

The Media in the “Liquid” Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020. Communication During Lockdown: Separate but Together

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the use of media and their functions during the coronavirus pandemic. **Thesis:** a huge increase in the importance of mediatized communication in a situation of physical distancing in the conditions of a pandemic, which can be described as “liquid,” as it takes on the features of Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity.” The graphic image of the coronavirus and its colloquial name, as well as the face mask shown by the media, are an essential component of the social structure of the pandemic image on a global scale. COVID-19 is therefore a biological construct, but also a media and social construct. The government-administered lockdown in the first quarter of the pandemic was widely and reliably followed, largely due to the strengthening of the “culture of fear.” At the same time, forms of remote communication and even group activities grew stronger. **Research method:** participant observation in remote learning and remote work. Analysis of the use of the sparse literature on the subject, desk research of expert statements. **Results and conclusions:** large information chaos in the first phase of the pandemic. The intensification of fake news in social media. A fertile ground for social stigma and conspiracy theories. **Cognitive value:** showing the media dimension of the pandemic and its consequences for strengthening the position of large information and communication companies (GAFA) and increasing the importance of forms of media communication in all types of social contacts. The article points to the importance of analyzing the functions, position and role of media—mass, social and individual—in conditions of spatial separation. Moreover, its considerations have a practical dimension—they can be adapted and developed in media practice.

KEYWORDS

GAFA, communication, lockdown, pandemic, fear



“It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.”

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*,
Quoted after Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1959, p. 1)

On Good Friday, April 10, 2020, in the empty and closed St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis prayed alone for an end to the coronavirus pandemic. He delivered his extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing without the presence of pilgrims, but via the media. It was a scene the world had never seen before, a contradiction of the pilgrim crowd scenery to which both Rome and the world had gotten used to. At the same time, it was a real model of new isolation and virtual, or rather media-related, communication in the age of the coronavirus pandemic.

The adjective “liquid” should be added to the definition of a “pandemic,” using the metaphor of modernity coined by Zygmunt Bauman (2006) as “liquid modernity.” The noun “liquid” is a substance with the consistency of water, not having an actual shape, thus changeable. A liquid pandemic can be characterized similarly, as the variability, unpredictability, and uncertainty of individuals—simultaneously shaping, and actually transforming, all forms of social life in the context of their fragmentation and episodic nature. It (the pandemic) is difficult to perceive not only medically, but also socially, psychologically, and—most importantly for this paper—in the media. And the media—including traditional, mass, new, and social—are its essential component, and maybe even carrier. The pandemic as a biological phenomenon is constructed in the media in information circulation at all levels—interpersonal, group, institutional, and mass communication. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp conceptually and theoretically. Nevertheless, one should try to, although in this paper—prepared only in the third month of a liquid pandemic—the available material was mainly statistical in nature, and with regard to sociological issues—episodic. The presented text emphasizes in its title the most important new problem—how to live, behave, and work together when living apart, in spatial separation. It cannot be done without the media, hence their great role and hence their new forms. Humanity and the world—these words must be used without an undue emphasis—almost from day to day use the media as “lifebuoys” for *homo socius*, which, as Stanisław Staszic used to say: “without company, i.e. society, it is impossible to even think” (quote from: Czarnowski, 2005, p. 36).

Annus Terribilis

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic introduced a specific state of epidemic emergency. The orders of spatial isolation were of fundamental importance (functioning under the term “social distancing,” which in Polish is incorrectly translated literally as “social distance,” while it is not about the social, but a physical distance between people). The lockdown restricts social presence, which is essential for effective and full direct interpersonal communication. It is a completely new social state on this global scale. Yet it reminded one of the year 1348, when the plague depopulated Europe, bringing the “black death” to tens of millions of inhabitants, so terrible that that year was called *annus terribilis*.

The mortality of the medieval plague, like the London plague (1665–1666) or the Spanish influenza (1918–1919), is obviously incomparable with the mortality of the current pandemic, but the social, psychological, and even media aspects of both of these epidemics display certain similarities. One of them was picked up by Albert Camus when he used a quote from Daniel

Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (original edition in 1722) as the motto of his *The Plague* (1947).

A Cure for the Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic is a biological phenomenon par excellence and as such should be fought. The problem is that there are no proven drug treatments and therapies yet, nor a vaccine. The means of controlling it, therefore, was to counter the spread of the virus, and therefore the contagion. A full lockdown, i.e., confining and isolating almost everyone, is used to stop the pandemic; in the case of an infectious disease or its suspicion, quarantine is introduced to prevent its exponential expansion, as was the case in the past with the plague. Hence the strict prohibitions on leaving the apartment or approaching other people. However, this means a loss of direct, natural, multi-sensory communication. In pre-media times, it would have also meant social isolation.

After all, in the current situation of the epidemic, the bans do not apply to mediated communication, i.e. media communication. On the contrary, it has intensified in the form of mobile telephony, audio- and internet video communication (Messenger, Skype and others), group communication (meetings and teamwork, e.g. on Microsoft Teams, Google Meets or Zoom), and finally institutional communication (arranging official and business affairs or shopping—through various platforms, from Amazon, through countless portals-online stores, to the portals of clinics, offices and institutions). In addition, mass media have been used—radio and television, in the form of terrestrial, cable and satellite—music and movie streaming services (Spotify, Netflix, and others) and many other portals of various types, including information. Social media, with Facebook at the forefront, are widely available and used here.

For such communication, one needs appropriate technical tools, such as telephone, Internet and TV connections, smartphones, computers with accessories (speakers, headphones, web cameras), and, last but not least, subscription fees for access to the network and Internet services. Hence the communication exclusion of people who are financially less fortunate and families with many children.

And finally, the most important thing—communication skills. Those which are indispensable in conversation are naturally acquired in the process of socialization and acculturation. In media communication—starting with writing and reading—competences are acquired only in the process of school education, from elementary to higher, and through special courses and training. Competences vary widely in online mediation, from the simplest, such as typing, pressing keys or pointing icons with the cursor, to more complex ones—creating text, inserting sounds or images, creating images, etc. And this is not learning programming—it is learning how to use the software! Quoting the words of the judge from Pan Tadeusz that “Good manners are not easy to learn, nor is this a small thing [...] We learn this over time, not to make mistakes and to give due respect to each” (Mickiewicz, verse 21), the same should be said about media communication, especially about the Internet which is simple, not uniform, but complex and contextual. Those who use it for teaching purposes, must have been taught its rules, possibilities and limitations in advance. Distance learning is particularly prone to communicative mishaps—due to the good visibility of the teacher, and generally poor visibility of his / her students.

Rafał Ferber advises against doing something on video that one would not do in a normal conversation: “If you have a dress code at work, show the same respect to the company by working from home” [translation] (Chaciński, 2020). He points out that the right clothing influences our level of focus on tasks. Even seemingly simple forms such as participation in a meeting or a “remote” speech require taking care of an appropriate background, clothes,

and even hairdos. The Zoom application may prove to be helpful here, as it offers the “Touch Up My Appearance” feature, which is a delicate filter for video that covers fine wrinkles and imperfections in makeup.

Seemingly minor matters, but on the whole, they can disturb the content of the message just as much as the usual technical imperfections and interruptions in the transmission (Shannon’s theorem / noise). Going into the element, as it happens in a pandemic, only produces disruptive results.

Nevertheless, despite the widespread lack of any experience, hundreds of thousands of teachers and many times more students, as well as fewer—but still many thousands—faculty and students, were obliged, almost overnight, to begin conducting online learning. And they started it. After all, neither ministries, nor schools and universities undertook the analysis or evaluation of the implementation of this form of education as quickly. And it is not just about the details, lack of equipment or access to it, variety of platforms, and even the quality of the teaching materials. The question of fundamental disadvantages—apart from the commonly raised advantages—that such mediated education presents, becomes fundamental. And one can notice them going back to Plato, who in the famous fragment of the dialogue *Phaedrus* compared the invention of writing to a living dialogue—learning by means of writing to the direct contact with a teacher:

“(...) there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt (...) To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality” (Plato, p. 45).

And now, by analogy, if a distant learning programmer (Zoom, etc.) came to a wise rector today and said: “Dear Rector, here are students who will be comfortable at home to be taught and study,” this wise rector should perhaps answer:

“Dear programmer, don’t you know that although a book should be read alone and quietly, learning is effective in contact with the teacher, and also in a group, preferably a small one. It is a direct dialogue, careful observation of the whole group, listening for comments, and—for them—observing each other, listening, being together in one room, but then also meeting friends, exchanging thoughts, etc. Therefore, through distant learning, you offer them not teaching, but at most, training. Appearances of knowledge, not true knowledge.”

Developed competences and strong motivations are essential not only for pupils and students, but also for many other groups, especially those of old age (as determined by the coronavirus mortality statistics). Their exclusion is not only related to hardware or financial issues, but also competence, and is often psychological. The latter also includes young adults.

Magdalena Kamińska (2020), a cultural scientist, comments in an interview:

“The pandemic also shows where digital media fails. I belong to many groups for young people on social media. More and more often they write that limiting interpersonal contacts to digital media causes some form of mental disorders in them. Accustomed to digital media, which they considered an important support to reality, they suddenly felt how much they needed physical contact. At this point, we realize that digital media will not take over our lives, because it is not able to meet all needs. At some point, we have to stop” [translation].

The journalist adds: “I miss these social gatherings when we don’t share any important information with each other, but simply spend time together, silent or listening—even for the hundredth time—the same anecdotes.”

“This is the fatal function of communication,” replies Kamińska, “which seems to have really disappeared recently. I have not heard of a case of people connecting on messenger in order to be together without words. Verbal communication, on the other hand, has intensified wildly. I also have the impression that I have never talked to people so intensely before. When there are fewer opportunities to leave the house, we are left with practically nothing but an Internet conversation.”

To diversify Internet contacts, applications have been developed that allow communication with strangers. Two randomly selected people can virtually meet and chat. If one of them gets offended or scared, they can click “stop” or slide their finger across the screen again. Then another interlocutor will appear before them (Sepiolo, 2020).

Fear and Anxiety in the Pandemic

These two words—fear and anxiety—have similar, but still significantly different meanings (Satan, 2012). Fear arises in the face of real danger, while anxiety arises from imagined danger or anticipated threat. Fear, therefore, may be caused by close contact with an infected or suspected person, e.g. coughing, quarantined, already ill and with a confirmed test, etc. Also entering the hospital premises, even a nursing home, in a large group of people may cause justified fear.

Sociologist Frank Furedi (2009) promotes a thesis that it is not a vision of progress and hope, but fear that stimulates and shapes the imagination of the beginning of the 21st century. Because people see everything through the prism of their safety. Furedi calls this fundamental norm of the culture of fear the precautionary principle. The assessment of whether something is risky or not is assigned to many types of individual and social activities. In a pandemic, even going to mass at church was considered dangerous by the Episcopate and the faithful (Borkowicz, 2020).

Anxiety, to put it simply, is a generalized fear. And in its formation, symbolic messages, heard news, rumors, and in the era of writing also literary narratives play a significant part in its formation, while in the era of mass and social media—streams of disturbing information. In a word, the sum of all fears turns into anxiety. Fueled by media news, opinions, images.

M. Kamińska (2020) emphasizes that:

“Most of us have not had any personal contact with anyone who is infected, all the information, all the fear, is generated by the media. If we hadn’t gotten so much of it, we might not have noticed the epidemic. (...) I compare this situation today to the smallpox epidemic that broke out in Wrocław in 1963. The media was then censored, the authorities wanted to give people as little information

as possible. Today we observe the reverse. There is a surplus of news, transmitted from above, duplicated from below. In various places on the web, people speculate whether the figures are certain, they distribute rumors, information, fake news, all mixed up. And there are no real experts, because the expert spreads his hands and says: ‘I don’t know what will happen. It will probably get worse, but I don’t know how long it will take.’ In this situation, the expert’s message is worth the same as any other rumor passed on by a neighbor in a digital mangle.”

In isolation, not only do the needs of Poles change, but also their emotions. Fear, frustration and anger mean that even information about facts is perceived differently. Some tend to be compliant with orders, others tend to question them or even to rebel.

Disintegration of Society?

In the dialogue of two scientists, Michał Bilewicz and Michał Łuczewski (2020), one finds important observations:

“[Łuczewski:] According to research (...) in those US states where statistically there were more cases of various epidemics, people were more likely to accept splitting up and building walls. And this shows how these categories of nature, i.e. the objective fact of the disease, translate into our mental, but also spiritual, religious view of the world. (...) Another coronavirus does not exist. This is a psychic construct. Of course, there is a virus, but we make a virus out of it, give it a name, tremble at it, suspend the economy and society on its behalf, lift some politicians and eliminate others. It is just an excuse. (...)”

[Bilewicz:] Sociologically speaking, it is about the social construction of the coronavirus. Here is a disease which is obviously much larger in scale than influenza, but if we look at the total number of deaths, it is actually difficult to rationally justify the scale of the social response—especially considering the economic consequences of this response, the scale of isolation, unemployment, etc. (...)”

[Łuczewski:] Today, in times of plague, we see better what society is. That the essence of society consists precisely in such constant and sudden changes of mood.”

M. Bilewicz is afraid of the consequences of the created fear psychosis in weakened social contacts:

“The Internet will in no way compensate for this dilution of social networks. (...) the greatest victims of this atomization are the oldest Poles, digitally excluded, who do not even have these virtual communities. And I think this atomization is not something temporary. It is a permanent transformation of the Polish society. (...) Now I don’t see any community. I can see extreme disintegration visible at every level. (...) Real disintegration takes place at a lower level, at the level of individuals. The fundamental change is that my neighbor is not my neighbor, but a potential source of biological danger. What makes us human—the ability to communicate, the ability to interact—is blocked today. So, society is ending. There is no society.”

Psychologist Janusz Czapiński (2020) adds:

“Virtual channels that allow us to maintain relationships are not enough. We cannot organize a trip with friends on the Internet. Besides, we are still convinced that this is a created world that is less emotionally saturated. It is not for social cohesion. And these ties will continue to break even after the order of forced isolation has been lifted. Even when we meet in real life, greetings and goodbyes will be less cordial. We still should be careful, because you don’t know who thinks what.”

Listening to Mainstream Media

The problem for those listening to news from countless sources, including government sources, was that they brought contradicting information every day. Virologists, doctors, politicians and experts gave different predictions and pointed to various promising remedies. One virologist argued that the epidemic would continue until an effective vaccine was invented. Another, that it will expire on its own in a few weeks. Yet another, that COVID-19 will keep coming back, like the seasonal flu. One doctor says that healed patients gain enduring immunity, which is contradicted by another’s claim that patients can only be immune for weeks or months. Polish doctors argue that cured patients cannot infect anyone—unlike the WHO, which claims that masks do nothing, and that the virus will be cured by tests and closing everything for two years. President Donald Trump claims that the coronavirus is not more dangerous than the flu, but after a few weeks he introduces isolation. After another few, he states that one needs to return to normalcy. The government in Poland initially banned even walking in empty forests and meadows, while leaving buses and trams running. The prime minister said at a conference that he had optimistic information, while the minister standing next to him scared him with a sullen expression.

The cacophony of opinions, as Olga Tokarczuk (2019) would say, is beyond doubt. All this, usually against the backdrop of a microscopic virus enlarged to the size of at least a soccer ball. Such an image-icon— similar to what the Kalashnikov was for terrorism—was supposed to arouse and frighten, and due to an unknown, often fatal disease—panic and fear. So, it was an effective means of maintaining a multi-million population in apartments, self-isolation, almost voluntary quarantine. The rigors of the epidemic were in effect, any loosening of them is now received with relief, but also with fear, which in turn is illustrated by masks covering the face. It is not known to what extent they are effective in close contacts in public space, but they remind one of the invisible danger and the need to keep a spatial distance. Worn with and without meaning, they have become a visual symbol of an individual’s behavior during a pandemic.

GAFAs are Holding Tight

Despite the media flaws and shortcomings, it must be admitted, as “Jutronauta” (Szostak, 2020) in *Gazeta Wyborcza* writes that:

“In the long run, those who today mediate key services that allow us to isolate at home will benefit most: Amazon, Google and other technology corporations. Without video-conferencing applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, the work of millions of people would be impossible today. We would be cut off from schools and clinics. Without Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp, we would not have contact with friends and loved ones. Corporations would stand without Amazon, Microsoft, and Google’s clouds. The more people work remotely, the more necessary the servers rented from technology giants become. Without their data centers, Netflix, which rents most of its computing power from Amazon, would not work.”

Video conference apps such as Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts have gained millions of new users. The extraordinary times of the pandemic gave Microsoft Teams 75 million daily active users, up from half as many a month earlier.

The pandemic has also brought new and generous government contracts to the world’s news corporations. Four global IT and technology companies—Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple—have gained record orders for their services in the field of telemedicine, telework, and tele-surveillance. To this must be added Microsoft products. So, in fact GAFAs + has grown stronger.

Media Infodemic

The Constant pandemic is an opportunity to strengthen the surveillance capabilities of the Internet, for a noble purpose, of course. Google and Facebook have started sharing anonymous data on the location of users to track the spread of the epidemic. For Facebook, the pandemic has also become an opportunity for users to start using it as Mark Zuckerberg touts—so that they can get closer and have valuable interactions, instead of spreading disinformation. However, there are some doubts about this.

Political scientist Jacques Rupnik (2020) from the *Center d'études et des recherches internationales* (the French equivalent of the Polish Academy of Sciences) emphasizes that in a pandemic

“We see each other as well as ever and we are as distant as ever. Half of humanity finds itself in such strange isolation. There is something perverse about isolation so closely. Physical. Which is accompanied by great listening. I cannot imagine that ever before people would listen so eagerly to what is happening to others—not only around us, but at the end of the world. Like in Wuhan? What’s going on in Singapore? And in Sydney? And in San Francisco?”

Indeed, people, as Olga Tokarczuk noted in her Nobel Prize speech—listen to distant signals. Today no longer with the help of the radio, but the Internet.

A global survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020 (“In-home media consumption due to the coronavirus outbreak...,” June 18, 2020)—showed that the coronavirus has a direct impact on home media consumption worldwide. 35% of respondents declared that they read more books or listened to more audiobooks at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 18% listened to the radio. More than 40% of consumers spent more time than usual messaging and on social media. Importantly, while in most countries at least 50% of respondents said they watched more news, the figures for Australia and the United States were lower, at 42% and 43% respectively. Australians are also the least likely to read newspapers, just 5% of Australian consumers said they read newspapers, compared with an average of 14%. While 60% of Italians used messaging services longer, in Japan, this was only 8% of respondents. Study participants from China and the Philippines spent significantly more time than others enjoying music streaming.

One observes a huge increase in the importance of brands in the lives of consumers, both technological and telecommunications. Before, telecommunications brands were considered essential in life, their products were supposed to work well, but consumers wanted nothing to do with them; now they are becoming a necessity in life.

In May 2020, the *Press* monthly published a special report on the “Digital Revolution in the Media,” providing a lot of data from the first lockdown period, supplementing in detail the picture of the growth of digital media. And so, Onet.pl had 19.83 million users in March 2020 (an increase by 15.49%), and its Medonet website was visited by 12.5 million Internet users in the same month. The results were also improved by other publishers that have been operating on the market for years—WP.pl had 18.45 million users in March (an increase by 10.67%), Interia.pl—14.19 million (an increase by 7.41%), Gazeta.pl—13.01 million (increase by 13.22%), TVN24.pl—11.4 million (increase by 44.6%), and Wyborcza.pl—10.8 million (increase by 38.9%).

However, the paper versions were losing. The weekly *Wprost* completely gave up this form of publication. Average sales of the title, which in 2011 oscillated around 100 thousand copies, in 2019 it fell to 14 thousand; from the leading position in 1990-2010, *Wprost* came down to “the end of the peloton.”

Separately, but Then Together

Never before have so many people in the world lived in such small, isolated groups; they could be called—by analogy to Internet filter bubble terminology—social bubbles. Billions of citizens around the world are now under coronavirus restrictions, weeks—even months—have passed since we socialized with people outside our homes.

That’s a lot of family time. Or time alone. However, these small groups may soon become a little larger. Governments around the world are beginning to gradually lift blockades, and when they do, they wonder to what extent and how widely they should allow this type of social group to form. The Belgian government is planning to allow the creation of “social bubbles” of no more than 10 people. People in such a small group would spend time together on weekends, and only with each other; overlapping groups would not be allowed. Creating your own bubbles would undoubtedly be socially awkward as well as difficult to enforce.

Separated people use group communicators to perform certain activities separately, together and in harmony, usually to play or sing. An example is the youth choir from Tampa Bay, Florida, or the dance “Kwarantaniec,” available on YouTube. There are also star home concerts as part of the “One World. Together at Home” initiative, which is a form of appreciation for the doctors fighting COVID-19. They featured, among others, Lady Gaga, Céline Dion, Jennifer Lopez, Andrea Bocelli, Paul McCartney, Elton John, Stevie Wonder, and the Rolling Stones.

A Bit of Theory

If one takes the change of social communication into a conceptual framework, one can refer to the pyramid of forms of interpersonal communication by Denis McQuail (2007, p. 37). Although it is a diagram from the era before the spread of digital coding and Internet communication, it also includes digital forms, with the exception that internal communication was and still is not digital (apart from possible inquiries by neurologists and cognitive scientists), and mass communication has always been purely media driven. Interpersonal, group and institutional forms, on the other hand, were both media and non-media driven (direct, “natural”); verbal, personal and media forms (written, telephone, etc.) used to be purely analog—visual or audio driven.

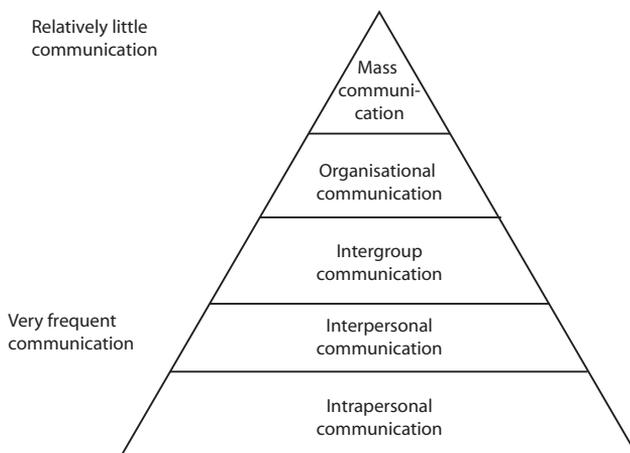


Figure 1. Level of the Communication Process—McQuail’s Communication Pyramid.

Source: Own study.

The change in communication with which one has been dealing since the beginning of the 1990s is the steadily increasing participation of digital media forms in communication at each of the four over-intrapersonal ranks of McQuail’s pyramid. Additionally, in the pandemic era, in the phase of the limitation of direct contacts, these digital forms have grown enormously; one can even speak of an explosion in forms of digital communication. The old analog media, however, has not completely disappeared—and will not disappear. At the same time, suppressing especially social group forms of direct communication have many negative consequences, including psychological ones.

The concept of a “hybrid” has recently come to be used in an extra-biological sense, first to denote a new form of war in which apparently civilian troops operate. The biological significance—hybrid as a crossbreed—can be referred to forms and means of communication that connect or mix the elements of direct and indirect communication.

Artur Modliński (2020) claims that the pandemic will accelerate the development of technologies that increase “social presence,” which is crucial for effective and full communication. “Of course, face-to-face conversation is most effective when we can hear the natural timbre of the voice and perceive facial expressions and sometimes touch the interlocutor. For now, however, the communicators that are common today are limited in this regard.” According to Modliński, one of the main limitations of the use of modern solutions is the relatively slow bandwidth of Internet connections: “One person starts talking, the other one too, and nobody knows who is to continue.”

According to Shelley Aylesworth-Spink (2017), frame analysis shows that the framework has an impact on how the audience relates to a given media channel. In this approach, the aspects highlighted in the narrative activate thoughts or feelings in the minds of the audience and increase the likelihood of their reaction in a relatively predictable way. Earlier Aylesworth-Spink research has also suggested that people use media coverage as a form of cognitive shortcuts to understand complex problems. This may also be the case with epidemic diseases, as most of us do not have direct experience in dealing with them. Understanding the specific problems associated with the media framework is therefore a prerequisite for understanding the dynamics of public opinion shaping in the face of epidemic problems.

On the other hand, Anthony Downs (1972), assuming that the media and the public rarely focus on an issue for a long time, introduced the idea of the “issue-attention cycle” referring to the highs and lows of attention that characterize a given problem in the mass media. Downs’ “issue-attention cycle” consists of five steps. The first is the pre-problem stage in which the problem has not yet attracted public attention; often only a small percentage of people, such as experts or interested groups, are aware of it. In the second stage, the problem leads to an increase in social awareness. However, this is often accompanied by an optimistic public opinion that it can be easily resolved. When people become aware of the significant costs (money, social benefits, etc.) of a solution, the solution begins to go beyond their judgment or the extent to which they are willing to tolerate it—then the problem will be in stage three. A gradual decline in interest in a problem characterizes stage four, followed by a gradual decline of public interest, the stage in which the problem is replaced by other problems and is only the subject of “spasmodic recurrences.”

Instead of the Summary

Since we have a “liquid” pandemic, i.e., nothing is certain as to its expected course, it is not known, because it depends, in the light of the Actor-Network Theory (Aylesworth-Spink, 2017) on many factors, not only biological ones, it is worth to remind the history of analyses regarding

previous pandemics and epidemics (which is already being done). In relation to Poland, the present times can be compared. With another post-war situation, namely with the cutting off of Poles from mass media (apart from a few subjected to thorough control), telephones and telexes, jamming of foreign radio stations, censorship control of letters—limiting the examples related to the media—in the period from December 13, 1981, to July 22, 1983, with the most severe restrictions in the first few months of this period. It was the martial law introduced at the time, but without the war. While there was no internet back then, other public media and forms of communication were cut off, so there was either a shutdown or a media cut-off. Such a practice had previously been known mainly from coups that had taken place in Latin America. However, the shutdown did not involve spatial separation (apart from the internment of political opponents).

Does this mean that there are no similarities between the two states? Not at all. “Facebook has been battling disinformation and harmful content over the coronavirus for months now flooding [...] social media. Fake news is to be removed from all Mark Zuckerberg websites, including Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp.” (Jumps Up, 2020). Mark Zuckerberg said he will “track any groups and events that oppose security measures imposed by the US government and individual states during the pandemic and intends to work with local authorities to do so. As long as the government does not prohibit the event at this time, we allow it to be hosted on Facebook. For the same reason, events that contradict the government’s guidelines on social distancing are not allowed on Facebook”, a Facebook spokesman explained publicly (Podskoczy, 2020).

On May 8, 2020, UN Secretary General António Guterres announced that the coronavirus pandemic had triggered a “tsunami of hatred, xenophobia” in the world, a desire to find the guilty and the “scapegoats.” The politician added that “Hatred of foreigners is increasing both online and, in the streets, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and attacks on Muslims have emerged, all linked to the coronavirus pandemic. Migrants and refugees are portrayed as a source of contamination (...) Memes are made about the elderly who are most at risk suggesting that they are the most redundant.” Guterres “appealed to the media, [...] educational institutions and governments to fight against such behavior and educate people whose” Internet illiteracy “makes them easily victims of online extremists who spread hate and conspiracy theories.” (“Coronavirus pandemic, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and a wave of hatred. Strong words of the UN head,” 2020, paras. 1–4). Social media has been called for the removal of harmful content.

Martha Powell (2020) of Infectious Diseases Hub indicated that:

“A pressing problem with modern-day, online media is the spread of misinformation – this has been much talked about in political spheres, but has also been a prevalent issue in healthcare regarding sentiment towards vaccination. The spread of misinformation on SARS-CoV-2 has been no different—theories have been floating around that the virus was engineered in a lab as a bioterrorism agent, or that the symptoms are actually caused by the 5G mobile network. In addition, thousands of listings on Amazon promoting fake COVID-19 cures have been reported, and the prices of some sanitizers and face masks have increased by over 2000%, despite in many cases not being fit for purpose.”

As Aleksandra Stanisławska (2020) notes, “The reach of fake news about the coronavirus published on Facebook is huge. Barely 100 counterfeit fakes were shared 1.7 million times and reached 117 million people. Medical experts are demanding more decisive action from social media platforms against disinformation.”

M. Powell (2020) states:

“Another challenge in the social media age has been avoiding stigma. Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, before the disease or the virus were officially named, many outlets referred to the virus as the ‘Wuhan virus’ or similar, with this hashtag trending on Twitter. Unfortunately, this wording has a tendency to stigmatize individuals from that city, and also builds an association with those of a certain ethnicity, in some cases stoking fear and xenophobia.”

Many experts have called for journalists to provide audiences with practical information or news that can be consulted, such as local phone numbers for healthcare facilities or advice on hand washing. This modest, but practical advice from trusted and up-to-date sources can help inform the public about the recommendations of its local administrative authorities that it may not otherwise notice.

The politicization of the pandemic by President Trump’s stigma via Twitter was another destructive aspect of the hasty medialization of political communication. The term “Chinese virus” fueled aversion to China, without sound justification and without concern for the consequences for international relations. As if in response, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2020) said at the Munich Security Conference: “This is a time for science, not for gossip. It is a time of solidarity, not stigma.”

However, communication in isolation also stimulates reflection, and even intuition, which was expressed by Olga Tokarczuk in her Nobel Prize speech delivered on December 7, 2019, in Stockholm. One of the commentators reacted very emotionally: “Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel speech is a moving prayer for the world that is dying in front of our eyes” (Dobrzyński, 2019). The clue of this speech is contained in the phrase “tender narrator” and the famous phrase “something is wrong with the world” (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 14).

The right language can also play an important role in combating stigma—especially in relation to regions or countries, as well as doctors and nurses. The virus does not distinguish between nationality or any other way, so there is no reason why journalists should do so.

The famous British artist Banksy reacted wonderfully. He painted a picture in one of the hospitals depicting a child lifting up a nurse doll in the Superman pose, and next to him a trash can with dolls of Spiderman and other comic superheroes (“Banksy created a work referring to the coronavirus ...,” 2020). The painting was put up for a charity auction.

Will the media be able to adopt the attitude of a “sensitive narrator” in order to correct this world? I leave this question as the most important problem for media studies, not only in the time of the pandemic.

UPDATE FROM SEPTEMBER 11, 2020

The article entitled “The Media in the “Liquid” Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020. Communication During Lockdown: Separate but Together” I wrote in May 2020, taking into account the epidemiological situation at the time, measures taken, media coverage, and social responses. When I received the text for final editing, I did not change its content, considering that it represented the situation of the first phase of the pandemic and confirmed its definition as “liquid.” Statistics from all over the world show fluctuations in the numbers of those infected, treated in hospitals, connected to a ventilator, and deceased.

The country most affected by the pandemic—assuming its beginning on January 22, 2020—became the United States. On September 11, 2020, alone, 35,286 new cases of infection appeared in the US and 1,113 people died; a total of 6,443,743 people were confirmed to be

infected there since January 22, and 192,979 of them died. Let’s compare these numbers without comparing them to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, in which 2,977 people were killed and more than 6,000 seriously injured (“September 11 attacks,” n.d., para. “Casualties”). Both events, how different, however, fall within the broad concept of “risk society” introduced by Ulrich Beck (2002, p. 65). In his opinion, various unknown and unexpected risks are increasing in modern society:

“In ancient society, the driving force was the feeling: ‘I’m hungry.’ The risk society, on the other hand, is motivated by the sentence: ‘I’m afraid!’ The community of poverty is replaced by the community of fear. In this sense, the risk society marks a specific social epoch in which solidarity is born resulting from fear and becomes a political force. However, it is still completely unknown how fear works. [...] Does fear drive people toward irrationalism, extremism, fanaticism?”

Today I will add—also toward conspiracy theories. They are “a form of comfort, because the truth is terrifying—nobody rules the world except chaos. That is why many prefer to believe in the behind-the-scenes games of secret forces.” (Witkowski, 2020). One of them says: “It is enough to press the red button on the TV remote control and the pandemic is over” (Bodziony, 2020). The Internet has given them the power to proliferate the most nonsensical conspiracy theories, such as the one that points to the multi-billionaire Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who planned the COVID-19 epidemic for profit.

In Poland, already in March 2020, a public group was created on Facebook “I do not believe in Coronavirus—Support group / YOU ARE NOT ALONE”; in September it had 114.5 thousand members proclaiming that the government and mass media are hiding from the public real information about the virus, not as terrible as the information presented to us in return. The members of this group therefore use the term “plan-demic,” a planned pandemic.

While governments are accused of exaggerating the threat, President Trump is currently being accused—conversely—of minimizing the threat, despite the fact that, as he confessed to the famous journalist to Bob Woodward in interviews for his book *Rage*—he knew COVID-19 was a “killer virus” and while he always wanted to reduce the threat it posed, he “still likes to underestimate it because he doesn’t want to panic.” And he was saying it at a time when the virus was rampaging all over the United States; then he resisted the wearing of face masks and other measures to limit the spread of the virus for a very long time. Trump showed little empathy for Americans. He deliberately misled them and failed to prepare his government for a huge health care effort. Worse, he has been trying and trying hard to shut down Obamacare, the universal health program that saved the health and lives of millions of poorer Americans. In addition, for many weeks he publicly misinformed the country about the low severity of the pathogen, disavowing at numerous press conferences leading American epidemiologists, including his advisor Dr. Fauci.

At the end of his election campaign, he himself contracted the coronavirus, becoming Patient No. 1¹ (update from October 2020).

¹ Patient No. 1—this is how I refer to the emergency medical care of President Trump, who had at his disposal not only a personal doctor, but the entire team of doctors from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in addition, he used three experimental drugs, of which at least two were not available to patients, except in a compassionate use request, which however requires a lengthy authorization procedure. For this reason, Holly Yan (2020) of CNN entitled her article “How Trump’s Covid-19 treatment is far different from what most American patients get.”

Medicine and science fail when confronted with politics and ignorance. Mainstream and mass media take the side of medicine and science, but social media, especially alt-Internet—of politics, most often of the extreme right, and ignorance.

ANNEX

Categorization of the narrative framework according to Tsung-Jen Shih, Rosalyna Wijai, and Dominique Brossard (1978, p. 149):

Consequences

The consequences of disease, such as human sacrifice, social or economic costs, are the focus of this narrative. In addition to harm, it also covers any phenomena, social or political problems, events or discussions generated by the occurrence or spread of the disease. For example, the discussion of drugs or an influenza vaccine is considered to be a consequence of the discussion of the topic of “bird flu” as the topic was raised in the context of a potential outbreak of such an influenza.

Uncertainty

This framework is characterized by an element of uncertainty, identified in any aspect(s) of the epidemic, including its cause, cure, possible spread, etc. It also covers the portrayal of the disease as unknown, requiring deeper exploration or analysis by experts or governments.

Action

The narrative highlights any action taken against the disease, including prevention, potential solutions, or strategies. An example is the ban on the import of certain goods, such as beef.

Calm

The narrative is based on the view that the public should not worry about the effects of the disease. Stories that emphasize readiness or success also take into account the role of authority figures in fighting disease.

Conflict

The narrative focuses on differences in opinion and leads directly to arguments / disputes between media authors. It may be a debate about the effectiveness of disease control, or a disagreement over how diseases will evolve and how severely it will affect people, or it may be a dispute over the adequacy or legitimacy of certain actions. Conflict is presented as an antagonism between opposing opinions or attitudes.

New Evidence

This framework relates to new findings / research findings or new evidence discoveries that help to understand disease or how to suppress an epidemic. These include the development of new vaccines, a new way of spreading / transmission, new methods of prevention, treatment, drug development, etc.

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