

PANDEMIC COMMUNICATION - A CHALLENGE AT THE RIGHT TIME?

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COVID-19 represents more than a health crisis; it is also an informational and socio-economic crisis. Therefore, there is an unprecedented need to increase the role that the community and its involvement plays in breaking the chain of transmission and mitigating the impact of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2022).

Abstract

Long before the isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic became a necessity, the practical part of the lecture entitled "Specialized Radio Work Techniques," which I teach the journalism students from Apollonia University of Iasi, was conducted with the help of the new technologies. I used the mobile phone and its various applications in order to replace the recorder, the magnetic tape and the editing studio in order to exemplify and create the necessary skills for a radio journalist. "Another life!" might say some users of the old Nagra recorder which, from a recording point of view, had similar performances, weighted over 15 kilos and was not able to record more than half an hour without interruption. If we look at things in such a manner, isolation triggered by the pandemic seems to have come at the right time. Meaning precisely at that moment in which human intelligence had the necessary substitutes ready. Information technology had already created the critical mass of electronic devices capable to preserving the life of the society in circumstances of ... social isolation. Experts emphasize the fact that restrictions did not obstruct communication. The numerous social networks and the already existent devices (television and mobile telephony) successfully ensured "the normality" of the human being life. Psychological and psychiatric consequences that specialists have not yet ruled on are not taken into account.

Keywords: *communication, pandemic, total isolation - house arrest, SARS-COV-2, SARS-COV-1.*

Question: From the perspective of communication, did the SARS-CoV-2 challenge appear at the "right" time?

I confess that this question which was hidden in my thoughts for some time now, came to light following my interview at Apollonia TV with Ambassador Viorel Isticioaia Budura. His

Excellence reminded me that the first mysterious virus which hit mankind appeared in 2003. The epidemics appeared in Beijing only a few days before the visit of the Romanian Prime-Minister in China, an event which took place two months before the official visit of the President of Romania in the same country. I knew that I was also part of the mission, but I was so caught in the whirlpool at Radio România Actualități that I did not have time to reflect on this information although our Embassy's messages from Beijing were as categorical as ever. Change ensured that the steady action of the Chinese authorities rapidly stopped the epidemics.

This is how the question appeared 19 years ago: What would we have done if SARS-CoV1 had also been so aggressive and we would have had to isolate ourselves indoors since then? How else could we have communicated? What would have happened with the economy, with the work from home? What about school? Now we see each other on Zoom, there are Google Meet, Skype and other such programmes which allow us to stay face to face from a distance. It is certain that our dialogue does not have the perfume or the cohesion which existed in the conference rooms. But we see each other, we hear each other, we communicate. With the limited internet which existed at the beginning of the millennium all we would have missed all these things. Just the thought of the isolation hypothesis in 2003

makes the frustrations and psychoses experienced in the last two years seem minor events.

“Apollonia” University of Iasi - already prepared

Before the isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic became compulsory, “Apollonia” University of Iasi possessed a very powerful e-learning platform. But, the same as in other university centres in the country, it did not yet use it at full capacity. As nothing bothered the classical activity, things were going by virtue of inertia and the number of users was quite small. The same as my other colleagues I used it especially to facilitate our students access to the students’ handbook and also to send them various collective messages. But, even then, the practical part of the lecture entitled “Specialized Radio Work Techniques,” which I teach at “Apollonia” University of Iasi was done with the help of the new technologies. Therefore, in order to exemplify the theoretical elements of the lecture and to create the necessary skills for a radio-journalist I have already been using for more than 4 years, the mobile phone and its various applications which might replace the recorder, the magnetic tape and the editing studio. “Another life!” now say my former Radio România Actualități peers, currently pensioners, but who used to use the Nagra professional recorder. A very precious device, from a recording point of view, which weighted over 15 kilos and which was not able to record more than half an hour without interruption. If we look at things in such a manner, isolation triggered by the pandemic seems to have come at the right time. Meaning precisely at that moment in which human intelligence had the necessary substitutes ready. Information technology had already created the critical mass of electronic devices capable to preserving the life of the society in circumstances of ... social isolation. This is the reason why experts say that restrictions did not, however, obstruct communication. The numerous social networks and the already existent devices (television and mobile telephony) successfully ensured “the normality” of the human being life.

In an interview for the Apollonia Radio and TV stations, professor Cristian Pirvulescu rhetorically asked himself: “Did communication

among individuals diminish during the period in which people were forced to stay home? It didn’t! On the contrary, the number of interpersonal discussions was far greater than usual” (IOAN, 2021a). Why? Because people stayed home and they were able to get in connect, via phone and internet, not only with their families and colleagues, but also with a very large number of acquaintances, with which they hardly communicated before. They were also able so see each other via WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram etc. Indeed, this observation is as pertinent as possible. A recent study revealed that only on Facebook over 12 million Romanian are active every month. Probably two thirds of the country’s population! Mind! The statistics do not include those outside the borders. YouTube follows Facebook with also 12 million visitors. Tik-Tok has overcome Instagram, which has over 5 million users every month (DOADS, n.d.). All these channels facilitated an incredible connection network which basically connected the population of the entire country, both from cities and from the rural environment. We state here that many villages offered large public internet networks with free access. We do not talk about the content of the messages yet.

Therefore, at the moment the crisis began, mankind had both the physical tools (hardware) and the utility ones (software) to ensure communication even in the situation of complete isolation. One that is just as hard as the one prisoners are subjected to. Here, I shall quote one of the best criminologists in Romania, Florian Gheorghe - the first psychologist ever hired in the Romanian prisons. In an analysis for Apollonia TV, professor Gheorghe noticed a surprising aspect for the general public. Namely, the fact that despite the number of people behind bars is very high, a long time following his imprisonment the prisoner feels as if he is in complete isolation (IOAN, 2022A; GHEORGHE, 2006). The psychologist considers that, the population caught in something that the contemporary world calls lockdown, meaning “protected at your own home,” perceives this isolation the same way people in home arrest do. Either alone or even accompanied by two or three family members, the individual suffers from the same claustrophobia as the inmate. We

add here the permanent bombardment to which he is subjected by the alarmist up to aggressive manner of the negative news broadcasted by various televisions. The large number of messages from the social networks with a similar content is accompanied by positive messages, such as "Have a nice day!, Have a wonderful weekend!," but this does not change the anxiety transmitted.

Since we got to this point, we also focus on the content of the message flow called infodemic. Meaning on those dozens, hundreds or even thousands of messages that each of us who stay home received and had the possibility to forward to our contacts. We noticed that not all the messages received could be forwarded unlimited. First of all, the social networks (WhatsApp, for example) restricted the number of addressees to a maximum of 5. But, some messages, with a certain content - most of the times a positive one - already received the label "frequently distributed" and they could only be forwarded to one addressee.

Traders of disasters or traders of evil

This subtitle was suggested to me by a book entitled "The power of evil," written by Tierney and Baumaister. I made this clarification because the following statements might be suspected as belonging to the theories of conspiracy. But the questions behind them remain. One of them refers to the large number of multimedia products which flooded social networks. Because, as people noticed shortly after being closed at home, millions of information appeared: some real, some less real. Like a Pandora box just waiting to be opened. Let's assume that at the beginning of the pandemic all film and TV studio around the world would have started producing millions of videos and images on January 1, 2020, and other text creators would have started writing the information needed to fight against the scourge. Even so, it is hard to imagine such a huge production being able to invade and virtual space and to create infodemic (WHO, 2022) - this news epidemics, more or less contradictory. And therefore, instead of clear, explanatory information, there has been a real shock to the public on a global scale, as with the accusation made by psychologists against the authorities who failed to manage this situation

effectively. Every social network member was basically bombarded from all sides by dozens of slides, photographs and videos with a content of an apparently extreme diversity. The general in retreat Gheorghe Văduva, former editor-in-chief of the army's weekly, claims that the press addresses a target audience and, as we know, no target can ever be found in an enviable position! (IOAN, 2022b). The fears and the contradictory feelings generated by these messages meant that in the moments immediately following their completion, each target would automatically turn into a transmitter fully convinced that the information he had just received was of great use to all his acquaintances. From this point and up to the decision of further broadcasting there was only one click.

The phenomenon became so serious that the World Health Organisation noticed that the spread of misinformation on social networks and on other digital platforms represents "a threat to the global public health as big as the virus itself" (WHO, 2020).

And basically, why is infodemic harmful? The individual reads, collects what he considers to be necessary and moves on. Is this really the case? According to specialists, yes. With one condition. If we dealt only with information overload. However, when we deal with infodemic, fake news, the partial or manipulative sources present a much more profound direct and visible impact. They even influence public health and contribute to the spread of viral epidemics (VOINEA, 2020).

Specialists explain the fact that in the face of uncertainties, people double the effect of pandemics with truly psychological epidemics (STRONG, 1990). Human psychology has its own epidemic nature. When placed face to face with the uncertainty generated by a pandemic, it spreads from one person to the other and gives birth to a collective phenomenon: a psycho-social pandemic.

A brief look over the thousands of messages that invaded the social networks shows a predominance of catastrophic events. The situation becomes even clearer when we look at the TV screens where news is almost exclusively alarming and speak, in inverted commas, of course, about the end of the planet. The universal

tendency of negative events and feelings to influence the human being more than that of positive ones is therefore being exploited.

Noticing this bombardment with negative news we correctly ask ourselves: Who does it serve and what is the consequence of the toxic pseudo-news consumption, brought into our homes by these “traders of disasters”? Tierney and Baumeister point out that the negative feelings produced by such messages represent some extremely powerful incentives which may make us stronger, more intelligent and more affectionate. But they also show that the positive branch of duality is only used if “the rational side of the brain understands its irrational impact.” The situation becomes even more complicated in the digital world which amplifies the power of the negative and in which victory against the evil imposes “wisdom and effort.” The situation might be kept under control if the mind of the public has the necessary respite between two news bombardments, presented as catastrophes, although information refers, for example, to normal meteorological phenomena.

The most frequently noticed reaction is the one observed by professor Mihail Orzeață, who notices that one of the most serious consequences of fake news is, among others, the negative influencing of people’s will when it comes to wearing masks, not getting vaccinated, and on the whole, the failure to comply with the sanitary and administrative measures issued by the competent authorities of the States, in order to prevent the spread of the SARSCOV-2 virus (ORZEAȚĂ, 2022).

The negative results of this situation are known not only by the owners of various radio and TV stations, but also by the representatives of all responsible institutions. Some measures were adopted in 2008 when of Parliament of Romania introduced the obligation of broadcasting both negative and positive news in equal amounts (PÂRVU & MOGA, 2008). Is there anyone who obeys this provision?

In time, the public notices the lack of respect from the press. What are the consequences? The first, which is the easiest to notice, is the drop of audience when it comes to news bulletins and the passing of the average among institutions in which the public no longer trusts and, worse

than that, which they consider corrupt, says Professor Mihai Coman, former dean of the Faculty of Journalism at the University of Bucharest (IOAN, 2021b). This distinguished creator of the Romanian democratic media school notices at Apollonia TV the massive shift of viewers from news programmes to entertainment and their preference to look for information in other sources than the traditional ones, especially on the internet. There is a risk, of course, because of the abundance of so-called newsmen and the massive manipulations.

We find ourselves in such a robotized vicious circle that it seems indestructible. The whole world is conscient of it but nobody does anything to get out of this endless loop.

The obstinacy with which the media continues the permanent crisis agenda generates the acute sensation that we were integrated in a connecting rod-crank system to wind the information generated by the bots based on the portraits offered by the users of artificial intelligence and contributing to the accentuation to the paroxysm of the infodemic. And if this transformation took place so rapidly and easy, what will happen with the human being when artificial intelligence becomes able to read and fully control our emotions and feelings, just like the well-known philosopher Yuav Noah Harari optimistically estimates? He already speaks about the passage of Homo Sapiens through the post-humanist purgatory in order to become an authentic Homo Deus (HARARI, 2018).

In order to answer this question, we suggest going back to the last decades of the previous century. The scientific research was trying to open new means of communication between the traffic controller on the ground and the airplanes. It was noticed that classical radio dialogue did not only uncover the flight activity, but conversations could easily be intercepted by the enemy and actions countered. That is why the aim was to use the phone as rarely as possible. The researchers invented a coded tele-transmission system which directly connected the ground computers that developed the flight path and the equipment on board the plane. The commands therefore shifted from the computer on the ground directly to the “intelligence” with which the aircraft was equipped. In most cases,

this “intelligence” acted directly on the controls of the aircraft performing the flight as resulted from the data provided by the computer on the ground. Communication was practically in the realm of computers. The individual, no matter if we sat in the control tower or on board the plane, almost didn’t matter. If we force things, we might say that this situation seems to have passed, with the will of the individual, under the control of the machines. Of course, we speak about an artificial intelligence which serves the human being, just like the artificial intelligence developed in the intensive care section of the great Humanitas Institute near Milan, which serves patients infected with the SARS CoV-2 virus.

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