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Artículos científicos

Comunicación política y gestión de crisis ante la pandemia del covid-19

***Political communication and crisis management in the face of the covid-19
pandemic***

Comunicação política e gestão de crise face à pandemia de covid-19

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Resumen

Esta investigación describe cuáles son las expectativas de la comunicación política después de la pandemia. Para ello, se considera la información del Global Communication Report (2020-2021) para analizar cuáles son las fortalezas y debilidades de la comunicación en América Latina, desde los retos éticos hasta la gestión de crisis ante el covid-19. El estudio considera una metodología cuantitativa, con base en una encuesta a 1683 profesionales de la comunicación de 20 países de Sudamérica, Norteamérica, Centroamérica y el Caribe. En sus resultados, 92 % consideró que la comunicación fue fundamental para salir adelante ante la pandemia. Asimismo, se evidencia que 37.5 % de las empresas comunicativas no estaban preparadas para una crisis. Por último, 38.6 % considera que el *big data* es el mayor reto para la comunicación postcovid.

Palabras clave: comunicación política, ética, redes sociales.



Abstract

This research describes what are the expectations of political communication after the pandemic. To do this, the information from the Global Communication Report (2020-2021) is considered to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of communication in Latin America, from ethical challenges to crisis management in the face of covid-19. The study considers a quantitative methodology, based on a survey of 1,683 communication professionals from 20 countries in South America, North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. In their results, 92% considered that communication was essential to get ahead in the face of the pandemic. Likewise, it is evident that 37.5% of the communicative companies were not prepared for a crisis. Finally, 38.6% consider that big data is the greatest challenge for post-covid communication.

Keywords: political communication, ethics, social networks.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa descreve quais são as expectativas da comunicação política após a pandemia. Para isso, são consideradas as informações do Relatório Global de Comunicação (2020-2021) para analisar os pontos fortes e fracos da comunicação na América Latina, desde os desafios éticos até o gerenciamento de crises diante da covid-19. O estudo considera uma metodologia quantitativa, com base em uma pesquisa com 1.683 profissionais de comunicação de 20 países da América do Sul, América do Norte, América Central e Caribe. Em seus resultados, 92% consideraram que a comunicação era essencial para avançar no enfrentamento da pandemia. Da mesma forma, é evidente que 37,5% das empresas comunicativas não estavam preparadas para uma crise. Por fim, 38,6% consideram que big data é o maior desafio para a comunicação pós-covid.

Palavras-chave: comunicação política, ética, redes sociais.

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Introduction

Political communication originated in the United States and continues to be the space where the largest number of voter investigations are carried out. His studies contribute to understanding what is the field to explore about informational and cultural consumption. The way messages are appropriated constitutes a form of media domination and control, so any evidence of how communicators and the audience think is important.

In this sense, this research focuses on questioning the role of the media during the pandemic: what was its performance and how could it be improved by informing society. Indeed, since March 11, 2020 —when the World Health Organization declared the state of a pandemic by Sars-CoV-2— people had to shelter in their homes. It was impossible to contain the information that spread through all the mass media: social networks, web pages, instant messages, television, radio, podcasts and others.

Therefore, and trying to find a diagnosis of how political communication was built and developed during the pandemic, an attempt has been made to analyze the development of strategic communication, public relations, and the ethical challenges of the media and journalists, as well as how to show the challenges in technological and professional matters based on the Global Communication Report (GCR) (2021), in which data is collected that allows analyzing this phenomenon, proposing solutions and building ethical proposals to reduce misinformation.

In this sense, Hauer and Sood (2021), concerned about the misinformation produced during the pandemic in the media and social networks, argue that it is necessary to promote prevention in these events of general interest. To do this, they reviewed social networks and found that disinformation produces fear and mistrust.

Based on this finding, the GCR (2021) was designed with 1059 questionnaires applied to men and women (20% and 80%, respectively) that coincide with Heuer and Sood (2021), since in the face of anguish, fear and negative feelings linked to the news of the pandemic, the interviewees chose to avoid information.

This shows that the role of the media is decisive in the behavior of the subjects, because in the face of distrust, citizens avoid information, which generates an inadequate adaptation to the problem. Hauer and Sood (2021) found that the media should avoid spreading rumors and have reliable sources because people's lives depend on that. For this reason, it is necessary to develop measures to counteract the evasion of information, since



whoever avoids informing himself can relax his prevention measures and, consequently, be infected.

Now, it is based on the hypothesis that the mass media are in a process of transition within political communication because now politicians do not use newspapers or television as traditional media, but through social networks. They build a different narrative. In this sense, the immediacy of his speeches may be above the public interest, serve personal interests or simply be false. In fact, we are also facing an ethical dilemma for communicators, who can spread information in the digital ecosystem without corroborating the sources.

Dimitrova and Matthes (2018) argue that, globally, an estimated 2.62 billion people use social media daily, informing themselves about political events through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and others. platforms, hence any message propagated by politicians eventually reaches the masses. In this way, many politicians have become digital activists or influencers, such as Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador, who has more than 2 million followers on Twitter in a country where only 30% have access to cell phones, although he has managed to capture the attention of young people and all the leaders of this country. Other examples are the presidents of Mexico (Andrés Manuel López Obrador), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro) and Venezuela (Nicolás Maduro), who have approximately 8 million, 6 million and 4 million followers on social media, respectively (García, 29 January). February 2021).

With this scenario, where the political communication of the rulers had a fundamental weight in the prevention of the pandemic, as well as in the behavior of citizens towards measures against contagion, the analysis of this research is presented. The first section describes the problem of the information spread, especially in social networks that displaced traditional media; the second describes the methodology followed by the Global Communication Report (2021) study to report its findings, and the last examines the results to propose compensation mechanisms around political communication and the dissemination of information in the face of a crisis such as that generated by covid-19 in Mexico and in the world.

The problem of online information

During the pandemic, the media found themselves exposed to their own mistakes. It became evident, for example, that many journalists, the media, public relations specialists, and communication specialists were not prepared to report accurately. Neither politicians nor the mass media in their online or digital version knew how to eliminate fake news.

Multiple investigations have been published on this subject that corroborate that during the pandemic the information disseminated did not have the best reliable source. Barcelós et al. (2021) highlight in their study carried out in Brazil that from a sample corresponding to 329 false news related to covid-19 on the sites of the Ministry of Health and the Globo Corporation (main media chain in that country) news that had as its objective a political position, that is, to deceive the population.

The most frequent thematic categories were politics (for example, counterfeiting of the covid-19 vaccine by the rulers, 20.1%), epidemiology and statistics (proportion of cases and deaths, 19.5%) and prevention (16.1%). According to Google Trends, searches in which terms contained in fake news were used increased 34.3% (Barcelos, *et. al.*, 2021, p. 4).

Images and videos circulated in Brazil that misinformed through WhatsApp and Facebook about the exponential growth of infections, which exceeded 600,000 deaths from this cause (EFE, October 29, 2021).

Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2020) highlight that in the face of the pandemic and the growing wave of deaths around the world, governments immediately planned and applied political communication strategies to explain the measures that should be taken to contain the health crisis, such as the closure of schools, work centers and the lack of support for a large mass of citizens on the brink of misery.

Añel and Rodríguez (2020) argue that, in the case of Spain, the official media tried to minimize the human tragedy, which resulted in a large number of deaths from covid-19, while critical media or those outside the government they had a more critical narrative about the news that spread. In this context, politicians opted for emotional discourse, telling stories of sadness and outrage, but little reliable information. In their study on communication during the pandemic in Spain, Añel and Rodríguez (2020) acknowledge that there was a lack of information control, the absence of a crisis plan and even ethics when reporting.

However, it should be noted that social networks are currently one of the most used resources for sharing information, which —as evidenced during the most critical stages of the pandemic— constitutes a danger because each politician heeded their criteria to go viral. data on the dead and on alert calls in the different cities (Galarza-Molina and Muñiz, 2021).

An example of misinformation in times of pandemic is the case of Italy, where the media did not disclose the severity of the disease and the government did not recommend more aggressive preventive measures to contain it, hence a large number of deaths. The study conducted by Vai et al. (2021) shows that of the 2,223 people who were surveyed about the perception of the pandemic, the majority recognized that they did not give it importance and even considered the distancing measures useless. For this reason, and as can be inferred, receiving information from the government should be a citizen demand regulated in a constitutional norm.

Another study called Politics, polarization & (PPP) (2021), carried out in the United States on the role of the mass media in the news broadcast during the pandemic, highlights that during the health crisis a process of discursive polarization was built in the media. In this regard, 53% of those interviewed stated that the division of opinions among the media was also polarized after the elections in which Trump lost and the member of the Democratic Party, Joe Biden (current US president), won.

Likewise, the PPP (2021) reports that of the North American citizens surveyed, 72 % consider that racism and the narrative against immigrants intensified during the pandemic and predict that it will continue like this. With the change in government —where Donald Trump had a marked activism against health institutions disobeying advice on wearing face masks and requiring more vaccines for Americans—, 85% of those surveyed said that Trump's defeat and the change in the administration would clean up the lost global reputation.

The terrible management of Trump, who refused to declare a national alarm and to promote more protection for Americans, showed that political communication during the crisis of the covid-19 pandemic was decisive. His supporters dwindled because Trump, as president of the world's most powerful country, downplayed the seriousness of the issue. Instead, he simply banned travelers from Wuhan from entering the country while claiming that the coronavirus was no more dangerous than a seasonal flu. Although Trump declared a national state of emergency and allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to the fight against covid-19, his decision was made too late. He tried to gain popularity with his Twitter attacks on the Chinese, but his sympathies dwindled. Barragán (January 9, 2021) maintains that



although Trump had 52 million followers on Twitter, this also made his mistakes more visible. In short, he was a political weapon with strong repercussions on his lazy speech in the face of the pandemic.

Research methodology

This research work on political communication and crisis management after the covid-19 pandemic was based on the study carried out in 20 countries by the global media monitor Global Communication Report (2021), which considered 1,850 questionnaires applied to professionals of the communication. However, it should be noted that only the sample of 1,683 was considered valid, since the other questionnaires were discarded due to perceived inconsistencies. Likewise, several professors, specialists and professionals of political communication, organizations and professionals linked to the field of the different associations were invited. However, due to the pandemic, the discussion could not be carried out in person, so the information contained in the Stata program is still being analyzed to make it known in detail.

This global communication outlook report (final questionnaire) was activated during May, June and July 2020 and the final report was used for this manuscript, i.e. not the full database due to having personal details from institutions and public and private organizations that have considered it an inconvenience to spread all the information.

Likewise, it should be noted that to carry out this study with a multinational scope, there was a collaboration network between communicators and universities belonging to 26 prestigious universities in the world. In addition, the report on communication at the global level has been carried out every year since 2014. However, the particularity of this study during the pandemic allowed us to understand the necessary discussion about the role of the mass media, the discourses that spread and the role of politicians in the information that is disseminated.

In this sense, the Latin American Monitor of Strategic Communication that participated in the study of Global Communication Report (2021) states that studies on political communication have been local and focused mainly on the United States, for which a broader vision is required. and comparison of other countries that have different electoral systems and a different sociocultural context.



In this case, the GCR study (2021) considered 20 Latin American countries to analyze the variables and coincidences between the different territories due to the fact that an overestimation of the positive influences of social networks usually occurs without a metric or analysis.

The consumption of information in the face of an event that is not controlled requires careful informative treatment, adhering to ethical standards. The result of public policies or actions undertaken to solve the crisis in the government due to a health problem is determined by the way in which political communication is developed: what is communicated and how it is communicated. In this regard, Hauer and Sood (2021) state that it is preferable for the government to keep information so as not to alarm the population because a greater problem may occur: anxiety, depression, economic or political crisis in the face of an event of this nature. In fact, according to McDonnell et al. (2012), in the face of the crisis of an uncontrolled event, panic buying can occur. Therefore, information is one of the main assets of governance and political legitimacy.

Even so, what should be reported is about the containment measures and ways to prevent contagion in order to deal with such a devastating disease in the best way. For example, in 2014 there was an Ebola outbreak in the United States that also caused chaos in public health, but it was controlled through communication management. That same year, in Africa, more than 10,000 people died from this disease, but preventive measures were extended and minute-by-minute information made it possible to control, above all, the population's fear of contracting it.

Having explained the above, the results of this study are shown below, which will allow us to understand the value of government information, the role of the media and the contemporary vision of social networks as information mechanisms.

Discussion

According to the analysis obtained from the GCR (2021), the phenomenon of fake news increased during the pandemic and the role of the media and national governments was greatly questioned because citizens minimized the risk and exposed themselves to the infections. Saint Michael et al. (2022) point out that fake news constitutes a risk for democracy and the development of society, while Moreno et al. (2020) recognizes the impact that fake news has on the reputation and credibility of organizations.



Indeed, disinformation produced fear and distrust in the traditional media. Jiménez (July 18, 2021) highlights that the post-Covid feeling is characterized by uncertainty, interdependence and volatility in society, which is also producing isolation, mistrust and individualism.

This behavioral phenomenon manifested in people's feelings and attitudes, produced by the media and social networks, is very interesting to be explained and analyzed. For this reason, communication professionals and specialists who agreed on the seriousness of this event were interviewed.

Figure 1 shows the profile of the interviewees, all linked to communication, public relations and mass media offices. As can be seen, the field of communication has a marked professionalization process, since at least 50% have bachelor's degrees and 43% have master's degrees.

Table 1. *Communicators profile*

Comunicadores entrevistados	Porcentaje	Educación	Porcentaje
Mujer	67.2	Doctorado	4.4
Hombre	32.8	Maestría	43.1
Internacional	15.5	Licenciatura	50
Nacional	52.7	Sin titulación	2.6
Otra	26.3		

Source: Own elaboration with data from the GCR (2021)

The study had an international representativeness, since 68% corresponded to South America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela; 19% to Central America and the Caribbean (Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic), while 11.4% of those interviewed had North America (Mexico and Puerto Rico) as their residence.

Now, of the 519 journalists, media specialists and communication managers in public relations who were interviewed worldwide (GCR, 2021), 43% consider that there will be an increase in false news and biased information in the mass media. and on social media.

Likewise, 73% of those surveyed expressed the risk of misinformation during the pandemic as a credibility problem for institutions, where conspiracy theories even proliferated, further diminishing the credibility of politicians, governors and legislators, as well as of the mass media and social networks.

All this, logically, caused the information companies to suffer a collapse in their activities (GCR, 2021). For example, in Chile, Venezuela and Peru, the pandemic caused serious damage to their economies, for which many newspapers or media outlets stopped working.

Dávalos López (2021) argues that in order to guarantee trust in the face of a crisis such as that generated by the pandemic, it is necessary for the media to promote truthful and transparent information. Only in this way will they be able to retain the audience they have. In addition, efficient actions in crisis management must be promoted, such as “guiding the public to prepare, participate in its minimization and prevention; as well as informing the population of unknown risks in order to promote a perception according to needs” (Dávalos López, 2021, p. 6).

In the case of Mexico and the United States, during 2020 and 2021, respectively, electoral campaigns were developed that had a cybernaut electorate due to the pandemic. And before, in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil managed to monopolize a large group of citizens who used social networks and instant messages to spread the candidate's promises. During his campaign, Bolsonaro managed to have more than 8 million followers who retweeted and shared his messages (Galarraga, October 25, 2018).

The results obtained from the research applied by the interdisciplinary group of communicators gathered in the Latin American Communication Monitor (LACM) (2021). (which integrates several professors, researchers and communicators from Mexican universities) makes it possible to understand the role of the media after the pandemic. However, for this research work, only the public version was accessed due to which the complete report is still under analysis and investigation.

In principle, through social networks and digital communication, a symmetrical communication process was built between the rulers and the ruled, since now citizens can disclose information about the lack of public services or request help directly from the rulers without need for intermediaries.

Even so, there are still ethical challenges around the role of the media and communication professionals. Fighting or supporting conspiracy theories and fake news,

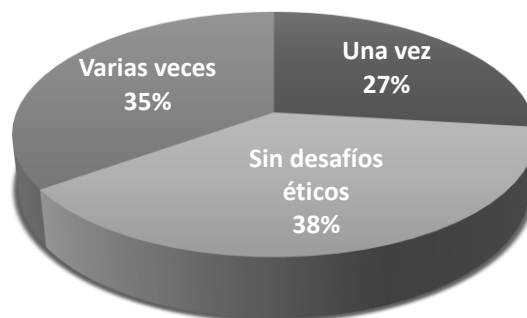


intentionally or randomly, impacts global health issues as well as the economic development of individual communities and organizations. In the GCR study (2021), 47% of communication professionals reported having had some ethical dilemma when reporting during the pandemic.

In integrity management, they use the ethical guidelines of their organizations in 88% and personal values in 89%, which are the preferred resources. Figure 2 shows that in ethical issues, 35% reported that they had had this type of challenge several times.

Figure 2. *Ethical challenges in the pandemic*

DESAFÍOS ÉTICOS EN LA PANDEMIA



Source: Own elaboration with data from the GCR (2021)

Now, if we consider all the Latin American countries regarding the ethical challenges they faced during the pandemic, there are significant differences between the regions that need to be noted. In Puerto Rico, 55.9% declared that they had never had an ethical challenge, followed by Venezuela with 53.7%, Panama with 52.4%, Colombia with 51.3%, Mexico with 40%, and El Salvador with 24.5% (GCR, 2021). This is due, in part, to the fact that the majority of communication professionals (journalists, managers, university professors and digital journalists) stated that they received ethical training in their university studies.

Díaz (2013) recognizes that ethics studies are present in Europe, where there is even a deontological consideration. In this sense, following the GCR (2021), 55.4% received ethical training at the university, 21.3% had assistance or received ethical training in their organization or through a professional, and 13.5% followed the institutional rules of the company and the job training. Only 9.8% declared that they did not receive training or classes on communication ethics (GCR, 2021).

This data is relevant when considering that there is a serious crisis in the media due to the fake news that is spread, as well as the misrepresentation of the information in the news channels. Even so, work must be done to monitor the rules so that false information that affects or harms society is not spread.

Regarding the challenges facing communication after the pandemic, the GCR survey (2021) highlights the following points: 39.4% indicated that digital evolution, social networks and the Web are the future of communication, while 36.8% He pointed out that big data and data mining are the challenges faced by any professional who seeks to stand out in this field. Likewise, 34.9% answered that the challenge is the creation of new content (more visual, more attractive and that attracts the attention of netizens), while 32.4% was inclined to generate communicative products that could be interactive and participatory with society. In addition, it should be noted that during the health pandemic and in the face of the crisis suffered by the media, many newsrooms promoted a cooperative attitude with their clients to guarantee greater confidence in the news broadcast. Monitoring of published information was crucial.

García-Avilés (2021) highlights that during the pandemic, Spanish journalists had to promote managerial attitudes and the search for trust among collaborators increased to guarantee that the published information was reliable. But there was also a kind of democratization of political communication because the public agenda is no longer solely in the hands of a communication group or mass media. Now it is practically impossible to control the agenda of topics that are presented on social networks immediately and promptly.

Conclusions

As can be seen in the results obtained, the information disseminated by the Government on any subject of public interest can generate a favorable or unfavorable public opinion, but also build emotional actions such as fear, anguish, evasion of reality and other behaviors that lead to citizens to get more information or to get rid of everything. Regarding political communication, informing citizens is a duty of the Government because it guarantees legitimacy and credibility.

During the covid-19 pandemic, the disinformation generated by populist governments such as that of Trump in the United States or that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (which minimized the seriousness of the problem) indirectly caused citizens to relax prevention measures and more deaths will occur. Therefore, it should be noted that false beliefs, once



adopted and spread through social networks, are rarely corrected. In other words, the rulers who chose to misinform and the media that spread their speeches became deniers of true information.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that governments can choose to avoid alarming the population to ensure that voters are calm in the face of a health problem that could show their vulnerability. Therefore, political communication and crisis management are essential to obtain good results in a government. For example, Trump minimized the health problem in the face of covid-19 to win supporters for his re-election; but the opposite happened because the government discourse that accompanied it produced distrust in the citizens themselves, who noticed a problem that worsened in the United States with more than 700,000 deaths.

The information disseminated around covid-19 was decisive. For example, in Italy after the first contagion recorded on February 18, 2020, there was an exponential growth. A month later, the number of positive cases reached almost 50,000, very different from the cases registered by Hong Kong, Vietnam, Japan and China, which spread more information about the danger of the virus and prevention measures.

Therefore, we can say that —based on the empirical evidence of the studies found on the role of political communication— the way in which governments informed citizens about the pandemic was crucial for citizens to increase or decrease its preventive measures.

Likewise, and although it is important to highlight that government communication is essential to counteract a pandemic, fake news can also be harmful for prevention because the population, based on their perception, reduces or increases health measures. In short, in the face of disinformation, citizens tend to reduce their perception of risk and infections increase.

Future lines of research

After the health crisis declared by the World Health Organization on January 30, 2020, the highest number of deaths occurred (as of October 2021) in the United States (763,784), Brazil (607,125), India (457 246) and Mexico (287,631) (Órus, 2021). In the United States, Brazil, and Mexico, a large number of fake news developed, which affected the taking of actions to reduce the impact of the pandemic. Curiously, these governments — called populist and headed by Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Andrés Manuel López



Obrador— faced the health crisis with a lack of transparency and minimizing the problem before the citizens. Thus, political communication was towards permissiveness, ignorance and lack of control, so it can be investigated why these three countries coincide around the highest number of deaths from covid-19.

In this sense, this research work can be useful to discuss the role of the mass media and social networks in the dissemination of official information. Likewise, it also places the information culture or cultural consumption of information in citizens as one of the desirable elements of democracy, where governments must promote policies of selective, real and corroborated information to combat false news as a State policy.



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