

Dynamics of the communication process at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Suceava, the first quarantined city in Romania (I)

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Abstract: The dynamics of the communication process during the quarantine to limit the spread of SARS-CoV2 was analysed in Suceava, the first city in Romania where this measure was imposed between March 30 and April 13, 2020. The quarantine was established after an outbreak of Covid-19 in the “Sfântul Ioan cel Nou” County Emergency Hospital, the largest hospital in Suceava County, with 1,500 employees and 1,300 beds.

We analysed communication within the hospital, by distributing a questionnaire to employees, which was answered by 57 people, communication through the media, by following three local publications from the point of view of community interest in pandemic news and the measures imposed, as well as the speech of the authority in the crisis situation.

Keywords: *communication; message; speech; management; pandemic.*

The main objective of the research was to analyse the actual situation following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The value of our study is that it provides a description of how communication was carried out and highlights various effects on medical staff and the population. Our results add to existing knowledge about crisis communication and could be useful in planning future studies.

Working method

It is an observational study, initiated by us, at the “Sfântul Ioan cel Nou” County Emergency Hospital in Suceava, the first large outbreak of Covid-19 in Romania. At the hospital, we contacted the manager to obtain the agreement to send to the medical staff, through the internal communication system (e-mail), a questionnaire with questions regarding the sources of information about the activity in the hospital during the beginning of the pandemic, March 21 - 13 May 2020; the sources of documentation regarding Covid-19; communication with the

¹ Both authors had equal contribution in writing this paper.

management of the medical unit; communication with colleagues; communication with patients and their families; appreciation of the hospital's communication with the population, during the quarantine period - March 30 - May 13, 2020.

The use of the internal network for the transmission of the questionnaire to the staff was approved by the legal department of the hospital.

The main reference points were the epidemiological accident at the County Emergency Hospital "Sfantul Ioan cel Nou" Suceava, from March 21-23, 2020 and the quarantine of the city of Suceava, between March 30 and May 13, 2020.

For the analysis of the growing interest in information, we used three local publications - Monitorul de Suceava, the daily newspaper with the largest audience, Suceava News and News Bucovina, online news publications, we asked their owners to monitor the audience on their Facebook pages, between February - May 2020 and March 20 - May 13, 2020.

Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to all departments of the County Emergency Hospital "Sfantul Ioan cel Nou" Suceava, through the internal electronic communication network. Responses were submitted anonymously on the Google Forms platform, where they were processed automatically.

Prior to the analysis, we examined all data for potentially erroneous or incomplete records and verified the information. After verification, the database was closed for analysis.

Results

In the study, all the employees of the Suceava County Emergency Hospital, who carried out their activities during the period of research, were invited to participate. 57 employees responded to the invitation by completing the questionnaire.

The results are presented in graphs and diagrams.

The limits of our analysis come from the low percentage of people who answered the questionnaire - only 3.8% of the total employees in the hospital. The conclusions cannot be generalised at the level of the entire medical body; additional, descriptive studies are needed on established samples based on probability.

This analysis has no external funders. We designed, collected, analysed and interpreted the data and drafted the report. We ensure final responsibility for the decision made to send this report for publication.

Discussions

Our study describes the management of communication between March and May 2020, the first stage of the Covid-19 epidemic in the first quarantined city in Romania, and provides information on how communication was made, the types of messages sent by authorities and the media, which can be used to improve communication and reduce social trauma caused by a crisis situation. The

municipality of Suceava has a population of 116,000 inhabitants, and the eight neighbouring communes, quarantined together with Suceava, together have 60,768 inhabitants. Therefore, almost 180,000 inhabitants were affected by this measure.

Our findings regarding the health communication strategy are largely in line with those of another recently published study, *Enhancing Global Health Communication During a Crisis: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic*, conducted by Scott C Ratzan, Silvia Sommariva and Lauren Rauh, published on July 30, 2020, which examines global communication during the Covid-19 pandemic and concludes that all health communicators need to be more proactive. Although our research does not focus on government communication, making only a few references to it, we found that in Romania a strategy similar to those in France, Germany and Great Britain was adopted, analysed by Philipp Brandt and Jan Wörlein in *Government Crisis Communications During the Pandemic*, published on April 21, 2020.

We focused on the city of Suceava in the first two months of the Covid-19 epidemic, namely at a time when there was little knowledge about SARS -CoV 2, and medical staff had less experience or confidence in its ability to properly manage the disease, both to avoid one's own illness, and in the correct evaluation and therapeutic conduct towards patients.

General Background

Coronavirus and the disease it causes, Covid-19, affect the entire population. The elderly are at risk because they have comorbidities that can complicate the evolution, and young people between 25-34 years old are the most vulnerable due to social and economic impact, according to Population Reference Bureau. The unprecedented economic and health crisis makes it almost impossible to predict what will happen next and that is why we consider that a very good communication in the field of health is necessary.

When we talk about communication we start from the simple definition given by J. J. Van Cuilenburg (*Communication Science*, 2000: 25), as a process that has four fundamental components: *a transmitter, a channel, information and a receiver* and that produces an *effect*. The essence of the process is, according to Cuilenburg, Scholten and Noomen, "the movement, transfer or transmission of information from one participant to another" [Cuilenburg, Scholten, Noomen, 2000: 26].

Frequently, he points out, "traffic takes place in two directions, it is bidirectional" (Cuilenburg et al, 2000: 26). In our analysis we were closer to the communication/ behaviour correlation, made by Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson [Watzlawick, Bavelas, Jackson, 2014: 54], according to which "any behaviour in an interactional situation has message value, in other words, represents communication."

"Activity and inactivity, words and silence all have the value of a message: they influence others, and these others, in turn, cannot but respond to this communication, and thus they also communicate. We will have to understand clearly that not talking or ignoring each other is no exception," considers Watzlawick [Watzlawick et al, 2014: 54]

and from this perspective we analysed the option *to talk as little as possible*, of the hospital management, immediately after the outbreak of Covid-19.

The attitude of the Romanian state authorities, both administrative and medical, in the period prior to the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization, was calm. Thus, on February 7, 2020, after the first case of Covid-19 confirmed in the country, the President of Romania, Klaus IOHANNIS, posted on his Facebook page that “there is no real reason to panic.” “The infection with this virus causes in most cases only mild symptoms, sore throat, cough and fever, as in any cold,” wrote the President of Romania.

One month later, on March 11, when the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 pandemic, President Klaus Iohannis said: “I was quite interested in the condition of those who were found positive, and so the 30 who were declared sick, I found that, in fact, their general condition is good. Specifically, many of them do not have any symptoms. Many of them have very mild cold symptoms. Some have flu-like symptoms. Even older people, who have other health problems, have an acceptable general condition. This is to demystify the disease a bit, because we read a few articles yesterday, reporting a deadly virus in a very apocalyptic way.”

The director of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Prof. Dr. Matei Baș, Prof. Univ. Dr. Adrian Streinu-Cercel, also stated on February 27, 2020, that: “This virus is 10 times weaker than the flu virus. But, considering that we have a new germ that has not been in circulation before, everyone is alerted and it is normal to be so. I mean, the medical world. I see that others are also alerted, who should not be,” and on March 11 he stated that: “The population has nothing to worry about, it is an epidemiological term (our note the pandemic), it changes the data of the problem for those who deal with pandemic management, but not for the common population”.

The messages conveyed from a high level are to reassure the population and encourage a positive attitude.

In Suceava, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on March 3, 2020. On March 16, 2020, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, declared a state of emergency throughout Romania, for a period of 30 days. From this moment, according to the decree, the measures are ordered by “military ordinances”, the actions and activities of the institutions are “missions”, the coordinator of the activity is the “commander of the action”, the figures are “reported” etc. The ordinances impose traffic restrictions, social distancing and suspend public activities. The restriction of traffic makes it that for journalists, the main sources of information become the official communiqués.

In the March 16 edition of the local daily „Monitorul de Suceava”, out of 23 articles, 15 are on the topic of the new coronavirus, with headlines such as Testimonies of Suceava Residents in the Diaspora, from a World Terrorised by Coronavirus; Exercises for Emotional State and Online Services in Times of Crisis. “The Prefect of Suceava asks the population to notify 112 about any person who

does not comply with prevention measures. “Ion Lungu: “The most important thing during this period is to stay home and avoid crowded areas.” The content of the official messages transmitted through the media foreshadows a difficult crisis situation, in antithesis to what the authorities said only 5 days ago.

The official information regarding the people suspected of being infected with the new coronavirus, the number of those confirmed positive, and the people in quarantine and isolation, was communicated by a single government institution, namely the Suceava Public Health Directorate.

The next day, on March 17, Suceava County Emergency Hospital, through the manager, is present in the press with three pieces of information of wide public interest: the acquisition of rapid tests for the diagnosis of Covid-19, advanced triage in tents, people with symptoms and the preparation of an operating room and an Intensive Care Unit for patients with Covid-19.

On March 19, the hospital announced through its spokesperson that two doctors from the Infectious Diseases Department had been infected with coronavirus and that “more than 10 doctors, nurses and nurses from the Pulmonology Department and the Emergency Unit were isolated and tested for Covid-19, after a young man who was hospitalised in Pulmonology was positively diagnosed with the new coronavirus. “This news published in the daily “Monitorul de Suceava” is in third place, due to the number of views in the online edition, section “Last Hour”, from March 18, with 7,171 visitors, and with another 4,872 views on March 19.

According to the chart, more than 4,000 views were recorded on March 11, when the coronavirus pandemic was officially declared.

A similar increase in the number of views in the last decade of March 2020 can be seen on the online news sites “Suceava News” and “News Bucovina” (see graphs).

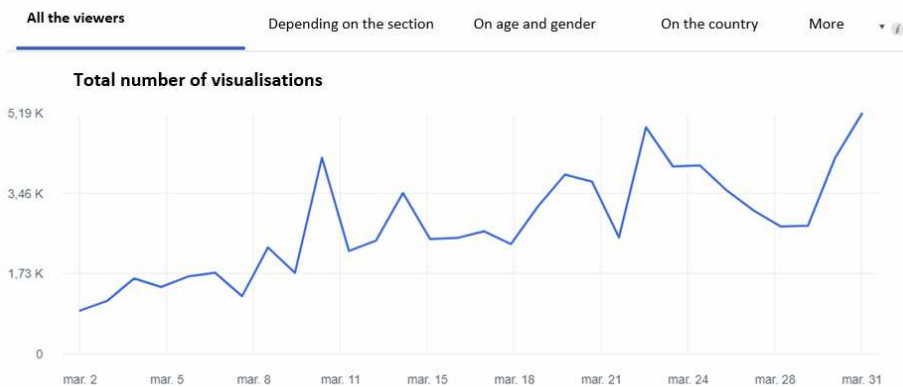


Figure 1 Graph of views on the Facebook page of the daily “Monitorul de Suceava”

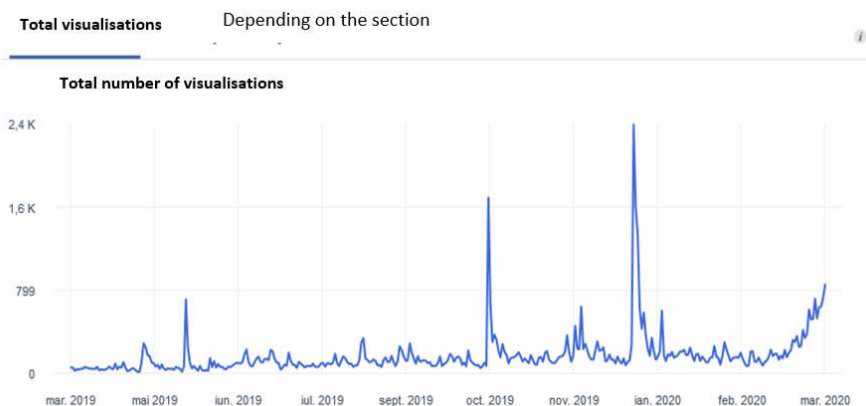


Figure 2 Graph of views on the Facebook page of the online publication “Suceava News”

On the same date, March 19, Suceava County Emergency Hospital informs, through the manager, that it has started setting up a molecular analysis laboratory to allow Real Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT PCR) for the new coronavirus. The news published in “Monitorul de Suceava” has only 1,473 views.

On the evening of March 21, the Emergency Hospital “Sfântul Ioan cel Nou” Suceava informed, through a press release, that 11 of its doctors from the front line were positive with the new coronavirus. In “Monitorul de Suceava”, the news has 5,002 views, almost half compared to news about a complaint from some colleagues of a confirmed man infected with SARS-CoV-2, who accused the health authorities of not being tested in turn. This news item had 9,984 views.

From March 21, both the health crisis and another form of communication began in Suceava.

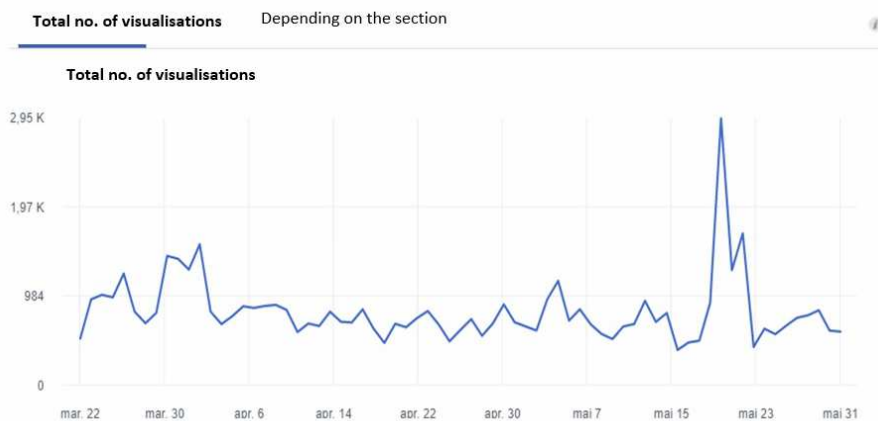


Figure 3 Graph of views on the Facebook page of News Bucovina

Page		Total appreciations	Last week	Weekly posts	Weekly interaction
TU 1	 Monitorul de Suceava	238.5K 	▲0,1%	150	901.2K 
2	 suceavalive.ro	54.4K 	▲0,2%	216	112K 
3	 Suceava News Online	43.9K 	▲0,1%	216	142.8K 
4	 Monitorul de Cluj	43.6K 	▲0,5%	230	141.2K 
5	 NewsBucovina.ro	40.8K 	▲0,8%	154	183K 
6	 Știri Suceava	38.8K 	▲0,3%	74	70.1K 

Figure 4 Readers' appreciation for the monitored publications on Facebook

On March 23, the hospital issued a press release announcing that the number of infected medical staff had reached 52 and outlined in 8 pages what protective measures had been taken to protect medical staff and patients from SARS-CoV-2 disease. The news had a record number of views - 17,799 in "Monitorul de Suceava". The technical data and explanations provided in the communiqué, by the Hospital's Steering Committee, claimed that all measures were taken to prevent the disease, but the large number of diseases in the hospital contradicted this message: "Romania, our hospital made every effort and took all possible measures to prepare the medical unit for cases of infection with the new coronavirus"; "The staff has been trained and the bare necessities have been provided."

Following the technical explanations, the communiqué adopts an apologetic tone, which raises doubts about the ability to manage the situation and undermines both the confidence of its own staff and the population in the effectiveness of the measures taken. In this context, the call for solidarity is lost.

"Unfortunately, we have faced both undeclared cases regarding the history of travel or contacts with people from risk areas, and a global crisis in terms of protective equipment, a situation that is not specific to Suceava County Hospital, but to all hospitals in the world at this time. There was no negligence on our part, we did everything we could, and we bought all the protective materials we found on the market. Some of the suppliers did not respond, others terminated the contracts because they had nowhere to supply. *We were constantly looking for solutions, in conditions of limited resources.* It is a global war with the new coronavirus and in this fight the effort must be common. *Neither the citizen nor the hospital can fight alone. We will only succeed together.* In the context of the situation generated by the coronavirus pandemic – Covid-19, our main concern remains the care of patients and medical staff. We want all patients to be safe and to benefit from the best conditions of diagnosis and treatment," the statement reads.

On the same day, March 23, 2020, the Ministry of Health announced that the hospital will be closed for 48 hours and will be transformed into a hospital - COVID, after 52 medical staff were diagnosed with coronavirus.

The official data that was communicated to us by the hospital, on November 2, 2020, at our request, show that between March 21-23, 2020, they were on medical leave due to the symptoms suggestive of infection with the new coronavirus – 89 medical staff, and another 193 were in quarantine.

The public communication on the number of cases of Covid-19 was taken over at the central level by the Strategic Communication Group. The communication process from the authorities to the general public becomes unilateral, from sender to receiver, mainly through press releases, without debates and without journalists having the opportunity to ask questions.

People are stuck in homes, so the main sources of information for the public are social networks, media and private messaging services (WhatsApp).

The content analysis of these messages, in the three directions indicated by Cuilenburg et al [2000: 132] respectively – the analysis of textual elements, the evaluation of the sender, and the evaluation of the receptivity, shows us real information, but also half-truths, false news or manipulators, conspiracy theories, rumors about the large number of deaths, or on the contrary, about hiding the number of deaths, false information about the treatment applied in hospitals to patients with Covid-19, and speculation of the emotional side in the media. The main effect was sowing confusion and mistrust both on the ability of the local authority to handle the situation and on the veracity of official statements. This effect was visible not only among the general public, but also on some of the medical staff, who chose to communicate with the media under the protection of anonymity.

The public call, from March 24, of a doctor from the “Sfântul Ioan cel Nou” County Hospital, for establishing a coordination of the situation in the hospital as soon as possible, launched by the newspaper “Monitorul de Suceava”, had 8,550 views, putting it at first place at the top of the readings. From the content of the message sent by the doctor it appears that for three days “the situation has been out of control”; “the army should come”; “*a lot of staff deserted covering themselves with a test*”; “the old hospital *is like a drifting ship*”; “those there are crying for help and beyond that it is not a decision-maker”; “let’s try to do something”; “try to do something.”

Two days later, another call is published, in which we also identify terms in the military field, which suggest an atmosphere of war, of disaster: “out of 233 doctors, a handful of people still work voluntarily”; “One by one, *the last people fall*”. “In the old hospital, 10 doctors are *voluntarily fighting* to save 150 patients. And he gives in one by one. We don’t have any help from the county, from Iași as well. The nurses *go on strike*, they don’t come because they are not tested, others are tested and isolated at home, as well, for two weeks. In France, Italy, Spain the staff work, if physically they can, regardless of whether they are positive or not. In our country, the

legislation allows them to flee, to renounce their mission and to stay in self-isolation or quarantine,” said the doctor. He also said that if the doctors and the rest of the valid medical staff do not return to work, “soon the coffins of the dead will be on the streets”.

A reference to a crisis similar to a war was made by the manager of the hospital, who before being suspended from office publicly stated: “I did my duty and I am not aware that I could have done something else and I did not, with which I had available and was available on the market. I don’t think other hospitals have done more than we have done and I will argue in front of anyone that *we are not war criminals*”.

News about the hospital in Suceava began to appear daily in the local, central and international press as well as on social networks, with headlines such as:

“Do something, because they are killing us here for days. They’re killing us?” - the nurse hospitalised confessed by phone the nightmare that hides behind the guarded gates of the largest medical unit in the county – Monitorul de Suceava; The hospital in the centre of the Covid-19 crisis in Romania, “Romania’s Lombardy” – Euronews; “Between the hospital in Suceava and DSP disappear dead by Covid-19 from official reports” – Radio Free Europe Romania; Suceava, “Lombardy of Romania” – Republic; Testimony from the horror hospital in Suceava: “You can hear the phones ringing from the black bags with which the dead are carried” - g4media; Shocking revelations about the “death hospital” in Suceava: “Some doctors refused...” – Evenimentul Zilei; The Apocalypse from Suceava: 30 dead at the “horror hospital” – Journalists; The disaster hospital in Suceava: “You can hear the phones ringing from the black bags in which the dead are carried” – Adevărul (The Truth).

The news, reports, media revelations and messages were communicated dynamically, supplemented by images or with a supporting background, with photos of crowds of medical staff being tested, rows of ambulances at the Emergency Department or with “testimonies in tears” from the “hospital of horror”.

Instead, the official information about the situation in Suceava was transmitted in a cumbersome language, based on numbers - number of infected people, deaths, cures, available beds, often difficult to understand for the population less familiar with medical terminology, legal or administrative, and the use of military terminology, produced an effect of fear rather than solidarity.

The official communication was shared: from the central level, the number of infected medical staff, the cases of infection, the transformation into Covid hospital and the number of deaths were transmitted through the Strategic Communication Group and through the website stirioficial.ro; at the local level, through the Suceava Prefecture - positive news, especially regarding the delivery of antiviral drugs or protective equipment to the hospital from the Ministry of Health.

The quarantine measure of Suceava municipality and 8 neighbouring localities, established by *Military Ordinance* no. 6 of March 30, 2020, was announced in a press statement from the headquarters of the Ministry of Interior, by the Minister of Interior, Marcel Vela, *the commander*. The message regarding quarantine is intended not only for the population in the quarantined area, but for the whole country and begins with the pragmatic formula – “Dear Romanians,” an expression of positive

politeness, built by combining the *Romanian* ethnonym with the adjective *dear*, which implies a subjective appreciation of the relationship with his interlocutor or his characteristics.” [Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 1981: 241]. To make this announcement, the authority used the elements of analog communication, shown by Watzlawick et al. [2014: 69]: “posture, gestures, facial expression, vocal inflection, phrasing, rhythm and cadence of the words themselves, any other nonverbal manifestation that the body is capable of, as well as the signs of communication that are constantly present in any context in which the interaction is produced”.

In what concerns the “communication scenography”, we noticed a few aspects characterising the relation between the positions invested with political/military power and the citizens: the Ministry of Internal Affairs dressed in a leather jacket, with epaulettes similar to the ones in aviation, talked from a standing position, flanked by a police quaestor in uniform and by the head of the Department for Emergency Situations, dressed in a jacket, which also resembled military uniforms. For the setting, they used a blue colour with minimal furniture – three desks bearing the Ministry’s logo and the flags of Romania, the European Union and NATO. A sign language interpreter completed the image that the message transmitted is so important that it must be understood by the entire population, including people with hearing problems. The Minister spoke slowly, clearly, with reserved gestures on a “complex and important situation,” regarding the risk of spreading the infections, “analysed by experts” and by all those who work “day and night”. The decision communicated was “extremely important,” and the articles in the Ordinance must be “received precisely”. “Stepping out of the Ritual” [Hobjilă, 2008] was constructed symmetrically, by resorting to the subjective pragmatic formula “dear compatriots” and by the assurance sent to the “citizens of Suceava”, that they have “the entire support, in these important, delicate and extremely hard moments,” when “the Romanian’s unity and hope that we shall emerge victorious from this national and international challenge will make us stronger and confident that we shall win.” We would also like to highlight at this point the metacommunicative dimension of the discourse and the role of the metacommunicative statements “as regulating components for possible conflicts,” as “means of instituting and maintaining goodwill relations between individuals, thus reaching a social balance, as an integral part of an ‘ecology of spirit’” [Nagy, 2015: 233].

Placing Suceava city under quarantine has led to the management of the County Emergency Hospital by a military team, in “a mission to take over leadership” in the period from 2nd until 30th April 2020, as shown in a press release of the Ministry of Health. Improving both internal and external communication was among the objectives of the military management.

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