Postmodern Openings
ISSN: 2068-0236 | e-ISSN: 2069-9387
Covered in: Web of Science (WOS); EBSCO; ERIH+; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Ulrich ProQuest; Cabell, Journalseek; Scipio; Philpapers; SHERPA/RoMEO repositories; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck

2021, Volume 12, Issue 4, pages: 104-123 | https://doi.org/10.18662/po/12.4/363

Information and News Consumption. Perception on the Communication of Authorities and Journalists During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Starting March 2020, Romania has been faced with a health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, a crisis reflected in media communication. In such situations, media play a crucial role in making relevant information timely and accessible, to help people learn about and understand what this pandemic is and how it is assessed, how to protect themselves, and what measures are taken by the authorities. This study aims to analyse how Romanian students keep informed during this national and global crisis, which also generates adjacent media phenomena such as an increase in misinformation, lack of transparency in communicating with the public or over-abundance of information. To this end, we applied a questionnaire which was answered by 426 students from a public university in Romania. The results show that students use many sources to get the information they consider important, believe that the types of messages that help them feel properly informed about the pandemic and its implications: data, figures, accurate facts, and the information received from authorities or experts and that they prefer multimedia digital content. Young people tend to be cautious concerning the transparency of official communication and continue to consume information transmitted by the mainstream media, perceived as being more credible than other news sites.

Keywords: *Covid-19, news, consumption, students, (dis)information, authorities, mass communication.*

How to cite: Muresan, R., Salcudean, M., & Pintea, A. (2021). Information and News Consumption. Perception on the Communication of Authorities and Journalists During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Postmodern Openings, 12*(4), 104-123. https://doi.org/10.18662/po/12.4/363

1. Introduction

As is the case with most of the world, Romania has also been facing the Covid-19 pandemic starting mid-March 2020. Isolation and social distancing measures were taken relatively quickly, by stern and restrictive governmental ordinances, whose defiance results in criminal fines and prosecution. On March 16th, 2020, a presidential decree was issued (Romanian President, 2020), and a state of emergency was declared all over Romania, while up to now nine military ordinances have been adopted (Diaconu, 2020).

Alongside the media campaign focused on awareness and the adoption of responsible behaviour in terms of hygiene, health, and social encounters during the pandemic, which began in the second half of March, "stay at home/stay home" messages appear on all media channels, also emphasize by the Romanian president during his public addresses. Both the government and mainstream media have used influencers (artists, notorious journalists, young vloggers) to convince people to remain isolated at home. As usual in times of tension, the social networks have been invaded by hashtags, frames for profile photos, images that call explicitly or implicitly for isolation and social distancing. For example, Google shows 242 million results, in 0.36 seconds, only for the expression "staţi în casă" the Romanian equivalent for "stay at home")

The healthcare crisis that Romania is going through from the beginning of the pandemic has social and economic repercussions and is also reflected in the media communication (Forbes Romania, 2020), where the creation/production, reception/consumption, distribution of media content, public dialogue and emotional reactions on social media make up a heterogeneous picture, marked by inconsistencies, contrasts, and informational jamming. Information on the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic is mainly transmitted in two complementary ways: 1) vertically and unidirectionally, from top to bottom, from the authorities to the citizens and 2) horizontally and multi-directionally, from the media (mainstream and alternative) to the audience(s). This background of public information is a natural amplifier of communication and interaction in social media, where users share media content, create more content, comment, posture, etc.

It is worth mentioning that a few years in, Romania has seen that confidence in media "is heavily eroded," while the official institutions, regardless of political colour, either suborn partisan outlets or do not show transparency concerning independent media (Lupu, 2020, pp. 43-55). During the pandemic of Covid-19, this reality has generated even higher tensions

between journalists and the government, the result of political decisions that are considered to endanger freedom of expression. *The EFJ has already denounced, as has the OSCE, the recent emergency decree introducing excessive criminal penalties for "fake news" about the virus. We urge the Romanian government to open negotiations with the trade unions on all these issues* (European Federation of Journalists, 2010).

As well as the vast majority of EU countries, Romania also closed schools and universities, while education has continued at home, through the e-learning platforms (Pantazi, 2020; Peticilă, 2020), while the resumption of traditional classes is scheduled to take place in September.

This survey aims to examine how students, as a representative class for the young European generation, get information during the time of national and global crisis, which also generates adjacent media phenomena such as an increase in misinformation, lack of transparency in communicating with the public or over-abundance of information. It is worth mentioning that for young Romanians aged between 18 and 30 this is the first global and national crisis that affects them directly, not just because of school closure and the use of e-learning exclusively, but also by limiting certain fundamental rights, a situation they have not faced until now, as opposed to their parents' or grandparents' generations, who had such experiences during the communist dictatorship, before 1990.

2. Literature review

The emergence and spread of COVID-19 had the whole world face great challenges to find the suitable means to fight this pandemic, and in this context, special importance is placed on the access to accurate and credible information, which should help the public learn how to protect themselves properly, how to understand the dangers to which they expose themselves if they refuse to accept and to observe the prohibitions and restrictions placed by the authorities to prevent the spread of coronavirus. According to Garfin et al. (2020, p. 1) *during a health crisis, the public depends on the media to convey accurate and up-to-date information to make informed decisions regarding health-protective behaviours*.

Consequently, the media has a crucial role in the rendering of information by which to encourage the public to adopt the appropriate behaviour to protect the general health and, also, to make sure that the measures taken by authorities are communicated in a timely and transparent manner. In this context, authors like Lewison (2008, p. 241) emphasize concern about the fact that the reaction of the public to news about unusual healthcare threats is influenced by how the media presents these events.

According to R. Ma (2005, p. 242), *the manner in which a crisis is developed can be largely related to the agenda-setting role (selecting issues to report) and framing process (selecting specific aspects of issues to report) of mass mediate*.

A pandemic is a special type of crisis, which requires a special type of communication because it involves collective responsibility, and *information is essential to allay individual and collective fears, to prevent the circulation of uncontrollable rumours, and to stem generalized panic which could spread from one country or even continent to the next* (Saliou, 1994, p. 3). Saliou also highlights that the management of such a crisis "means mobilizing networks, particularly media networks, which must be assured of information in real time and kept in constant touch (Saliou, 1994, p. 3).

The role of the press is, according to Lee (2005, p. 259) *to provide accurate and timely information to affected members of society*, and this information must be transmitted without sensationalism and without disturbing images (Garfin et al., 2020, p. 2; Mayo-Cubero, 2020, p. 8). Specialized studies, emerging immediately following the outbreak of this crisis, draw attention to the need to promote responsible media consumption and to take into account how news reports can affect the parties involved (Wen et al., 2020, p. 4).

The enormous amount of information related to COVID-19 and the fact that this information is many times ambiguous or vague, in combination with *an invisible threat, such as the virus* (Garfin et al., 2020, p. 2) may induce an escalation of feelings such as fear and uncertainty and, consequently, a proliferation of rumours and misleading or false information. Since 2005, Dahlgren has observed *the erosion of the distinction between journalism and non-journalism* and *the cacophony that emerges with this media abundance and so many political actors and mediators*. Even more so, in times of crisis, information anomia is amplified. World Health Organization (2020) also emphasized this danger – in a report published in April 2020 they used the term "infodemic" to describe *an over-abundance of information - some accurate and some Not - that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it*.

Another aspect to be mentioned, especially in times of crisis, is lack of confidence in the transparency shown by the authorities (experts and politicians) whose traditional communication methods are questioned, as the public expects to receive much more precise information more quickly, to *increase the acceptance of potential outcomes* (Wendling et al., 2013, p. 9). *When people are suffering the impact of an event, but also at the same time placed in the active role of information sharing, they feel empowered and involved in the emergency response. They are moving from passive observers or victims to becoming actors. This situation*

increases their ownership of the situation and potential acceptance of outcomes, as they feel that they can be part of the solution (Wendling et al., 2013, p. 9).

The Internet and social media, in particular, contribute significantly to the distribution and proliferation of rumours, false or misleading information (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019, p. 6) or are used deliberately to cause panic and confusion (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). This work can be even more dangerous when, as some researchers found, social media audience increases in periods of crisis, Internet users preferring interactive to the static information, and a consequence of this manifestation is an increased appreciation for information originating from other users (Austin et al., 2012, p. 190; Procopio & Procopio, 2007, p. 77). There are overlaps, interferences, mutual takeovers of digital content between traditional media and social media, journalists referring to social networks as an alternative resource-rich in content relevant to the audience(s) (Jukes et al., 2010; Varona-Aramburu & Sánchez-Muñoz, 2016).

An essential detail in the field of health information is related to the source of such information and, especially, the credibility of the sources or the confidence of the public in that source, as a factor that influences how the soundness of used arguments and the persuasive character of the information transmitted are perceived. The factors that contribute to increasing the credibility of sources include, according to Berry et al. (2007, p. 37) *expertise, competence, and objectivity; in general, highly credible sources, such as experts, are more persuasive than less credible sources*. In getting informed, the public would have to rely mainly on information obtained from authorized sources in the field, scientists, or representatives of international organizations. *Because most new threats to health will themselves be international* (Lewison, 2008, p. 241), the role of international organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO), which exercised an important influence in reporting previous health crises such as SARS in 2003, or the European Commission (EC), in the proper communication of the measures taken is more and more important, and their contribution to the public having faith that things are kept under control is considerable. Equally, the public needs to show responsible behaviour concerning media consumption, i.e. *to avoid speculative stories and limit repetitious exposure to media stories that provide little new information* (Garfin et al., 2020, p. 2).

One aspect which is particularly relevant in times of crisis, like the one that mankind is experiencing at the moment, is the danger of making insufficiently consolidated democracies more vulnerable (Robins-Early, 2020; Totok, 2020), through excessive use of power by the authorities, especially if the government has authoritarian tendencies (Clark & Marchi,

2017; McGill, 2020), which makes the role of the mass media and the proactive social media even more important (Chadwick, 2013; Benett et al., 2018). Moreover, studying the interference of communication in the public sphere in Spain during a crisis, Mayo-Cubero makes a pertinent observation that *public administration has prioritized the protection of ITS own image over Citizens' right to information by means of practices such as date concealment, information manipulation and/or the use of crises for political purposes* (2017, p. 234; 2020, p. 3).

Media researchers have addressed in recent years both the news media consumption habits of young people and their effects on the formation of participatory democratic behaviours (York & Scholl, 2015; Banaji et al., 2015; Madden et al., 2017; Bergström et al., 2018), as well as the production of media content by young people and the practice of citizen journalism, as a proactive involvement in the community (Deuze et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2017).

Young people consume the information they receive mostly in their social network feeds (Madden et al., 2017; Bergström et al., 2018). In Romania, The Centre for Independent Journalism Romania has undertaken recently quantitative research about the youth media consumption, and one of the conclusions refers to *the small role played by traditional media (television, radio, printed publications) in shaping the youth media consumption* (Centre for Independent Journalism, 2019, p. 93).

3. Methodology

This study aims to analyse how students are informed during a national and global crisis, which also generates adjacent media phenomena such as an increase in misinformation, lack of transparency in communicating with the public or over-abundance of information.

A general prerequisite of our research is that "infodemia" affects all people in isolation, including youth, experts drawing attention to the risks of misinformation like confusion, increased levels of panic, amplified hatred speech (Bogdan, 2020; Thomas, 2020).

A particular prerequisite of our research starts from the youths' daily information habits; in times of crisis, students, as an educated group within the young population, keep informed continuously, and information reaches them mostly employing SNSs. A further particular prerequisite refers to the fact that students are aware of the risks of misinformation, a phenomenon which is present both in the mass media and social media.

Using this research, we intended to find answers to the following research questions:

- How and where do students get information during a crisis?
- What types of media content do students prefer?
- How do they relate to the information relayed by the authorities or by the journalists?
- To what extent are they aware of the phenomenon of misinformation?
- How do they protect themselves from the false information that has invaded social networks?

This is a quantitative survey, in which we used a quantitative method of data collection and analysis, namely a poll based on a self-applied questionnaire. The questionnaire contains two types of close-ended questions: multiple selection and open questions and combines questions with single answers with those which have multiple possible types of responses.

Participating in this survey have been 426 students of the "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu, a Romanian public university, where 14 162 students attend the various specializations of the nine departments.

Participants have been selected using the convenience sampling method, a questionnaire being distributed to students by the teaching staff who are class tutors.

The participants are students of the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu attending undergraduate and master's degree courses, from the first to the final years in school. Their age range is 18 to 30, and their studies cover diverse subjects within the nine departments: journalism, public relations, sociology, law, medicine, engineering, physical education, literature, psychology, political science, theology, etc.

Table 1. Distribution by gender
Source: Authors' own conception

The distribution of responses by gender		
Female	294	69%
Male	132	31%
Total	426	100%

The data collection tool used for this research was a questionnaire, conducted based on the researchers' experience. Two experts in the field have reviewed the questions in the questionnaire and have verified the

validity and clarity thereof. Following this assessment, 14 questions have resulted.

By applying the questionnaire, data has been collected as relating to objective aspects, such as channels and sources of information regularly used by students, time spent informing, as well as subjective aspects - opinions and attitudes of the participants about the types of messages they prefer, the credibility of various information sources and platforms. The questionnaire was applied between 30.03 - 13.04. 2020.

4. Results

Asked how much time they spend daily informing about the coronavirus pandemic and its social, political, and economic implications, more than half of the respondents (57.5%) answered that they allocate less than an hour a day to this activity. 34.5% of students spend between an hour and three hours each day informing themselves about this pandemic, while only 5.2% allocated over 3 hours to this activity.

67.4% of the surveyed students believe that their level of information about the development, dissemination, risks, and consequences of the pandemic is high and very high, while nearly 30% (29.6%) believe that their level of information is moderate. A very small percentage, only 2.3% of the respondents, consider their level of information to be low or very low.

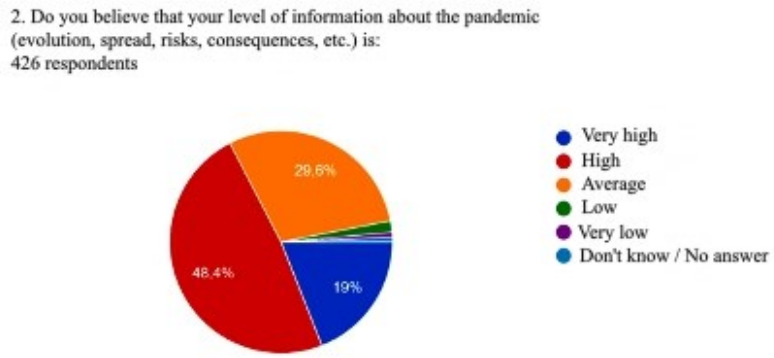


Fig. 1. How students appreciate their level of information about the COVID-19 pandemic
Source: Authors' own conception

Students have a variety of media channels at hand, that they can access to get information about the pandemic and the implications thereof, and the results of the survey indicate the fact that they use many sources to

get the information they consider important. Of significant importance among these channels are the websites of official institutions, such as those of some national ministries (Health, Interior, Foreign Affairs, etc.) or those of some international organizations such as WHO, which are accessed by 65.7 % of respondents and rank second in the students' preference after the mass-media (news websites, television, radio) used when the students seek information about the crisis. Ranking third in the students' preference are social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, accessed by 37.3% of students to obtain information about the pandemic, while 30% of the students prefer to access applications or interactive maps updated constantly to obtain information.



Fig. 2. Sites of official institutions such as the Ministry of Health, preferred by the students
Source: Ministry of Health website screenshot taken in 2020

When asked what sources of online information they use to keep up to date on the pandemic, 69.7% of the surveyed students have responded that they preferred the news sites of local TV stations, followed by Romanian news sites, accessed by 33.8% of the students, and foreign news sites (such as BBC, CNN, Guardian, etc.), accessed by 31%.

When asked about information on the pandemic that is received via the social networks 39.7% of respondents believe that it is of moderate relevance, while 34.1% consider that is of little to no relevance. 23.9% of the

surveyed students consider that the information about the pandemic coming from social media is relevant or very relevant to them.

Regarding the types of messages that help them feel well and correctly informed about the pandemic and its implications, 70.7% of Romanian students have opted for data, figures, and accurate facts; 66.2% rely on information received from authorities and 46 % on information, opinions, and estimates from experts. TV news is preferred by 17.8% of respondents. Having in mind that television remains the most used media channel in Romania and the information flows from the authorities to the public mainly via this channel, the answers students provided to this question confirm their orientation towards the mainstream media in times of crisis. A fact worth mentioning is this: Digi24, considered the most balanced TV channel in terms of broadcasting information, but with smaller audiences than the very politicized television stations in Romania, has seen an increase in viewership during the Covid-19 pandemic, about the announcements made by the authorities (Obae, 2020). The least consumed media messages by students are those "from various news websites" - 8.7%, messages from people they trust - 7.3%, posts which confirm/ do not contradict what they already know about this topic - 5.6%, messages from TV guests, other than experts - 2.8%.

Table 2. Students' preferences regarding the types of messages about the pandemic that helps them keep informed
Source: Authors' own conception

Types of messages preferred by students		
Press articles from various websites	37	8.7%
Data, figures, accurate facts	301	70.7%
Information from the authorities	282	66.2%
Information, opinions, estimates from experts	196	46%
TV guests, other than experts	12	2.8%
Messages distributed by people they trust	31	7.3%
Posts that confirm/do not contradict what they already know about this topic	24	5.6%
TV news	76	17.8%
Don't know/ No answer	13	3.1%

Asked in what form they prefer to be provided with information about the pandemic, 65.7% of the students answered that they preferred "multimedia type digital content: videos, infographics, animations" – 44.8%, and photos & images - 20.9%. It is already known that for digital natives

(Williams et al., 2010) visual communication is essential, in both senses: both when consumed, and when produced. Among the classic journalistic genres, news (TV, radio, online publications) rank first in the order of students' preferences (43.4%), followed by reports - 35.9%, documentation - 34.7% of complex press reports - 29.1% and interviews - 27.9%. A very small percentage of respondents (0.4%) mentioned studies and scientific data among their preferences.

Questions 8 and 9, which should be mirrored, watch the two main flows of information: unidirectional, from the authorities to the public, and multidirectional among various actors that are continuous, interfering, reverberating and impossible to control: mass-media, alternative media, social media, various audiences (people, organizations), virtual entities who produce and distribute content with the potential for disinformation and misinformation.

Table 3. Students' preferences for various types of media content
Source: Authors' own conception

Media contents preferred by students		
Complex press reports	124	29.1%
Digital multimedia content such as videos, infographics, animations	191	44.8%
Documentation	148	34.7%
Photos or images	89	20.9%
Interviews	119	27.9%
Reports	153	35.9%
News or brief information (TV, Radio, online publications)	185	43.4 &
Other (studies or scientific data)	2	0.4%
Don't know/No answer	11	2.6%

Regarding communication/information from authorities, a cumulative percentage of 54% of the students consider it transparent (46.7%) and very transparent (7.3%). However, almost half of respondents (41.6 %) believe the Romanian authorities communicate with little (30.8%) or no transparency (10.8%). This percentage sits 12% less than the cumulated approval rate.

Students see themselves similarly about the media. When asked how they consider that Romanian journalists provide information during the crisis caused by the pandemic with the new coronavirus, 67.6% of students have opted for "both professional and unprofessional", while only 8.2%

believe that journalists provide information in a very professional manner. Out of the total number of respondents, 19.3% think that journalists show little (9.9%) or no professionalism at all (9.4%) when informing the public. From the comparative interpretation of responses to questions 8 and 9, the extra confidence of the students is focused on the authorities, rather than on journalists, whose communication is also perceived as relatively not trustworthy.

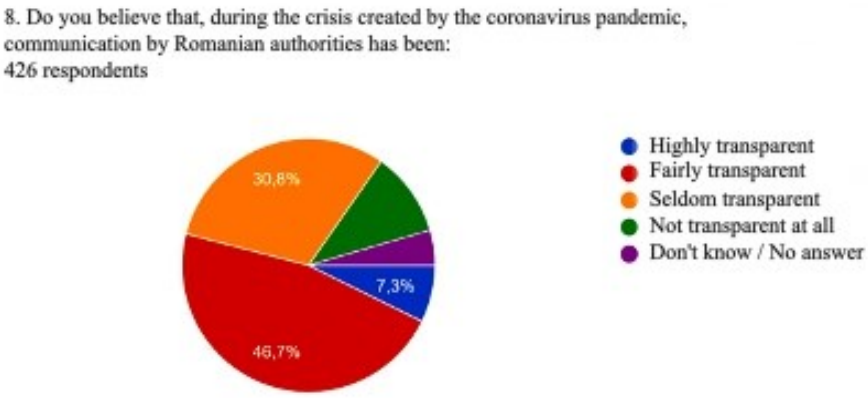


Fig. 3. How youths appreciate information transmitted by authorities
Source: Authors' own conception

When asked whom they trust more for public communication about the pandemic with the new coronavirus and its implications, 61% of respondents have placed their confidence in the Romanian authorities. At quite a large distance are those who say they don't trust either the state or other sources (21%), followed immediately (18%) by those who say that they trust only the sources that they can reach by themselves. Only 11.3% (48 of 426 respondents) have said that they trust in what that journalists report. The remaining percentage is divided between those who do not know/provide no answer and those who nominated other sources considered reliable: notification from the Ministry of Health, communication from other countries, journalism of quality and official sources, or people who work directly with them (1% each).

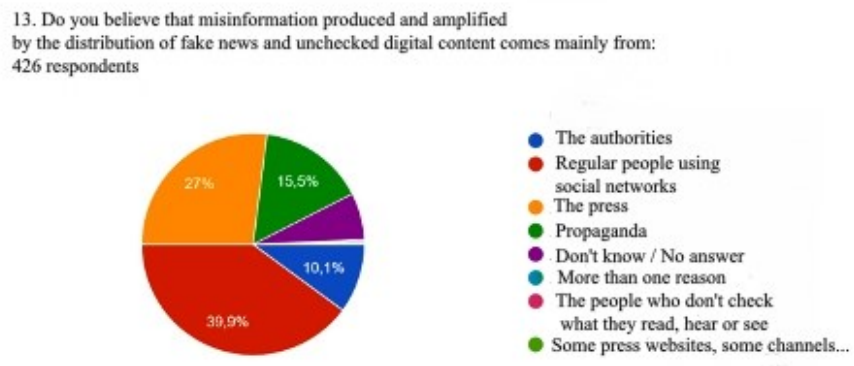
65.3% of the surveyed students say they prefer that the information about pandemic with the new coronavirus and its implications should be communicated through the media objectively (in an impartial, unbiased,

neutral manner, with accurate data and facts), while 22.5% want both objective and subjective information alike (information which should involve interpretations, positioning, comments, emotions, and life stories). 8% of respondents prefer only subjective information, and the rest did not know or did not answer.

The level of misinformation during the crisis generated by the pandemic with the new coronavirus is considered moderate by 34.7% and great by 33.1% of the respondents, while 22.1% of participants say that the level of misinformation is very high. As a result, over half of the respondents have an acute feeling that there is plenty of misinformation and fake news spreading, which stands proof that in such moments of unprecedented crisis a sense of responsibility should be very well articulated, especially in a context where information plays a main role.

When asked whom they believe relays most misinformation produced and amplified by distributing fake news and unchecked digital content, 39.9% of the students said that this is due to people accustomed to using social networks, and 27% assign misinformation to the press. Propaganda is considered the cause of misinformation by 15.5% of respondents, and 10.1% say that the authorities are to blame for misinformation.

Fig. 4. Who do students believe distributes fake news and unchecked digital content?
Source: Authors' own conception



To make a projection of what makes a journalist credible, students participating in the survey have been asked to complete the statement: "To be credible, journalists would have to..."

Thus, 36.6% of respondents believe that journalists would have to communicate "inconvenient truths" to be credible. A close position (31.5%) is held by students who believe that journalists would have to filter information before making it public, followed by the 19.5% who believe that journalists, to be credible, must observe and interpret reality. 10% of respondents believe that journalists need to say what the authorities don't tell and 8% believe that they need to stir emotion, by promoting unique life stories.

5. Limits and Discussions

The phenomenon of public communication and of informing citizens, in general, and the youth in particular, at the time of a crisis of global and national impact, shows some specific features, such as deepening tensions between mainstream media and alternative media, on the one hand, and authorities on the other hand, while the government may tend to exceed its power, during a state of emergency. Habits of media consumption are changing in times of crisis with major social repercussions, which is reflected both in the offer (topic diversification, overabundance of information, excess of breaking news) and the demand (increased online connection time for social interaction and overexposure to mainstream media). Moreover, a very recent study shows how much the consumption of broadcast information increased during this humanitarian crisis (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). A significant occurrence in the context of the coronavirus pandemic is the reservation with which students see social media, which they commonly use daily otherwise (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018).

Almost 70% of the students responding to this research believe that they have a high and very high level of information, although over half of respondents say that they allocate less than one hour per day to inform themselves about the pandemic of Covid19 and its socio-political implications.

According to previous studies (Bachmann et al., 2010, p. 43) *it is well established that younger people tend to acquire information via digital media rather than through more traditional channels", for the young public "new media seem to gratify their needs in a better way, thereby gradually taking over functions of the traditional media* (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2010, p. 337), the media consumption of young people being oriented towards new media (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p. 156).

Because the time was short and we wanted to capture the habits of media consumption expressed by Romanian students during the crisis generated by the pandemic of coronavirus, in Romania, this research was limited to a single public university. An extension of the study to the

national or even EU level should make it even more relevant and would create the possibility of comparing results.

6. Conclusions

Both in Romania and other countries of the world, the mass media has seen a decline of authority and credibility in the last two decades (Carlson, 2017). However, responsible journalism plays a vital role in any democracy in times of crisis. From the responses received, we noticed that young people continue to consume information from the mainstream media, especially in tense contexts, equalling professional journalism with 1) investigations, 2) critical relation to the authorities, and 3) impartial filtering of relevant information for citizens, a position that independent and professional media must keep.

The results confirm the findings of a study on the preferences of the public regarding the traditional or social media in times of crisis (Austin et al., 2012, p. 188; Casero-Ripollés, 2020), which showed that in such a situation, main traditional media channels are used to get information, as they are perceived by the public as being more credible than social media, while the latter is preferred for *insider information and checking in with family/friend*. In the context of the importance of understanding the habits of consumption, in particular media consumption, *the continued relevance of traditional media, and the links between everyday media consumption and wider social contexts* was also noticed by Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham (2007, p. 185).

During the crisis triggered by the pandemic of Covid-19, students tend to give more credit to the authorities, also because this type of information – official, centralized, controlled, strategic and coherent -, makes use of symbolic and convincing public voices: senior officials (the president, prime minister, and other top tier politicians), using official channels (websites of public institutions, important TV stations). Communication from authorities to citizens is unidirectional, continuous, and coherent and appears more credible than what transpires from the media which, in this day and age, is particularly heterogeneous, infused the fake news, different approaches, sensationalism, and controversial opinions. However, students are circumspect regarding the transparency of official communication, which shows that they are willing to question the content they consume. This is apparent as over half of them admit that the level of misinformation during the pandemic with Covid-19 is high and very high.

Students surveyed in the research prefer balanced journalism, based on facts and data, and transmitted in "visual friendly" formats, easily accessible to them.

Acknowledgements

Project financed by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu & Hasso Plattner Foundation research grants LBUS-IRG-2020-06. The authors do not have a conflict of interest.

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