INT J TUBERC LUNG DIS 26(10):981–982
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http://dx.doi.org/10.5588/ijtld.21.0761

LETTER

COVID-19 media communications: a new role for health professionals?

Dear Editor,

COVID-19 has impacted health services and forced healthcare personnel to adapt to new methods of working,[1,2] especially in communication. Medical doctors and scientists have assumed a more prominent role in media coverage since COVID-19 emerged on the scene.[3–5] There has been a shift from a straightforward reporting of facts to the explanation and interpretation of COVID-19 news. Although powerful elites, such as politicians (especially members of the Government), remain important, the significance of scientific and medical specialists on infectious disease has increased.[4–6] In contrast to Spain, where politicisation of the crisis was evident due to the overwhelming presence of politicians as news sources,[7,8] *Le Monde* noted that in France there was an increase in the participation of professionals to alleviate uncertainty and enhance comprehension.[9]

To analyse the importance of scientific and medical experts during the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal, we conducted a two-fold analysis, consisting of a questionnaire survey and a quantitative analysis of all COVID-19 news published in two national daily newspapers (*Público* and *Jornal de Notícias*). The survey was made available online (through the Limesurvey platform) from 11 May to 29 May 2020; 18 March to 2 May 2020, 9 November to 23 December 2020; and 15 January to 28 February 2021 (corresponding to the state of emergency periods in Portugal). The researchers listed all national news media outlets (radio, online, written press and television) and stratified them according to mutually exclusive categories: journalists, health or science journalists, editors/coordinators and TV news coordinators. The survey explored the following dimensions: 1) impact of telework; 2) organisation of newsrooms/sections; 3) concerns about health literacy; 4) choice of news sources; and 5) changes in journalism brought about by the state of emergency. The survey link was sent by email to the central newsrooms of all types of media. Collected data were treated, coded and categorised using SPSS (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA), and according to a previously tested grid of analysis.[10]

We received 200 survey responses: 114 were from general journalists, 18 from health or science journalists; 50 from editors/coordinators; and 18 from information directors. Although Portuguese journalists continued to seek official sources during the most critical stages of the pandemic, they also turned to expert sources, such as medical doctors and researchers.[11] News required sources with expert-level understanding to provide accurate and credible information, mainly from the medical, epidemiological and statistical fields. New channels of online communication were also created, such as interviews via skype or zoom. Despite a decline in technical quality, these channels allowed new media voices to be heard.[12] Our corpus included 2,933 news pieces based on 6,350 sources: 1,850 texts published during the first emergency state/lockdown (first period); 457 during the second phase (second period) and 626 in the last emergency state (third period) (Table). Professional sources were more highly cited during critical stages of the pandemic, representing more than 30% of the sources (Table). The number of news items and sources increased, and the situation demanded explanations that only experts could provide. This is a change for Portugal's health coverage, where official sources were usually preferred. Medicine was prioritised over other fields (such as physics, natural or social sciences), and reporters chose physicians, especially when they represented medical services or hospitals, as the public wanted to know what was happening in healthcare units. Sources from academia were also highly represented and researchers had greater legitimacy when leading or explaining the research or when assuming a position. Researchers were asked to talk about the pandemic and not their own work. Overall, journalists valued expert sources in the following order: medical doctors; managers; heads of faculty/research centres/scientific societies; and researchers. Official documents were also valued, mainly during the second phase (17.3%), when the pandemic had not peaked and, consequently, the news covered a variety of themes.

In some countries, the pandemic has changed the way journalists select commentators on the news, with a shift away from politicians towards health experts.[13,14] In Portugal, there was a high level of COVID-19 literacy, reliance on traditional media and adherence to pandemic control measures. More studies are needed to explore this possible association. If this new journalistic paradigm persists, health

Article submitted 20 December 2021. Final version accepted 17 May 2022.

Table Status of news sources* quoted in the COVID-19 texts published in the daily press in Portugal, May 2020–February 2021

Status of news sources	First period of analysis (18 Mar–2 May 2020) %	Second period of analysis (9 Nov–23 Dec 2020) %	Third period of analysis (15 Jan–28 Feb 2021 %
Professional sources†	33.1	30.5	34.9
Official sources‡	28.1	22.4	30.9
Heads of associations	4.1	6.1	3
Non-professional sources§	0.7	1.5	0.8
Common citizens¶	7.3	6.2	4.7
Other human sources#	1.2	0.9	2.5
Documents**	11	17.3	9.5
Media††	7.3	8.1	4.4
Other non-human sources‡‡	6.5	6.9	9.2
Other sources§§	0.7	0.1	0.1
Total of news sources quoted in COVID-19 texts	100	100	100

* People or documents which are quoted in a news text.
† Those who become sources because of their professional expertise (e.g., doctors, nurses, lawyers, etc.)
‡ Those who become sources because of their status, which is usually either an elected or appointed role (e.g., Prime Minister, President, Minister of Health, etc.).
§ Sources who are quoted despite their professional category.
¶ People who give personal testimonies or who are healthcare users.
# Those who do not belong to any other category are not documented sources.
** Non-human sources that are quoted in the news, such as reports, press releases or papers. They can be specialised (papers) or official documents (reports).
†† Non-human sources that are categorised as a medium of communication, such as TV, newspapers, websites, etc.
‡‡ All non-human sources that do not fit any of the pre-existing categories.
§§ All human sources that do not fit any pre-existing categories.

experts and physicians, in particular, should invest in risk communication training to help manage future public health crises.

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