affected the whole world and all the fields of social life. The dramatic negative effects on people made the administrative and sanitary authorities to take measures in order to stop the spread of the virus, intensifying at the same time the scientific research to manufacture a vaccine that could make the virus become inoffensive. If the development of an anti-COVID 19 vaccine can be considered an achieved goal, the limitation of its transmission represents an ongoing process, with ups and downs. The administrative and sanitary measures taken by states' authorities are the following: keeping a physical distance between people, quarantine (limiting and even prohibiting the movement of people within localities, states and even between states); forbidding meetings and demonstrations, the temporary stopping of unessential manufacturing and commercial activities; housework (telework); the temporary closure of schools and the existence of online teaching as well as the use of facial masks. The above-mentioned measures were fairly appreciated by some doctors and specialists and contested by other specialists, politicians or journalists. The allegations brought to the authorities refer both to the relative efficiency of the measures and to their negative effects for people and especially for communication.

Keywords: COVID 19, interpersonal communication, quarantine, physical distancing, online teaching, facial mask, telework .

1. INTRODUCTION

Most studies regarding the SARSCOV 2 acute respiratory syndrome (COVID 19) mention its appearance in December 2019 (GABBIADINI et al., 2020) in a lab near the city of Wuhan, China (KARUNATHILAKE, 2020). This coronavirus was more aggressive than all known viruses of this sort up to this moment. From the discovery moment of the first case and up to the moment of the development of this scientific paper (February 7, 2021) there have been 106,445,607 people infected worldwide and 2,322,504 of them died (WORLDOMETER, n.d.).

Alerted by the great spatial, temporal and numerical proportion of contamination, the states' authorities discussed with virologists, epidemiologists and infectious specialists and took measures to limit the infections, intensifying, at the same time, scientific research in order to manufacture a vaccine that could make the virus become inoffensive. The use of facial masks, the preservation of a physical distance between people, quarantine, forbidding meetings and demonstrations, the temporary stopping of unessential manufacturing and commercial activities, the temporary closure of schools and the existence of online teaching became standard procedures for the majority of the worlds' states.

The race against the clock for the production of a vaccine, triggered between the worlds' greatest pharmaceutical companies led to more rapid results than it had been initially estimated, on the basis of some prior produced vaccines. The development of a few anti-COVID 19 vaccines in a record of approximately one year, fuelled the conspiracy theories (DACOMBE, 2021; SPRIN, 2020) and stimulated a relative lack of trust, as well as the protests of some different socio-professional categories, including various types doctors, from many of the worlds' states (details are provided the picture below).



Fig. 1. The casualties of this year's viral conspiracy theories (SPRIN, 2020)

The administrative and sanitary measures used to limit the spread of the COVID 19 virus and of its variants (the new strains), which appeared in the last months, had both positive, but also negative effects on multiple levels, especially that of communication.

2. THE PURPOSE OF SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION

Through this scientific paper I aim to analyse and synthesize the results of some of the relevant studies and opinions published in well-known journals on the topic of communication during the SARSCOV 2 pandemic. I also present my own conclusions in this paper, resulted from the observation of humans' behaviour, in different hypothesis, within the community they are part of.

The effects of physical distancing

The limitations of physical distancing were decided on the basis of the results of some experiments consisting in measuring the space up to which peoples' saliva particles are projected during speech, sneeze, cough, with or without a facial mask (MITTAL et al., 2020). The hypothesis was the untested peoples' possible infection with COVID 19, who might release the virus in the atmosphere during speaking, sneezing or coughing. You find details in the picture below.

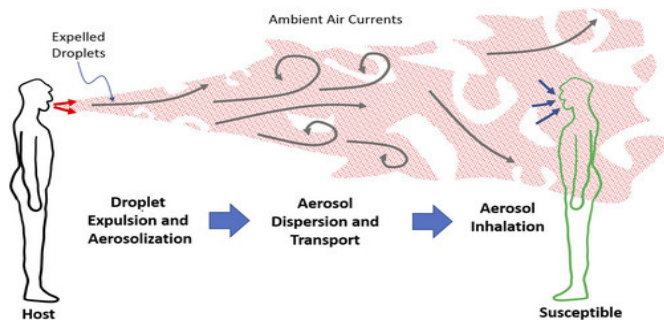


Fig. 2. A mathematical framework for estimating risk of airborne transmission of COVID-19 (MITTAL et al., 2020)

Physical distancing reduces risk of transmitting the virus but, at the same time, it also very much reduces the possibility of nonverbal communication. This type of communication does not only relate to gestures, the tone of voice, body posture and visual contact, but it also implies hand-shaking, respectively approaching

the interlocutor at a reduced distance. The use of physical distancing oblidges us "to find substitutes [such as elbow bumps rather than fist bumps], which in or some cases are cute and entertaining. But they're also always sending the message that this is artificial" (JONES, 2020).

The effects of the temporary stopping of productive and commercial activities and working from home (telework)

Working from home was also practiced before the SARCOV 2 pandemic, but on a lower scale. This type of activity offers the advantage of excluding going to and coming back from work and, implicitly, the contact with other people who could be carriers of the COVID 19 virus, and might grow the risk, rhythm and number of people who get infected by it.

On the other hand, telework is also a form of (self)imposed quarantine, which has negative effects in terms of physical, mental and communication on employees and their families because, at times, it overlaps online teaching in quite a small space, most times totally insufficient. In other words, "it's really hard to keep those things separate when they're occurring in the same location" (MILLS, 2020).

A 2020 Martec Group study from America, to which 1214 employees, from all types of productive activities and age categories, took place concluded that working from home is at the basis of a "significant decline in mental health across all industries, seniority levels, and demographics. Job satisfaction, job motivation, and company satisfaction were also negatively affected"(LAKER, 2020). Because of these negative effects, a major part of the survey participants said that they prefer to return to the classical option of their activity.

Working from home is associate with "stress, depressive symptoms, social isolation and a blurring of boundaries between work and family time" (COLLIE, 2020). Also, the uncertainty regarding the evolution of the pandemic and of the economy, the fear of loosing the job, accompanied by the movement restrictions and quarantine makes many employees work without a proper relaxation (the so-called burnout syndrome - AZOULAY et al., 2020: "The prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and

depression or severe burnout was 46.5%, 30.2%, and 51%, respectively, and varied significantly across regions." PATON, 2020: "Even before the first wave of Covid-19 had dissipated, a British Medical Association survey in April found that fully 44% of doctors felt they were suffering from depression, anxiety, stress or burnout.")

Avoiding or at least reducing the negative effects of working from home may be achieved by communicating only with your co-workers and superiors, through ad-hoc teleconferences (when employees have to be informed about some aspects which cannot be delayed) or through weekly or monthly teleconferences, according to the specificity of the organizations' activity.

The effects of the temporary closure of schools and universities and the online teaching

Online teaching means that students, teachers and the rest of the staff do not go to or come back from schools or universities. This restrictive measure offers the benefit of eliminating the direct contact with peers who may be carriers of the COVID 19 virus and might grow the risk, rhythm and number of people who get infected by it.

Online teaching is a solution which was used throughout the world starting from the beginning of this century under the name of distance teaching. The studies conducted on this topic by Alawamleh et al, and by other authors, prior to the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, highlighted situations in which "Often the students felt alone, overshadowed by other members, or reluctant to publicly share their ideas....Also, shy students appear to be more interested in online settings than in conventional settings" (ALAWAMLEH et al., 2020). Karen Kear presents the existence of some negative effects, such as "individualizing learning and limiting interaction with others. Students described feeling isolated from their teachers, from the content of the course and from their classmates." Some students perceive online teaching as impersonal, like the interaction of one computer with the other (ALAWAMLEH et al., 2020).

The temporary closure of schools and universities and the conducting of the distance learning process via the internet represents a solution which allows teachers and trainers to

continue their activity and remain connected to gaining knowledge and forming the necessary life skills. Unfortunately, online communication also has some disadvantages, as the studies conducted both prior to and following the outbreak of the pandemic undoubtedly concluded that it is "associated with decreased empathy and increased individualism" (GABBIADINI et al., 2020).

Although online teaching is more accessible and flexible than the traditional one, there are some authors who noticed the relatively lower trainer-student interaction, because of "a poor engagement and interactivity, along with other issues created by a lack of immediacy and nonverbal signals. Several students viewed the medium as "faceless," so there may be misunderstandings and the tone could turn negative" (ALAWAMLEH et al., 2020).

Likewise, online teaching also induces a feeling of isolation because students have to stay home, in front of the computer, for up to 6 hours per day, an activity which negatively influences their eyes and psyche.

A group of professors, from Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj Napoca, consider that the efficiency of the online teaching act "requires a reconceptualization of the didactic strategy" by developing some new university pedagogies" focused on interactivity (OPRE et al., 2020).

Blake and Wadhwa's study on the topic of online teaching and teachers' interaction with students shows that: "At the height of the COVID lockdown, more than 160 countries had mandated some form of school closures for at least 1.5 billion children and youth." And the effects of this decision may last decades (BLAKE & WADHWA, 2020).

The effects of wearing face masks

The wearing of face masks was studied by otorhinolaryngologists and linguists both in order to limit the spread of the SARS-COV 2 virus and regarding their effect on communication. The results show that: "both linguistic and non-verbal information are important for understanding social communication and interaction. In a timely publication about medical masks, Goldin, Weinstein, Shiman reported acoustic degradations where medical masks act

as lowpass filters and high frequencies (between 2000 and 7000 Hz) are attenuated by about 3–4 dB (dB) for simple surgical masks and up to 9–12 dB for N95 masks.” (NOBREGA et al., 2020)

Wearing face mask is a protective measure meant to reduce viruses’ access into our body through respiratory system, especially SARS-COV-2, which is highly aggressive. According to Campagne Daniel, „interpersonal communication is negatively affected, as with face coverings.” On the other side, some specialists consider obligativity of wearing mask questionable because the certainty of its protection is low. (CAMPAGNE, 2020; NOBREGA et al., 2020)

It is generally known that “Facial expressions and gestures play a major role in facilitating interpersonal communication, comprehension, and the delivery of intended messages. As such, wearing face masks hindered the ability of seeing and understanding people’s expressions during conversations, and decreased the impact of communicated material.” (MHEIDL Y et al., 2020) Details are provided in the picture below.

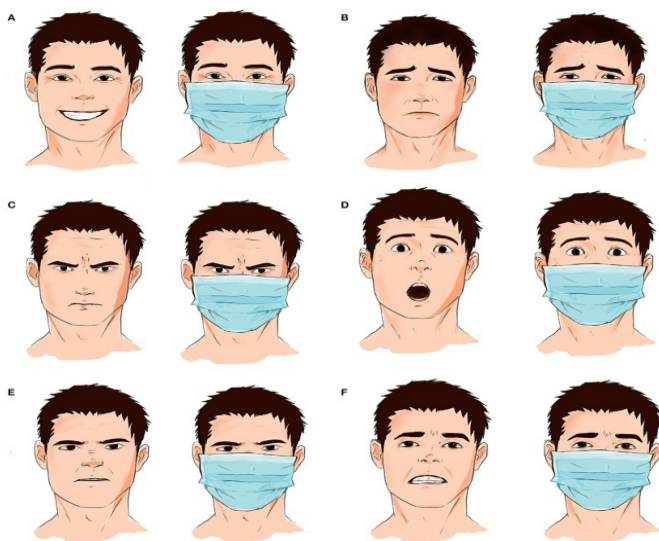


Fig. 3. Effect of Face Masks on Interpersonal Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Mheidly et al., 2020)

During wearing of facial mask some people say “I can’t have a proper conversation because my words sound muffled.” That is why people with hearing problems like deaf ones encounter supplementary challenges during their conversations (ONG, 2020).

The effects of quarantine

The temporary isolation of some individuals, localities or administrative-territorial subdivisions of the states generated the frustration and discontent of the people directly or indirectly influenced by these measures – transporters, entrepreneurs, owners or even commuter employees, people who are on holiday and have to go into quarantine when they can back home etc.

Besides the short-term effects generated by quarantine, a large part of the population also suffered from medium and long-term negative effects, such as anxiety, the fear of going out of their homes and of communicating face to face with other people, including to their close relatives or with doctors, when they face a health issue. A study conducted by Kayikcioglu et al. shows that: “most of the study population (73.5%) reported that they would not go to a hospital even if they had a severe complaint during the COVID-19 outbreak [.....] due to fear of contracting the coronavirus in health care services” (KAYIKCIOGLU et al., 2020).

In the long term, „the less contact we have with other people, the more we become suspicious of other people. This can make others more defensive and lead to a vicious spiral where isolation leads to suspicion, which begets defensiveness, which reinforces the suspicion and leads to further isolation as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (TAUNTON, 2020).

In general, quarantined people have different perceptions. Some of the participants in the study conducted by Vasiliu described isolation as a captivity form which generated discussions and arguments because of stress, monotony, nervousness and anxiety. Others blamed frustration, loneliness and indifference, while a third category of participants perceived quarantine as an opportunity to better communicate with other family members (VASILIU, 2020).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The efficiency of the administrative and sanitary measures was different from one country to the other according to the cultural and

geographic conditions (a relative isolation, as for New Zealand and Australia), the level of education and civic responsibility of some of the members of the human communities, the intensity of the manipulation activities carried out by the anti-vaccination activists etc.

The media coverage of the opinions for and against the restrictive measures taken by the states' authorities by the written and audiovisual press has, in addition to the natural objective of informing the public, the undesirable effect of dividing the population and even the international community.

The focus of the media, and especially of the television channels, on the negative news about COVID 19 (the increasing number of illnesses and deaths, the emergence of new strains with greater aggression, the controversies regarding the effectiveness of anti-Covid 19 vaccines, etc.), associated with the physical isolation of a large number of people contributed to the increased anxiety of many people and the fear of communicating face-to-face with their peers and going to medical wards to be seen by doctors, when they are confronted with various health problems.

During this pandemic time "It is probably more important than ever to just stay in touch with people whether by phone, email, text or old-fashioned letter" (TAUNTON, 2020).

Quarantine, physical distancing, work and distance learning, limiting and even banning the possibility of going to restaurants, hotels, theatres, cinemas, museums, or libraries forces us to live our lives mainly online (JONES, 2020), a fact which very much hinders both face to face and nonverbal communication.

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