

73. Traversing the Infodemic: Analyzing Communication Practices and Strategies in Portuguese Media During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Introduction

This study analyses communication practices disseminated in Portuguese mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as communication strategies and approaches by Portuguese government bodies. It is argued that the lack of rigour in the information provided in various instances, and the lack of more pedagogical approaches, contributed to a degree of misunderstanding, suspicion, and hesitancy among the population. The article showcases pandemic-related communication practices, emphasising that these examples do not generalise social communication in a pandemic context. Instead, the goal is to pinpoint a set of practices that warrant a reconsideration of their formulation and presentation to the public in future instances.

The study was developed within the project *An Infodemic of Disorientation: communication design as mediator between scientific knowledge and cognitive bias*. Among further objectives, the project aims to test potential contributions of communication design in filtering and translating complex health-related information, thus contributing to a more empathetic dialogue between scientific proficiency and citizens' concerns in future scenarios.

Methods

This study brought together contributions from researchers in communication, design, and statistics. Communication strategies by government bodies during the pandemic were identified, and publications, press releases and reports in prominent Portuguese mainstream media were analysed. Contents from public television channels (RTP1, SIC, TVI, RTP Notícias, SIC Notícias, TVI Notícias) and newspapers (Público, Expresso, Observador, Jornal de Notícias e Diário de Notícias, among others) were reviewed, including daily communication practices, data presentation (statistical data related to the evolution of

the pandemic), risk behaviour, and good health practice communication. To assess the accuracy of communication and effectiveness of data presentation, these were cross-referenced with press releases from health authorities, and data published in reports from *Direção-Geral da Saúde* (DGS, the Ministry of Health department responsible for defining and implementing health strategies and programmes).

Findings

From the onset of the pandemic, mainstream media communication was marked by a degree of sensationalism, dramatisation of facts, and a relative lack of critical thinking in disseminating data. An inconsistency in information reporting between the various institutional and media organisations stood out. Replication of news from the source agency (Lusa) was common, often without critical analysis: this may have resulted in either an incorrect interpretation and dissemination of the original news, or a dissemination of source inaccuracies.

Portuguese government authorities and health institutions were not always in tune, with divergent theories and forecasts generating a level of uncertainty among the public. In the first weeks of the pandemic, fears of the estimated high number of infections became widespread, and institutional and media organisations spent long periods making predictions regarding the peak and corresponding best course of action. Information on the subject was diverse with no consensus between theories from the President of the Republic, the Minister of Health, and the Director-General of Health. Mainstream media presented different theories and interpretations of the evolution of the pandemic; inconsistencies were repeated regularly, and for two years, communication was characterized by the exaltation of alarming numbers of infected cases.

Complex graphs were presented, projecting a semblance of objectivity in relation to the situation, but often with ambivalence. The evolution of cases was often analysed on a day-to-day basis rather than week-to-week or month-to-month, failing to allow an analysis of the evolution pattern. Consequently, newspapers would commonly report a drop in cases over the weekend (due to the flow of registrations differing from what happened during the week); on Monday or Tuesday, the same newspapers would report a substantial increase in cases (due to the increase in registrations during the week, considering part of the previous days). Although the increase was due to the flow of registrations and not the flow of actual COVID-19 cases, a fact easily proven through the design of an infographic highlighting the weekly pattern, it was frequent for Monday news channels to open with over-simplified, alarming statements such as “New cases more than doubled in the last 24 hours” (Antena 1, 2020).

Although the DGS published graphs in their reports, clearly displaying the evolution of cases, media channels tended to produce their own graphs, occasionally with errors. As an example, on 3 February 2021, in *Jornal das 8*, it was reported an increase in cases compared to the previous day, adding that there was “no defined trend” in the evolution of cases (TVI & Carvalho, 2021). The analysis was restricted to a very limited number of days, did not include the weekly pattern, hence, no clear trend could be discerned (Figure 1). Indeed, an infographic showing the previous weeks and comparing the same day of each week would highlight the trend, currently a downward one.

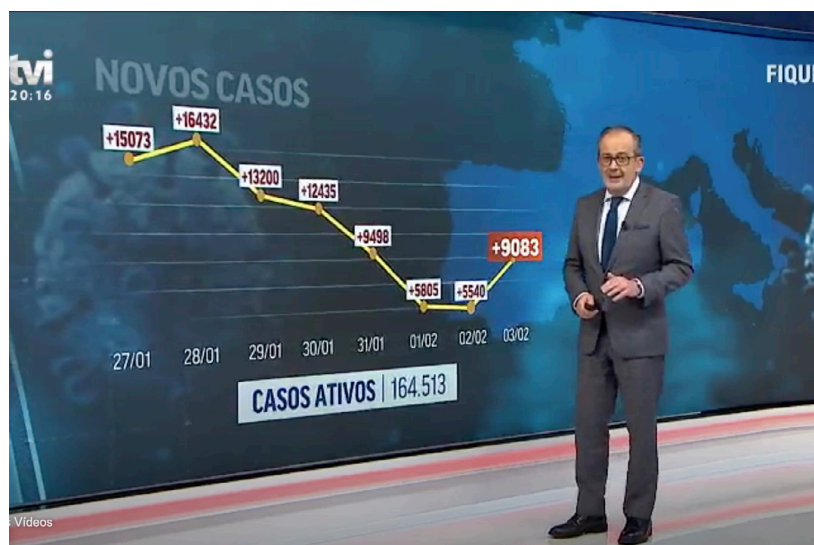


Figure 1 – Graphic shown on TVI's Jornal das 8 broadcast on 3 February 2021 at 8.16pm. Source: Tvi Player.

Another aspect highlighted was the lack of consistent, continuous, and articulated didactic and pedagogical initiatives between the various media to promote good health practices and the well-being of the population in face of the emergency. Pedagogies related to the use of masks were relatively ineffective. The basic rules of mask-wearing protection were often unclear, with an early circulating misinformation that their use could be harmful. At the root of this theory was a statement by the Director-General of Health that referred explicitly to cloth masks, but the news ended up spreading through the mainstream media and the DGS website ambiguously, creating misunderstandings, doubts, and a great stir around this issue. As masks were declared mandatory, the news on the subject tended to focus on the duty to wear them, and fines that could be imposed in the event of disobedience – neglecting, for example, guidelines on how to ensure the correct and safe use of the mask.

Vaccination also generated news stories with sensationalist and uninformative content. Rather than highlighting the positive effects of the vaccine, using infographics that demonstrate the reduction in the lethality of the virus in the period following vaccination, news often focused on deaths that occurred, with headlines such as “Even with vaccination, more people died this year than in 2020” (Inácio, 2022).

Analysing the scenario highlights the need for translating complex facts into accessible, summarised discourse for effective health communication and behavioural pedagogy. Figure 2 illustrates how infographics can reconfigure intricate information. Involving communication designers collaborating directly with the DGS is advantageous for translating data analysis into intelligible and transparent content for the average citizen.

Within this project, a set of exercises with undergraduate students are being conducted aimed at reconfiguring complex information, promoting safe behaviour, and clarifying how certain data and graphs should be read through infographics and data comics. It is considered that these two approaches are examples that could contribute to facilitating the reading and understanding of complex information.



Figure 2 – Infographic exercise by Patrícia Ramos

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