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## The role of the media in times of crises

Report<sup>1</sup>  
Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media  
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### *Summary*

Free and independent media must provide citizens with accurate, comprehensive and high-quality information, this being both a right and a duty. The media must perform this key function at all times, but it is still more important in times of crisis, when they should be able to stimulate discussion on the right measures to counter the causes and the adverse effects of a crisis and to overcome it.

The media should also facilitate citizen participation in discussions on the long-term changes that are needed to increase society's resilience to potential future crises. They should play a key part as links between decision-makers and the public and take on an educational role by analysing and explaining the new obligations being imposed to tackle a crisis and the behaviour which the authorities expect from citizens.

The risks of disinformation and manipulation of information increase in times of crisis. The threat posed by information disorder is amplified and the need to prevent it and counter it becomes more pressing. The requirement for professionalism and thoroughness in checking information disseminated is all the greater in times of crisis and the media must be aware of the heightened responsibility that they have to assume to the full. Social media platforms should redouble their efforts to counter information disorder by developing fact-checking tools and promoting reliable and accurate news sources.

The collaboration between public authorities and the media is one of the keyways of dealing with and overcoming a crisis. This collaboration should be developed despite the critical stance of some sections of the press towards the action of governments. The collaboration between the authorities and the media should in no way undermine the independence of the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to committee: [Doc. 15140](#), Reference 4535 of 12 October 2020.

## **A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>**

1. While freedom, pluralism and independence of the media are vital preconditions for our democratic societies, the importance of a healthy media ecosystem is even more obvious in times of crises. Free and independent media must provide citizens with accurate, comprehensive and high-quality information, this being both a right and a duty. It is vital for citizens to have access, through the media, to relevant, reliable, clear and factual information on the crises, as this can have a decisive impact on society's ability to cope effectively with tense situations such as health crises, environmental disasters, acts of terrorism, social violence or armed conflicts.

2. The media could play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and multicultural understanding, and in preventing or minimising oppression and conflict. However, when a crisis threatens dominant understandings of individual freedoms, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic, debates tend to polarise and fragment the community itself, which is reflected in online and broadcast content. These polarising crises are likely to happen in the future, and their impact on public debates demands a comprehensive media approach for informing and engaging the public effectively.

3. Free and independent media must be the driving force of critical analysis of the causes of a crisis. Their professionalism is one of the preconditions for constructive public debate on how to deal with it, which must involve politicians and the various groups in society. The media help to stimulate discussion on the right measures to counter the causes and the adverse effects of a crisis and to overcome it; besides, they facilitate citizen participation in discussions on the long-term changes that are needed to increase society's resilience to crises of the same type or to prevent them more effectively.

4. The media help to reinforce the legitimacy of the decisions taken by political leaders and improve understanding both of their content and of the reasons for them; they also play a key part as links between decision-makers and the public. Moreover, the media can take on an educational role: they must be capable of analysing and explaining the new obligations being imposed to tackle a crisis situation and the behaviour which the authorities expect of the public.

5. The risks of misinformation, polarisation and populism on-line increases in times of crises. The threat posed by information disorder is amplified and the need to prevent it and counter it becomes more pressing. The requirement for professionalism and thoroughness in checking information disseminated is all the greater in times of crises and the media must be aware of the heightened responsibility that they must assume to the full, including in terms of effectively countering conspiracy theories and inflammatory discourses.

6. While this is a responsibility for all media outlets, there is a specific role for public service media which has to be recognised, enhanced and safeguarded. Public service media must remain independent and serve the public because they have a specific remit to fulfil as a factor for social cohesion and integration of all individuals and as a broad platform for pluralist public debate. In the particular context of crises, public service media should encourage citizens to develop critical thinking and the capacity to compare various sources of information.

7. As far as social media platforms are concerned, given the risk of false news or unchecked information being disseminated on their networks, the operators should redouble their efforts to counter this trend by developing fact-checking tools and promoting reliable and accurate news sources. Lockdowns and forced restrictions on movement during Covid-19 pandemic have significantly increased the importance of the media in general because the free flow of information also becomes a means of overcoming the isolation faced by individuals whose freedom of movement is restricted, while the restrictions have made social media much more important as a means of maintaining family, interpersonal, work and social contacts.

8. These various functions are interconnected and complement one another. It is important not to divide them up or limit them. It is wrong and dangerous to assume that governments are best placed to control and distil information in times of crises so as to avoid the dissemination of inaccurate information and direct collective behaviour effectively. An approach of that kind is incompatible with democratic principles and the protection of the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

9. Collaboration between public authorities and the media is one of the keyways of dealing with and overcoming a crisis. The authorities should support the media so that the latter can perform their various roles to the full. This willingness to co-operate should be given effect despite the critical stance of some sections of

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<sup>2</sup> Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 2 December 2021.

the press towards the action of governments, as collaboration between the authorities and the media should in no way undermine the independence of the latter.

10. There is a need to review existing multidisciplinary knowledge and approaches about media and society, communication and crisis management. Media should be able to actively play their role not only as a channel to communicate to publics and allow public opinion formation, but also a channel for expert knowledge to be transferred to institutions.

11. Measures to enhance the role of the media during crises should involve institutions, services, experts and civil society, in order to make community, institutional and research processes visible and approachable, as well as to strengthen trust. Maintaining a resilient and adaptable media ecosystem is the best way to confront crises in democracies. Efforts need to be focused on long-term policies, which start long before a crisis begins.

12. Consequently, the Assembly calls on member States to recognise and value the role of the media as a crucial actor in the management of a crisis and an essential node in the wider network of communication especially in time of crises, and, in particular, to:

12.1. ensure the conditions for a strong, pluralistic and independent media ecosystem that can support coherent deliberative processes locally and internationally;

12.2. encourage a structured collaboration and networking - before, during and after crises - between the media, experts, public authorities, services and the public;

12.3. support collaboration between public media and institutions with a view to provide permanent spaces for citizens to access and share knowledge about the processes of science in transparent ways, and to appreciate the constant evolution of scientific knowledge;

12.4. support critical research and investigation journalism able to explain complex processes that are still in the making and aim at unveiling unfair and misguided actions of powerful authorities and businesses, such as corruption and abuse of power;

12.5. support media coverage of the scientific debate, in order to raise awareness and expand the knowledge of the public on both the technical and the social nature of the changes and responsibilities involved in the management and solution of the emergency.

13. Considering real danger of misinformation, polarisation, populism on-line in times of crises, the Assembly also calls on member States to:

13.1. bring their legislation and practice into line with [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2007\)3](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the remit of public service media in the information society, as well as PACE [Resolution 2255 \(2019\)](#) on public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda, and [Recommendation 1878 \(2009\)](#) on funding of public service broadcasting;

13.2. put in place policies that may disperse the concentration of opinion power by social media and create countervailing power, as well as regulations of and about social media, to prevent that powerful digital businesses become centres of political power;

13.3. put in place policies that may encourage social media to develop further their fact-checking capacities to ensure that business interests do not overshadow the need to respect ethical principles of any publication on-line;

13.4. support the development of a strong mixed-media approach across sectors, in order to deactivate polarisation and misinformation driven by digital conglomerates and exclusivist narratives;

13.5. ensure that administrative services and institutions can use social media to provide, monitor and collect information during crises, whereas citizens can use them to ask for information or to provide their own;

13.6. support the media which have developed verification procedures that allow them to play a new role of verifying the accuracy of user-generated information.

13.7. support community media projects and seek to involve citizens more deeply in public debates by taking specific measures, such as creating and maintaining multidisciplinary social media spaces and involving students in educational activities for and communication with the community before and during a crisis;

13.8. support focused training for science journalism that covers the social sciences, as well as the hard sciences, to enhance journalists' ability to report on scientific work and help the public to understand the scientific dimension of crises management;

13.9. support trainings offered by national and international journalism organisations, universities and research centres focused on the sociological study of journalism and on constructive journalism approaches in training;

13.10. support journalistic coverage of both local and global contextualisation and narratives, and discouraging nationalistic frames in the media;

13.11. support documentary production and podcasting of knowledge that can make science, services and institutional work more visible through media cultural outputs.

## B. Explanatory memorandum by the rapporteur, Ms Engblom

### 1. Introduction

1. The main idea on which this report relies is that the media are essential agents for peaceful development and fair allocation of understandings, opportunities and resources in the constantly changing context of a democratic society. The public functions of the media – informational media in particular – consist of informing as well as providing cultural and political support and guidance in the making of choices with regard to these opportunities and resources. This role of the media entails collecting and sharing a representative range of views about a problem and its solutions, to help institutions shape final decisions that could be *reflected* upon, understood, and supported by a large part of the population, i.e., *deliberated*. The deliberative aspect is essential for substantial democratic processes, and the media are its main guarantor.<sup>3</sup>

2. This contribution of the media to democratic processes becomes particularly difficult and complex during current crises, due to a variety of factors and dynamics.

3. Firstly, news media outlets and platforms tend to shape information around the new needs and feelings of digitally active audiences, instead of covering contexts, the variety of views available, and distinguishing between opinions and validated information. Business-driven digital platforms allow audiences to express themselves, and algorithmic dynamics overexpose citizens to content reflecting their own views. The journalist's profession is more and more an underpaid and precarious, multi-skilled job; due to this transitional status of the sector, it is less able to make space for democratic and societal needs.

4. Secondly, uncertainties and fears triggered by crises limit the individuals' predisposition for a lengthy deliberative and educational exchange. Fears quickly take over social media spaces, where direct and individual opinions become dominant. Once shared in these "democratising" platforms, institutional and scientific guidance becomes as disputed as individual opinions are.

5. Thirdly, journalism has a complicated relation with science, which should inform institutions' work during crises. Science complexity and time-consuming processes clash with the journalistic philosophy of truth and clear-cut "facts", but media simplifications of science can trigger new fears and further limit the predisposition to deliberative exchange. During crises, all these factors and dynamics can more easily be exploited by partisan agents and technological determinants, which further nourish citizens' fears and frustrations.

6. This combination of structural, mediatic and social dynamics puts pressure on the relations at the basis of the matrix that is responsible for the democratic formation of public opinion. This is the matrix composed by institutions, services, experts, citizens and informational agents (i.e., journalists, news media, digital media platform, other media outputs), which work to shape public debates and solutions to problems. Global and regional crises dangerously test some of the foundational pillars of the democratic process, such as the comprehensive provision of coherent information, its easy retrieval and understanding, and the ability to monitor and respond to new needs, views, and fears in rational ways. Citizen's trust in institutions and science is put under pressure, and new communicative constraints affect crisis management.

7. However, while democratic deliberation is more difficult during crises, it is more important than in normal times, when the democratic debate has established and stable channels to consider and evaluate change. In this report, I recommend a comprehensive and longitudinal approach, in which the key functions of the media during crises are part of a wider approach. This approach stretches beyond the duration of the crisis and entails the collaboration of institutions, experts, services, media and publics in consolidating a coherent and flexible communicative network for debate management for the public good.

8. My analysis builds on the excellent background report by Dr Giuliana Tiripelli,<sup>4</sup> who I warmly thank for her outstanding work. I have also taken account of the contribution by other experts,<sup>5</sup> and by several members of the Committee.

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<sup>3</sup> J.S. Dryzek (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Polvani M. (2021) *Partecipazione e spazi civici. Forme, problemi e opportunità della partecipazione in politica*, in Actionaid, *Qualità della democrazia. Spazi civici e partecipazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano, pp.13-22, in press.

<sup>4</sup> Senior Lecturer in Digital Journalism and Media Discourse, De Montfort University, Leicester.

<sup>5</sup> Mr Paul Reilly, Senior Lecturer in Social Media and Digital Society, Deputy Director of Learning and Teaching, Information School, University of Sheffield; Ms Daniela Ovidia, Scientific Director, Centre for Ethics in Science and Journalism, Milan; Co-director of the Neuroscience and Society Lab, Brain and Behavioural Sciences Department, University of Pavia.

## 2. Key functions of the media in times of crisis

9. Times of crisis are times in which the links between social and individual life come to the fore and the “social contract” is put under test. Ideally, the media should help the public make sense of change and understand what new choices need to be made at the individual and social level, in order to support a peaceful and fair transition to a new – temporary or permanent – organisation of social life, thus minimising the potential damages caused by the crisis. The media should therefore provide all required elements for individuals to understand not only what set of choices are available to them as individuals, in the new context, but also why certain social needs must have priority over others, and how they are to be prioritised.

10. The new visibility that social needs gain during a crisis creates two important tensions in the community. The first tension is caused by the need to reconcile the individual’s freedoms and ideologies with new social needs and priorities. This reconciliation of needs is more difficult in communities that strongly rely on principles of individual freedoms as pillars of their culture, instead of collective ones. The second tension is caused by the fast-paced rhythm that a crisis imposes on the debate, which makes it more challenging to develop effective and substantial, deliberative processes in favour of the new social priorities. This fast-paced rhythm implies that digital media usually remain the only “spaces” able to circulate new information – especially “interpretive information” – quickly followed by news media.<sup>6</sup> This allows digital media to dictate the agenda and the interpretations to be discussed, according to technological and discursive dynamics that are not based on transparent structures and principles. Institutions struggle to quickly evaluate and absorb the public’s views into policies, and publics struggle to understand the value of new institutional inputs.

11. It is therefore important that the media include approaches that counterbalance these two tensions before and during crises. The media’s ability to highlight the links between social and individual life, and to bring to the fore the benefits of belonging to a community, which entails having responsibilities and roles as well as freedoms, becomes crucial before and during a crisis. The ability to continue offering channels for effective and healthy deliberation, where a variety of new and old views are not only expressed, but also brainstormed and reshaped collectively during frantic times, is another essential function of the media during crises.

12. Another key function of the media, and especially of journalism, during crises is their ability to cover debates and developments about uncertain and non-tangible “facts” in ways that are clear and acceptable for audiences. Debates about crises, including ideas proposed by scientific experts and institutions, are usually qualified by a focus on risk, risk management, uncertainty of results and new but invisible social dynamics. It is crucial that media are equipped so as to cover these intangible and nonetheless powerful “facts” and grey areas in ways that can be fully understood by audiences, to prevent inaccurate and simplistic causal explanations from filling gaps in understanding.

13. Crises often produce a loss of critical infrastructure, and a communication mix that includes both traditional and digital media can be lifesaving.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it is important that institutions, services, experts, journalists, and civil society are deeply rooted, visible, and active in online media, and that they apply contingency and coordinated plans allowing them to share public messages across different media. Developing a strong mixed-media approach across sectors, where digital media are tools and not partners, is particularly important to deactivate polarisation and misinformation driven by digital conglomerates and exclusivist narratives, which will deprive democratic deliberations of space.

14. In developing effective media functions, it is crucial that the loss of critical infrastructure is understood symbolically and contextually, as well as materially. Crises challenge cultural and discursive dynamics, which are at least as important than the material infrastructure of communication, and they do this in a variety of ways. When a crisis threatens shared social and cultural values of a specific community, the tendency in a community is to rally around the flag.<sup>8</sup> This is especially the case during terrorist attacks, wars, or moral panics, when the media could play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and multicultural understanding and in preventing or minimising oppression and conflict. However, when a crisis threatens dominant understandings of individual freedoms, debates tend to polarise and fragment the community itself. These polarising crises are likely to be the crises of the future, and their impact on public debates demand a comprehensive media

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<sup>6</sup> News media usually follow social media in fast-paced developments, see Hänska M. (2016) “Networked Communication & the Arab Spring: Linking broadcast and social media”, *New Media & Society* 18(1) 99-116.

<sup>7</sup> Reilly P. & Atanasova D. (2016) *A report on the role of the media in the information flows that emerge during crisis situations*, <http://casceff.eu/media2/2016/05/D3.3-Communication-strategy.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> David Y. and Sommerlad E. (2021) Media and Information in Times of Crisis: The Case of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infodemic, in *Andrews, G.J., Crooks, V.A., Pearce, J.R., Messina, J.P. (eds) COVID-19 and Similar Futures*, Springer, 2021, in press.

approach for informing and engaging the public effectively.

## 2.1. Informing the public

### 2.1.1. Informing the public about the measures taken by authorities

15. Informing publics about the measures taken by authorities is the first step in the development of a strong media role during the management of a crisis. The main limitations in the provision of information in this context are not only given by the lack of quality of, or access to, the information provided to media by authorities and experts; they also concern intrinsic journalistic demands and the quality of current “post-global” debates.

16. In digital contexts, quality investigative journalism can be misinterpreted; as a consequence, it may strengthen polarising views and lack of trust in institutions. Offering cues to interpret and explain complex processes that are still in the making and still need to be fully uncovered is a key element of critical research and investigation, which is aimed at unveiling unfair and misguided actions of powerful authorities and businesses, such as corruption and abuse of power. As such, this kind of journalism should always be supported.

17. However, in the lonely digital environment, during a situation marked by uncertainty and fear, individuals do not really deliberate about this content; rather, they tend to use these cues to confirm simplistic interpretations.

18. This example shows that, if left alone in the clickbait space where many citizens look for confirmation of their views, even the best investigative journalism may contribute to vilify the quality of information and to nourish simplistic, inflammatory and polarising interpretations. The danger is that of a self-fulfilling prophecy: institutional and experts’ discourses are reframed to fit journalistic needs, but audiences only take what they need to confirm their beliefs. While the public understands that it is promised quick and univocal solutions, it remains unable to engage critically with the grey areas and uncertainty of science; it can therefore more easily feel legitimised to resist requests for quick behavioural change. Once beliefs are confirmed, resisting the change required by institutions can easily be understood as a tool to participate in the struggle for society’s democratic nature and freedom from oppression.

19. Local and nationalistic frames are another important element that shapes the effectiveness of quality information about the measures taken by authorities during crises. This is because crises confer “new significance on doing normal things as a way of performing one’s nationhood and calibrating national solidarities”.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, nationalism was linked to new evaluations of panic buying and mask-wearing, and to conspiracy theories circulated on social media.<sup>10</sup> Unlike previous international disasters of the post-cold war era, such as Fukushima, the media discourse about Covid-19 appeared to be strongly nation-focused and often excessively critical of international institutions.

20. With the next crisis, we may see less responsible behaviour if the media focus on these “organic” nationalistic frames. This is because nationalist frames are more common among populist groups, and research has demonstrated that environmental protection supported by populist groups does not coincide with the changes required by the challenge of climate change.<sup>11</sup> Critical media scholars also worry about “the danger of nationalist ideology in a state of exception and a crisis of humanity”, namely “that authoritarian characters such as Trump are prone to use violence, which can result in wars”, etc.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1.2. Explaining new measures to tackle a crisis

21. Science journalism and science communication ought to play a major role during a crisis, for when a crisis arises scientific experts are expected to explain solutions and justify new measures. What can limit current science journalism and communication in fulfilling this role is the fact that they focus on hard science, quantitative research and innovation (including new discoveries in medical and health science). Science news and programmes are scarce and often dramatised, and they do not explain the complexity of scientific work.

<sup>9</sup> Goode J., Stroup D. and Gaufran, E. (2020) Everyday Nationalism in Unsettled Times: In Search of Normality during Pandemic, *Nationalities Papers* 1-25 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/article/everyday-nationalism-in-unsettled-times-in-search-of-normality-during-pandemic/2AC99C9E14C5B6D0B094194EB685CE1E>.

<sup>10</sup> Goode J., Stroup D. and Gaufran, E. (2020) as above.

<sup>11</sup> Forchtner B. and Kølvrå C. (2015). The Nature of Nationalism: Populist Radical Right Parties on Countryside and Climate, *Nature and Culture* 10(2) 199-224 <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/nature-and-culture/10/2/nc100204.xml>.

<sup>12</sup> Fuchs C. (2020) Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism, *TripleC* 18(20), <https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/1167>.

The production of science news tends to follow traditional journalistic norms, only showing the outcomes of complex processes, while science journalism formation and training remain debatable and fluid.<sup>13</sup>

22. This focus on innovation and hard science strongly limits the function of the media during crises, because it obscures the social nature of the changes and responsibilities involved in the management and solution of the emergency. A crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic affects and disrupts factors and processes that are not only medical, but also – and especially – social. Similarly, a focus on quantities hides qualitative repercussions of crises, and while numbers are thought to be objective, recent developments have shown that numbers are not objectively interpreted by citizens (see, for example, of the reactions to the quantitative information about blood clots of the AstraZeneca vaccine).

23. Soft sciences, such as social sciences, can unveil the qualitative and social implications of crises and thus enable audiences to understand how their practical behaviour may impact on their community. Unlike the hard sciences, the soft sciences are able to show what links an individual to their community, to explain the qualities of phenomena and how invisible systems shape their lives, thus offering explanations for fear and frustrations that go beyond ideas of “powerful elites” or “corrupted politicians”. It is in these qualitative understandings that a full grasp of new obligations can arise from among citizens, but rarely do soft science receive a media coverage worth of their value.<sup>14</sup>

24. The lack of focus on the processes and uncertainty of research (both hard and soft science) can strengthen expectations among audiences and citizens of rapid solutions to crises. These expectations can nourish discontent and mistrust in expert knowledge when these rapid solutions do not arrive as soon as expected, or if problems are encountered.<sup>15</sup> This absence of coverage about how science is practically conducted, its collegial nature, and how results in one area can enrich other disciplines, is mainly the by-product of journalistic norms, such as the tendency to produce a coverage that focuses on a clearly defined “fact”, which fits into the space and format available to the journalist and which needs little contextual information.

25. Finally, science journalism formation and training are still unstable and fluid. Former scientists, especially from the hard sciences, can recycle themselves into valuable science journalists working on innovative platforms and fact-checking, potentially proposing a positivist bias which is typical of the hard sciences. However, soft and hard science communication itself is still not a clearly distinct profession, while the traditional role of the permanent and professional journalist covering science for a specific news outlet is slowly disappearing.

26. At the same time, scientists in a variety of disciplines have been pressured for years now to test and improve their media skills, and to present their individual work to the media – something they have done quite promptly during the Covid-19 crisis. The mediatised culture and upskilling of the scientist into a “media expert” has produced extra workload for scientific experts, while it has pushed some research centres and institutions to brand research messages for enhanced visibility. The emphasis on a “home-made” knowledge exchange by scientists as individuals (who are not experts in communication!) has made it possible for a few VIP researchers to appear in live news and TV programmes.

27. The outcome of this has been a cacophony of voices, with no clear roles or visible chains of authority in shaping accurate knowledge. In Italy, for example, the mediatic over-exposition of the views of scientific experts was perceived – over time – more as a source of confusion than a source of clarification.<sup>16</sup> The personalised media focus on the individual scientist makes it easier for active audiences to respond to their knowledge confusion by approaching information that simplifies complex processes, by producing their own “science” coverage online, or by selecting the “expert” who provides the hypothesis that they want to hear.

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<sup>13</sup> Dunwoody S. (2014) Science journalism, in Bucchi M. and Brian Trench B. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*, Routledge, Abingdon <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203483794.ch3>.

<sup>14</sup> Cassidy A. (2014) Communicating the social sciences and humanities, in Bucchi M. & Trench B. (eds) *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*, 2nd Edition, Routledge. There are notable exceptions in the communication of soft sciences. For example, history is successfully communicated to publics through digital media in European and non-European countries, and does not seem to produce the same polarising dynamics of other sciences, see <https://www.wired.it/internet/web/2021/04/14/storia-tendenza-divulgazione-barbero/>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, how the public interpreted the AstraZeneca blood-clots risks online from early March 2021 onward.

<sup>16</sup> See Bucchi M. (2021) Per aumentare le vaccinazioni investiamo in fiducia, *Nature Italy* 12 January <https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00004-x>.



### 2.1.3. *Quality information as a remedy against disinformation*

28. Explaining change is not just about fact-checking or fighting disinformation,<sup>17</sup> and the attempts by institutions and scientists to respond to the loss of control over information and public understanding may produce more damage than benefits if they are not included in a wider approach. The biggest threats to democratic societies experiencing modern crises are much more about citizens' lack of trust in institutions and experts than about the availability of accurate and fact-checked information, or the potential dangers produced by a limitation of quality information.

29. This happens because fear plays a major role at the start of a new crisis, and "facts" can do very little against fear. It is also not possible for every citizen to fully understand a crisis as a scientist would do. The current fragmentation of social structures and communities of belonging makes it more difficult for individuals to find shared and comprehensive explanations for sudden threats in the present. The political economy of the web (e.g. personalisation of news) further compartmentalises their views.

30. Therefore, citizens who doubt the efficacy and safety of new anti-crisis measures, such as Covid vaccines, are not ignorant, and their general education may have little to do with their attitudes towards science; they are, simply, non-experts.

31. While it is crucial that authorities protect democracy without restricting freedom of expression, it is equally essential that they protect the debate against interest-linked exploitations of mediated discourses, to protect a deliberative debate against populist and polarising debate dynamics. Partisan utilisation of media discourses successfully exploits existing ideas and identities, and they can deprive the debate of deliberative substance and jeopardise support for new measures safeguarding social and individual safety. Dry and sensationalist coverage, and digital new personalisation, can strengthen support for populist and polarising narratives in the debate, which represents authorities as an "elite" operating against the public good, as an enemy of the citizens. These are all forms of disinformation, which however flourish from wider social and communication dynamics.

### 2.1.4. *The specific role of public service media*

32. Public service media have a crucial role to play in guaranteeing the presence of stable deliberative channels and the circulation of coherent and authoritative discourses, in the presence of disruptive communication dynamics triggered by crises.

33. Public service media provide information that supports the public interest, while other media provide more information that the public is interested in. The provision of clear information, which respects the science, is the primary role of public service media, which are among those authoritative institutions that successfully circulate coherent messages before and during crises. The other crucial role of public service media is that of holding to scrutiny the ways in which political institutions protect the public interest and the public good.

34. The relations between politics and public media should be carefully monitored, to guarantee that media services can hold government to scrutiny. At the same time, the flexibility of public media in supporting education during a crisis should be protected and enhanced.<sup>18</sup>

35. The behavioural changes that are needed to responsibly act during a crisis in a democratic society can be endorsed better when they are meaningful for citizens. Public service media play a crucial role in preparing the public to imagine, visualise and relate to the future reality of forthcoming crises, in particular the climate change crisis. This role could reduce the tendency to believe conspiracy theories in order to explain unexpected events. In the particular context of crises, public service media should encourage citizens to develop critical thinking and the capacity to compare various sources of information. Finally, public media should offer citizens mediated spaces that may guarantee the unfolding of deliberative processes during crises.

### 2.1.5. *Information via social media: risks and benefits*

36. Social media represent "a two-way communication between emergency services organisations and

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<sup>17</sup> In some cases, fact-checking may play a limited role, for example at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Massimo Sandal, Science writer, currently employed at the fact checking project Facta; author's chat with expert, 5 February 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Both British and Polish broadcasting services quickly offered thematic education tools for children (i.e., TVP Szkoła, TVP School).

affected populations”.<sup>19</sup> Services and institutions can use social media to provide but also monitor and collect information during crises, whereas citizens use them to ask for information or to provide their own. In addition, traditional news media source and draft news stories via user-generated content, instead of just producing their own, and they have developed verification procedures that allow them to play a new role: that of verifying the accuracy of user-generated information.

37. The risks and opportunities for institutions, experts and services of using social media during a crisis are many and widely discussed in the literature, but one is particularly relevant in this discussion: the timing and resources needed to manage, verify and respond to new online debate dynamics, and the enormous quantity of information triggered by a crisis. While communication experts had previously made plans aimed at managing a pandemic crisis,<sup>20</sup> an effective approach via social media was rarely implemented for the Covid-19 challenge.<sup>21</sup>

38. At the same time, researchers have alerted institutions about the dangers of delegating too much to social media platforms. “When viewed from the perspective of the potentially enormous opinion power of social media, [...] it becomes clear that making some social media platforms the central locus of the governance of online communication and enforcers of public value standards, not only enhances their public accountability but also strengthens their grip on the very process of democratic opinion formation”. Therefore, “dispersing concentrations of opinion power and creating countervailing powers is essential to preventing certain social media platforms from becoming quasi-governments of online speech, while also ensuring that they each remain one of many platforms that allow us to engage in public debate”.<sup>22</sup> In this connection, social media should be encouraged to develop further their fact-checking capacities to ensure that business interests do not overshadow the need to respect ethical principles of any publication on-line. Social media and digital platforms are great promoters of debate, but they also give an illusion of freedom, while they determine what citizens engage with. When left unmonitored, their emphasis on the individual user as the nourishing machine of the digital debate can restrict the popular understanding of the importance of deliberative processes.

39. All this calls for a comprehensive and structural approach to the maintenance and consolidation of a flexible network of communication on social media, where the principal nodes are represented by institutions, experts (including both communication and topic’s experts), services, civil society and public media accounts. This network needs can quickly adapt and flexibly manage information flows before and beyond the duration of a crisis. Through this network, organic dynamics of information online can be studied and supported or countered, across platforms and beyond sectoral and national boundaries.

#### *2.1.6. Monitoring public understanding*

40. An essential part of the deliberative formation of democratic support for policies is the ability of institutions to listen to citizens. Although some of this institutional listening happens during civic assemblies and through pre-existing channels of feedback collections, a large part of it can also be done by monitoring and analysing public understanding of new crises and policies. Such analysis can be supported by contemporary digital analytics tools.

41. The Cambridge Analytica affair demonstrates that digital analyses can be very effective to capture changing feelings and opinions among a specific population. In that case, such effectiveness was used to promote partisan outcomes and data were obtained through ethical and legal breaches. This kind of research can’t be left to, or coordinated with, private and social media or PR companies. Similarly, political representatives should not be involved in the production and use of such research.

42. However, it is possible to monitor feelings and opinions in perfectly legal and responsible ways. Before and during crises, institutions and media should monitor citizens’ feelings, or “sentiment”, and opinions as part of a larger and multidirectional process informing new policies. For example, the analysis by Pulsar about the Covid vaccine sentiment clearly shows trends and attitudes, which can be further examined and contextualized.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tiripelli G. & Reilly P. (2017) Lesson 1: News Media and Crisis-Management, <http://casceff.eu/media2/2017/07/Topic4-Lesson1-News-Media-and-Crisis-Management-FIN-1.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> See ASSET, <http://www.asset-scienceinsociety.eu/outputs/deliverables>. Documentaries about pandemics were made available by public media before 2019 (e.g. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p059y0p1>), which were rediscovered by the public after the Covid-19 pandemic started.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s chat with Daniela Ovidia, Scientific Director, Center for Ethics in Science and Journalism (Milan), 22 March 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Helberger N. (2020) The Political Power of Platforms: How Current Attempts to Regulate Misinformation Amplify Opinion Power, *Digital Journalism* 8(6) 842-854.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.pulsarplatform.com/blog/2021/the-covid-vaccine-sentiment-index-tracking-public-attitudes-toward->

43. The monitoring of sentiment and opinion should constitute a first step in policy development, to map narratives and discourse dynamics of social groups involved, and to identify cultural leaders able to promote cohesive and effective debate development for specific groups. Its results should inform the framing, circulation and timing of institutional messages about new policies, targeting specific groups of audience-citizens in different ways. A testing phase should be included, before crisis development. Public service media should play a primary role in digital audience research, in collaboration with universities and institutions. The results of this research should inform the alphabet used to translate institutional messages about new policies into content that audience-citizens can easily understand and relate to.

## **2.2. Involving the public**

### *2.2.1. Giving space to doubts and questions*

44. A stable message, which clearly distinguishes between imagined and real dangers, would be ideal to prompt citizens to take responsible measures against a crisis. However, removing uncertainty and grey areas from the scientific debate in order to produce comprehensible information and minimise fears is potentially dangerous. This is because scientific knowledge and crisis measures have no intrinsic stability. In these contexts, a “no-doubt” message can highly damage trust in institutions and experts as soon as new uncertainties or discoveries come to the fore, which is very likely to happen during a major crisis.

45. This problem has been demonstrated by the current debate about and reactions to the new precautionary checks on one of the Covid-19 vaccines.<sup>24</sup> Once the debate gets framed in polarised ways, such as “safe versus dangerous”, it is very difficult for the media and for institutions to reframe it. This is because the news media tend to cover issues that are already part of newsworthy narratives. However, citizens and scientists assign different meanings to terms such as safe/unsafe: the understanding of risk by a scientist (e.g., 1 in 10,000 has a major side effect) is different from the understanding by a lay individual, for whom 1 in 10,000 (major side effect) is a confirmation that they can experience side effects.<sup>25</sup>

46. Existing and new sociological and digital research should be used to monitor and examine developing understandings of crises and science. The news media should be encouraged to provide contextualised and comparative stories and statistics (e.g., serious vaccine adverse reactions versus car accidents, or similar), to convey the uncertainty of science to citizens without letting it trigger panic. The aim should be to spread discourses citizens can rely on to think about their own choices in navigating a crisis in responsible ways.

47. Finally, public media and institutions should collaborate to provide permanent spaces for citizens to access and share knowledge about the processes of science in transparent ways, and to appreciate the constant evolution of scientific knowledge. Doubts and questions should be framed in media debates as what makes democratic societies grow. Social media can be a primary tool for this purpose, as a part of a wider and flexible network of communicators, where experts, citizens, cultural leaders and institutions flexibly share questions and answers in constructive ways. This approach will contribute to transform the cacophony of experts’ voices into a meaningful and stabilising part of the deliberative process, against the instability of populist and undemocratic narratives.

### *2.2.2. Stimulating expert-based discussion about crises and changes*

48. Communities of experts can play an important role in stimulating constructive and clarifying discussions about crises and change. International scientific networks can collect a variety of perspectives on the same problem and use their familiarity with scientific exchange to safely transport multidisciplinary knowledge to other experts and citizens.

### *2.2.3. Stimulating support for measures to counter the crisis*

49. Easy access to, and reliance on, scientific information does not happen automatically for many citizens. In addition, it is not the quality of information alone that enhances understanding and behavioural change,<sup>26</sup>

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each-vaccine/.

<sup>24</sup> Davey (2021) in *The Guardian* 15 March 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/15/why-some-countries-have-suspended-the-astazeneca-vaccine-and-what-it-means-for-australia-explainer>.

<sup>25</sup> Spiegelhalter (2021) in *The Guardian* 15 March 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/15/evidence-oxford-vaccine-blood-clots-data-causal-links>.

<sup>26</sup> See Jackson (2016) in *openDemocracy* <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/catastrophism-is-as-much-obstacle-to-addressing-climate-change-as-den/>.

especially during the tensest stages of a crisis that affect subjective understandings of individual freedom (i.e., Covid-19). Accurate information and understanding will not solve problems of denialism.<sup>27</sup> There are many other barriers for citizens to overcome if they are to approach and use available quality information for behavioural change, which are first of all structural and social, and only secondarily technical and educational.

50. For these reasons, stimulating support for measures to counter the crisis requires an investment in cultural power. While general messages produced by experts may have polarising results, cultural leaders embody narratives that social groups rely on to make sense of what's happening. As a consequence, those who identify with the corresponding group will relate the provided information more easily to their experience.

#### *2.2.4. Improving citizens' engagement during extraordinary change and measures*

51. There are specific roles that the media can play during extraordinary measures, apart from the informative ones examined by emergency and crisis research.<sup>28</sup>

52. One area that has been overlooked until now is the role of the media, in general, in supporting citizens' mental health and social interaction during times of extraordinary measures such as lockdowns. Firstly, the media can offer forms of entertainment that can replace other leisure activities that are unavailable during a crisis. Secondly, they can provide guidance and make experiences of mental health issues more visible and thus normalised. Third, new media have proved excellent in filling interactional gaps when in-person interaction was not possible (e.g. Zoom). These online forms of socialisation could be continued beyond the duration of a crisis, and adapted to solve other problems (such as disabilities, traffic control). To achieve full potential in this area, it is imperative that all state members guarantee permanent and ultrafast Wi-Fi coverage to every home, as well as the necessary technical tools, as a primary need and as a human right of every individual.

53. Mainstream media have a special role to play in improving citizens' engagement with extraordinary change. As well as contributing in the general ways discussed above in this report, they are also uniquely suited to set a shared timing for different activities throughout the day, by strategically scheduling suitable programmes for the different times of the day. This schedule can help individuals in lockdown to separate work, leisure, and family time, when the absence of structured, external interactions makes it difficult to maintain healthy routines.

54. At the same time, the Covid-19 crisis has shown that existing social media platforms can already play a crucial role in rebuilding discourses and debates along constructive lines, with little intervention from institutions. Both journalists and local institutions naturally need time to provide new and accurate information and support in extraordinary or unexpected circumstances. For this reason, during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, the absence of locally focused information and interactional support was often compensated for by the spontaneous formation of Covid mutual aid groups on social media, which responded to the local public's need for practical information and reassurance.

55. This example demonstrates that citizens strongly need to "deliberate" during crises, as a way to regain control and reorganise meaning, and that local institutions should be ready to adapt quickly and reshape spontaneous media dynamics into deliberative spaces, where new ideas of community life are shared and reorganised. This would also help to raise awareness and expand the knowledge of the public on both the technical and the social nature of the changes and responsibilities associated with managing and finding solutions to the emergency.

#### *2.2.5. Facilitating citizen participation in discussions about long-term changes*

56. Without an appreciation of the importance of science – both soft and hard science – in society, citizens may find it difficult to deliberately engage in dialogue about long-term effects and policies. This is because citizens may not have the tools to understand how their choices impact on the community, now and in the future, and what they can do to improve current and future community life. Citizens can feel empowered by the idea of helping their own community if the links between themselves and their community, and the benefits of being part of this community, are real and clearly shown, and if options are explained.

57. Schools should be involved at all levels in order to explain the links between soft and hard sciences and the intergenerational implications of current individual choices. Both hard and soft sciences should be brought to citizens more informally.

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<sup>27</sup> Author's chat with Dr Stephen Jackson, expert of the politics of climate change, 9 April 2021.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, <http://casceff.eu>.

### **3. Collaboration between the media and experts, public authorities, publics and services**

#### **3.1. The media as a key link between experts, public authorities, services and the public**

58. Approaches to mediated communication for crisis management and resolution need to draw on existing studies and research by experts of science communication, crisis communication, and cultural and social communication dynamics. Previous work already points to the need for a clear and open communication, which is able to stimulate and strengthen responsible behaviours instead of mistrust in institutions and institutional paternalism.<sup>29</sup> In democracies, it is crucial that citizens are, and feel that they are, treated as equal partners, contributing to crisis management and solutions. Mediated communication should therefore not only be used to illustrate or justify institutional decisions and research, but it should also be used to show the difference that citizens can make in a crisis through their behaviours and choices.

59. The 2012 report of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control entitled “Communication on immunisation – building trust”<sup>30</sup> makes it clear that building trust and transparency is at the basis of a successful approach to communication. The steps to prepare and implement a communication programme (on immunisation, or other topics) contained in the 2012 ECDC already outline a path that should include a beneficial relationship between media, on one hand, and experts, public authorities, services and the public, on the other. This step-by-step approach is applicable to a variety of crises, and it includes the formation of links with stakeholders, including the media, which are coherent with the recommendations proposed in this report.

60. The media are a crucial node in the wider network of communication, involving experts, public authorities, services and the public. Consequently, measures meant to stabilise flexible but authoritative communicative links between all these actors, and to strengthen citizens’ views about their roles in society, are essential components of communication before, during and after crises.

#### **3.2. Reinforcing the legitimacy of the decisions taken by political leaders and institutions**

61. Citizens may not be able to grasp the importance of decisions taken by political leaders, even when these decisions are science-based and even if they constitute a well-balanced effort to meet a variety of needs for the social good. This is due to a variety of predominantly long-term, cultural factors with strong links to structural developments of individual opportunities in society, which this report has discussed. This lack of understanding may weaken public support for crisis prevention, management and adjustment policies.

62. Democracies experience crises that are similar to those of non-democratic countries, and the measures that both have to take in order to protect their communities entail some limitation of the individual’s freedom. The difficulty for a democratic country – being based on the principle of individual freedom – is that of having citizens make choices that help society without imposing them on people. These choices can become preferred and sustained by individuals if they see them as measures that allow them to fulfil a role which they believe to be theirs in society.

63. An intersectoral, communicative network of experts, public authorities, services, and the public, can reinforce the legitimacy of the decisions taken by political leaders in these situations. Such network can affirm accurate and constructive discourses in the public debate through the media in flexible but coherent ways. The general aim of this network has to be that of reinforcing messages about the power of the individual to shape the well-being of society, before, during and after the crisis, in parallel to the work being done by institutions, experts and services.

#### **3.3. Reinforcing public support for services**

64. In general, citizens largely support the work done by services (such as emergency or health services) to prevent, manage or respond to crises. What is less visible for citizens, and therefore less understood, is the complexity of the service machine, and the amount of work and resources needed to plan and act in coherent ways during a crisis. This lack of visibility can weaken support for allocating resources needed and understanding of the efforts and difficulties of key workers and emergency structures, which in turn leads to more misrepresentations of services and their processes.

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<sup>29</sup> See Bucchi (2021) as above. Bucchi suggests that existing studies and approaches to the mediated communication of science are already available, but they still need to be fully applied.

<sup>30</sup> Available at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/communication-immunisation-building-trust>.

65. An intersectoral, communicative network of experts, public authorities, services, and the public, can pressure the media to make such services – and their working processes – more visible through the cultural products that shape a community's views. This is especially the case for entertainment products (e.g. Netflix series), where typical roles and problems are popularised in fictional stories for the wider public.

### **3.4. Reinforcing the role of scientific evidence and experts in public debates**

66. The Covid-19 crisis has clearly highlighted a major weakness in the mediated communication of scientific information during a crisis. Global institutions, which ought to represent guidelines and actions worldwide, have often been vilified in popular discourses, and their messages have remained unheard. Scientific narratives, which by their very nature travel across borders, have mostly been read through nationalistic or polarised frames.

67. It is possible to identify three general points for action. The first is the need to consistently support scientists studying the factors and processes related to the crisis (e.g. medical, climate change scientists), making sure that they are protected from political and partisan interference or from marketing needs of their employing institutions. The second is to support and make visible scientific research on communities experiencing change and uncertainty, in the same way as scientific research on viruses and other “hard” facts is supported in the public discourse.<sup>31</sup> The third is the need to support a shift from personalised scientific communication towards a collective one, a kind of communication of research visibly based on the international community of researchers and their developing work.

68. There are two main kinds of “personalised information” that appeared online during the Covid-19 pandemic. In both cases, such “personalised information” was not part of a coordinated effort to engage with the media and publics during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first is that of actual communication experts, who decided to spontaneously engage in the debate out of a sense of responsibility and *in the absence of* stabilised channels for doing so within a pre-established, global-local network.<sup>32</sup> These agents of communication already constitute a big part of the global-local network that is required to manage mediated communication during a crisis: they only need to be included and acknowledged as relevant nodes in the network.

69. The second type is that of individual experts with expertise not in communication but in the problems provoked by a crisis (e.g. virologists for virus knowledge), who engage directly in the crisis debate. Their experiences are usually marked by fluctuating effects. During their media presence, they have shown both the strengths of researchers and their weaknesses as communicators, to the point that they have often endangered their own image as experts in their own discipline. In the short term, their interventions in the media debate have accentuated the personalisation of news, the sensational frames and the polarisation of audiences. In the long term, however, this impromptu and direct engagement of the scientist could stabilise and contribute to the debate.

70. Many good practices already exist, which rely on a less personalised approach, and which could be seen as part of the global-local multisectoral network needed to sustain constructive communication during a crisis. From a technical point of view, podcasts and audio platforms also offer great and growing opportunities for the future communication of science.

71. As the shaping of collective approaches and networks may take time, higher education institutions offer a more flexible and already available platform to quickly mobilise multidisciplinary knowledge developed by students in public engagement activities under the supervision of experts and research-active staff.<sup>33</sup>

### **3.5. Managing crisis development: enabling public authorities to identify unforeseen difficulties**

72. The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated that the most hard and unforeseen difficulties during crises in democracies relate to the management of the relations between public opinion, media coverage and political choices.

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<sup>31</sup> It is important that institutions, services, and politicians emphasise, in the media, that the science on which their decisions are based is not only that of the hard sciences, but also that of the soft sciences. Soft sciences study dynamics of communication, and communication academics can inform contextualised media strategies for both hard and soft science-based policies.

<sup>32</sup> This is the case, for example, of Roberta Villa, who mobilised her expertise in communication developed through European-funded project in her Instagram profile; see <https://www.instagram.com/robivil/>, and <https://www.journalismfestival.com/speaker/roberta-villa> for a bio.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Vaccination Myths and Facts video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxxAkFLKbKE&t=46s>.



73. The sociological study of the media becomes very important in the support of cross-sectoral debate coordination before, during and after crises. It can explain how the media and political realms affect each other, and the dynamics that reinforce political debates, with particular emphasis being placed on the dynamics of discourses on which citizens rely. Sociological studies can, and should, inform digital monitoring of debates, enabling public authorities to identify a variety of difficulties and solutions in their approach to the media.

74. In addition, exchanges between experts can identify unforeseen difficulties for authorities and publics. Academic conferences are spaces where early results of research are presented and examined by a community of experts. By involving journalists in academic conferences (e.g. hard and soft science conferences about climate change, vaccinations, Covid-19, and more general conferences), these potential and unforeseen difficulties can become more easily visible for institutions. Conferences could use a journalist–expert joint session to translate expert jargon into accurate news articles for media audiences and focused reports for specific institutions.

75. In other words, journalism is not only a channel to communicate to publics and allow public opinion formation, but also a channel for expert knowledge to be transferred to institutions. Journalists can also force experts to communicate their knowledge as a community of experts, instead of individually, thus reflecting the real nature of research as a community endeavour in the public debate. At the same time, allowing journalists to become an established presence in research would make them more knowledgeable about the research processes and unveil invisible sociological dynamics that suddenly disrupt social life during crises,<sup>34</sup> which they could use to contextualise their news reports.

### **3.6. Support by authorities for investigative and constructive journalism in times of crisis**

76. Journalism, unlike other knowledge-producing sectors (such as research), is fast and adaptable, and it can adapt in flexible ways during a crisis. However, digital journalism tends to contain elements that are more likely to induce click baiting, and attractive “critical” narratives can sometimes nourish polarisation and fragmentation. Consequently, crisis coverage needs to rely on more than just investigative and “watchdog” journalism. Communities need information that not only holds powerful subjects to account. They also need information that can make the practical and planning efforts to solve a crisis visible, and that can show how others may be affected by the individual decision to adopt responsible behaviours.

77. Various journalism approaches, such as Peace Journalism, Solutions Journalism and Constructive Journalism, can rebalance the debate along these lines during crises. These models usually stem from critical media studies, and they rely on clear empirical evidence and theories about the wider feedback loops that nourish destructive communication dynamics. In other words, these models can explain why polarising media communication develops, and what political and social factors contribute to it. They should therefore be fully supported in educational and professional training, and included in research and policies about media communication in times of crises.

## **4. Conclusions**

78. Measures to enhance the role of the media in crises should involve institutions, services, experts and civil society. They should aim to protect spaces, time, interventions and tools in order to make community, institutional and research processes visible and approachable, as well as to shape and strengthen trust and a sense of identity, purpose and belonging. Maintaining a resilient and adaptable media base of this kind is the best way to confront crises in democracies, because it allows for an effective evaluation of ideas and support of a deliberative philosophy that may prepare citizens for change. The member States’ efforts therefore need to focus on long-term policies and measures, which start long before a crisis begins.

79. The contribution of the media to democratic processes becomes particularly difficult and complex during crises, due to a variety of factors and dynamics. News media outlets and platforms tend to shape information around the new needs and feelings of digitally active audiences, instead of covering contexts, the variety of views available, and distinguishing between opinions and validated information.

80. Uncertainties and fears triggered by crises limit the individuals’ predisposition for a lengthy deliberative and educational exchange. Fears quickly take over social media spaces, where direct and individual opinions

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Power M., Doherty B., Pybus K. and Pickett K. (2020) How COVID-19 has exposed inequalities in the UK food system: The case of UK food and poverty, *Emerald Open Research* 2(11) <https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.13539.2>.

become dominant. Moreover, journalism has a complicated relation with science, which should inform institutions' work during crises.

81. In times of crisis, the media should help the public make sense of change and understand what new choices need to be made at the individual and social level. The media should therefore provide all required elements for individuals to understand not only what set of choices are available to them as individuals, in the new context, but also why certain social needs must have priority over others, and how they are to be prioritised.

82. The new visibility that social needs gain during a crisis creates two important tensions in the community caused by: a). the need to reconcile the individual's freedoms and ideologies with new social needs and priorities; b). the fast-paced rhythm that a crisis imposes on the debate, which makes it more challenging to develop effective and substantial, deliberative processes in favour of the new social priorities.

83. It is therefore important that the media include approaches that counterbalance these two tensions before and during crises. The media's ability to highlight the links between social and individual life, and to bring to the fore the benefits of belonging to a community, which entails having responsibilities and roles as well as freedoms, becomes crucial before and during a crisis. The ability to continue offering channels for effective and healthy deliberation, where a variety of new and old views are not only expressed, but also brainstormed and reshaped collectively during frantic times, is an essential function of the media during crises. Another key function of the media during crises is their ability to cover debates and developments about uncertain and non-tangible "facts" in ways that are clear and acceptable for audiences.

84. Crises often produce a loss of critical infrastructure, and a communication mix that includes both traditional and digital media can be lifesaving. Hence, it is important that institutions, services, experts, journalists and civil society are deeply rooted, visible and active in online media, and that they apply contingency and coordinated plans allowing them to share public messages across different media. This is particularly important to deactivate polarisation and misinformation driven by digital conglomerates and exclusivist narratives.

85. When a crisis threatens dominant understandings of individual freedoms, debates tend to polarise and fragment the community itself. These polarising crises are likely to be the crises of the future, and their impact on public debates demand a comprehensive media approach for informing and engaging the public effectively.

86. Informing publics about the measures taken by authorities is the first step in the development of a strong media role during the management of a crisis. Offering cues to interpret and explain complex processes that are still in the making and still need to be fully uncovered is a key element of critical research and investigation. This kind of journalism should always be supported.

87. However, during a situation marked by uncertainty and fear, individuals do not really deliberate about this content. Moreover, they tend to use these cues to confirm simplistic interpretations. Therefore, if left alone in the clickbait space where many citizens look for confirmation of their views, even the best investigative journalism may contribute to vilify the quality of information and to nourish simplistic and polarising interpretations. While the public understands that it is promised quick and univocal solutions, it remains unable to engage critically with the grey areas and uncertainty of science. It can therefore more easily feel legitimised to resist requests for quick behavioural change. Once beliefs are confirmed, resisting the change required by institutions can easily be understood as a tool to participate in the struggle for society's democratic nature and freedom from oppression.