STATE, MEDIA, PEOPLE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

This article overviews studies exploring the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic and is aimed at detailing the interrelation between state, traditional media and society via the proposed four-component framework. Methodologically the research is based on agenda-setting theory (McCombs &Shaw, 1972) and dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, S. J., & DeFleur, M. L., 1976), bringing to the forefront the issues of efficiency of the traditional media as a key transmitter of the state policy to the public. It can be concluded that despite frames and foci employed in the media in line with the key principles of risk communication the state fail to establish efficient communication with the public. Furthermore, due to uncertainties on the state level at the onset of the pandemic, a certain disarray was observed in media's agenda, leading to the state's failure to encourage public trust neither in the media nor in the government. Discriminatory rhetoric was used to shift responsibility to the third party in order to justify failures and uncertainties. To conclude, it seems that the framework proposed and an array of the issues discussed may constitute a universal framework applicable for studying interrelation between the state, media and society at the time of a world crisis.

Keywords: public responses, media, COVID-19, politicisation, credibility
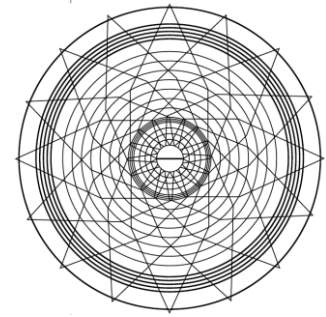
Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has faced various crises caused by wars, pandemics, famine and natural disasters. In some cases, these challenges were successfully overcome, in other cases, severe damages were reported.

Notwithstanding the economic effects of force majeure, when studying outbreaks of diseases, the research was focused primarily on public responses (Li, Liu and Li, 2020; Paek et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2015). It seems that a triangulation of linguistics, sociology and psychology brought about the answers to the questions of trust, resistance and well-being. However, considering this issue in the political framework seems crucial too, since

quite often the population make the authorities responsible for the tragic consequences of catastrophes and epidemics (Radina, 2013). Evidence suggests that the public may not understand the dangers of an influenza epidemic yet trust the government and accept the actions being taken (Paek et al., 2008). Distrust during an epidemic (in the case of influenza) is associated with social tensions (Davis et al., 2015), and resistance to government action during a pandemic (in the case of the H1N1 pandemic) is related to the values of a "reluctant" society (Raunack-Mayer et al., 2009). One more important issue put forward by research devoted to force majeure situations is the specifics of awareness-building in the context of natural disasters, epidemics, etc. Research shows that public education is more effective when it occurs at the early stages of a crisis, and by cooperating with the government, the media can help manage public responses in the case of emergency (Li, Liu and Li, 2020).

If we overview the research available since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that much attention has been devoted to manipulation strategies employed by politicians (Andreeva & Arkhipova 2021; Reyes Bernard et al. 2021), agenda setting activities (Sizonenko et al., 2021), political communication in social networks and its impact on the public (Haman, 2020; Zeemering, 2021). Much attention has also been devoted to risk communication as a major predictor of public compliance with the recommended health behaviors (El-Far Cardo, Kraus, Kaifie, 2021). Thus, it seems that the link between the state, media and public was established proving their mutual interdependency. In times of the pandemic, the key task of the state was to make the public comply with the measures imposed and trust the authorities. This could be achieved by delivering timely and reliable information via performances, Internet or traditional media. Evidence suggests that the level of trust in traditional media sources (mostly state-funded) was low at the onset of the pandemic despite the growing overall consumption of media content (Casero-Ripolles, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Vermeer et al., 2022). Thus, it seems relevant to consider the way traditional media communicate information to the public, the way they are integrated into state information campaigns, and possible effects of such cooperation on the public.

With my theoretical overview, I aim to detail the effects of crisis management via traditional media, employing a four-component framework that seems efficient in exposing an indispensable link between the state, media, and people. The four components are key frames and foci, politicization of information, discriminatory rhetoric, and the level of public compliance.

My article adds to the knowledge on how coordination and collaboration of the state and media can help tackle the crisis. I hope that the proposed four-component approach could be used in further studies devoted to force majeure of any kind.
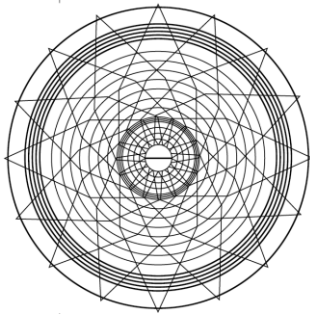
Methodology

The underlying methodology of the article is a dependency theory claiming limited effects of the media on how people think, feel and behave (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The choice is justified by the fact that during any crisis the need for information skyrockets for several objective reasons, such as the necessity to resolve ambiguities, to find the answers to the questions, and to form certain attitudes. Furthermore, people facing the crisis are trying to make sense of new, unfamiliar risks, and the media play a crucial role in framing those risks, as it is likely to influence individual attitudes and risks perceptions (Hubner, 2021).

The Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) was also taken into account, as key frames and topics prioritized in the media determine the significance and priority of events built in the social imagination.

In order to provide a comprehensive review of the literature, a collection of scientific articles was compiled using the keywords: "media coverage covid", "frames covid", "politicization covid", "credibility covid". The search was performed on the official websites of such publishers as Elsevier, Wiley, Springer, Sage etc. (the access was provided by the HSE University). Cyberleninka and eLIBRARY.RU were also used to collect data in Russian. Overall, 65 articles in the time period between December, 2019 and May, 2020, were scrutinized employing the method of content analysis.

The article is organized into four meaningful sections, each presenting sufficient information on one of the key issues. These principles seemed to enhance our understanding of traditional media's role in relation to both the state and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic.
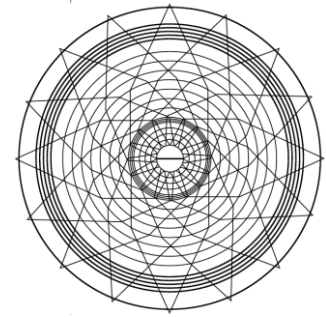
Key foci and frames

At the onset of any crisis when the level of uncertainty is rising and stereotypes are being ruined, people long for information in order to evaluate the causes of the events and to address those who are responsible.

It should be kept in mind that through framing the media seem to construct public understanding of the crisis, and the agenda (foci) contributes to certain choices and decisions made by the audience. While at the outbreak of the pandemic public's compliance with the measures initiated by the government seemed to be of utmost importance, the frames and foci transmitted by the media in various countries could have been used as an efficient tool to govern the public. According to the main rules of risk communication, it is assumed that the more threatened people feel, the more support they give to lockdown policies and the more positive their overall assessment of the benefits of restrictive measures is (Naumann et al., 2020). Thus, the traditional media (state-funded in

particular) are expected to portray individual and societal risks in an aggressive way. To prove this point, below is the list of key frames and foci identified in the countries such as China, India, Pakistan, South Korea, the USA, Canada, Australia, Italy, Serbia, France, the Russian Federation, Tanzania, Nigeria and South Africa, Brazil and other.

Overall, the study based on the evidence provided by the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (a platform that monitors print, broadcast and online news worldwide) reveals that at the outbreak of the pandemic, left-, right-center-, right- and conspiracy-pseudoscience-rated news articles prevailed over scientific and least-biased-rated news (Krieg et al., 2020). The tendency could be justified by the uncertainties and the lack of scientific knowledge on the novel virus. At the onset of the pandemic, the media were sceptic about the degree of danger and the consequences that would follow. However, along with the aggravation of the situation, skeptical discourses were replaced by negative ones.

The media focused on providing the public with the updates released by WHO, covering prevention activities (Gupta et al., 2021) and generally, a scientific frame focusing on symptoms and health effects dominated the discourse (Ophir, 2021). Furthermore, much emphasis was laid on possible preventive measures or effectiveness of treatment, which was considered inaccurate (Gupta et al., 2021), as well as the spread of Covid-19 and the number of confirmed cases (Hubner, 2021; Mwangale Kiptinness & Okoye, 2021). The government response frame disclosing responses and measures taken by the government along with the advice frame either to the government or to the public were identified (Shazia, 2022).

The above-mentioned key frames and foci can be considered objective, and their main function – informative. The media tried to remove ambiguities to form certain attitudes. That was the first stage of the information campaign in the media.

However, when the number of cases skyrocketed and the states were forced to implement restrictive measures, the media turned to portraying indirect effects of the pandemic and societal detriment (Cho, 2021; Hubner, 2021; Ophir, 2021). Media's rhetoric became more intense and aggressive producing alarming stories with the focus on the death rates (Basch, 2020; Oberiri & Bahiyah, 2020). The virus was predominantly framed as a cause of fear (Kalinin & Mavleeva, 2020), danger (Velikaya, 2021) and a national crisis (Mwangale Kiptinness & Okoye, 2021). Risk frames (transition of the virus), constructed by the media, seemed to play a crucial role in encouraging people to comply with public policy measures (Wallace, 2021) and the key topic under discussion was "risk of infection" (Radina, 2021). A containment frame focused on attempts to ameliorate risks (Ophir, 2021) and attribution of responsibility frame determined the scapegoats (Cho, 2021). To construct the frames and to intensify the negative effects created the use of military metaphors and
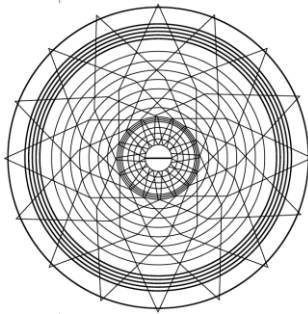
the vocabulary of war was revealed (Dankova & Krekhtunova, 2020). Coronavirus was portrayed as a brutal and merciless enemy bent on taking over the world (Ibid.), destroying and disrupting human life (Sumayya, 2022). The study of global media coverage conducted by Ogbodo et al. (2020) reports similar results, namely that fear/scaremongering frames dominated the global media coverage of the pandemic along with human interest (the impact of the pandemic on human beings across the world abound).

Thus, we can conclude that the media hardly gave any hope for the best, broadcasting intensely and negatively (Starosta et al., 2020).

Politicization of information

The prevailing frames and foci revealed above may point at a certain degree of politicization of information on Covid-19 in the media. If we assume that traditional media acts as an intermediary between the state and public then the opinion of the state is supposed to be transmitted explicitly via its representatives conveying certain messages or implicitly by involving third parties (experts, people of influence). Thus, it seems relevant to reveal the ways the media politicize the issue and how they manipulate public's perceptions.

Fowler & Gollust (2015) put forward three criteria for defining a health issue as politicized: 1.a political source was mentioned to highlight a political conflict; 2.a political context was offered for the audience to make sense of the issue; 3.a conflict or controversy was portrayed specifically within a political dimension. Thus, relying on the aforementioned criteria, I have reviewed the studies, claiming politicization of coronavirus issues in the media.
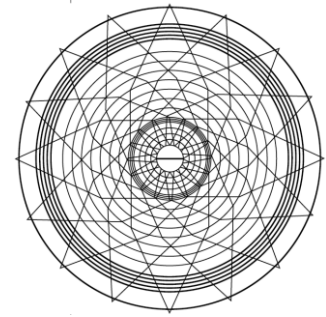
Evidence suggests that in media politicians were quoted more frequently than academics and other public health experts (Hart & Chinn, 2020; Hubner, 2021; Cho & Wang, 2021), making politics overrule science in news coverage (Zhang, 2021). For example, among the 25 most mentioned persons in article titles of NYT – 20 persons were politicians (Sommer & Rappel-Kroyzer, 2021). Politicians were the most frequent actors both in informational and analytical materials in the Russian Federation (Mukharyamova et al., 2021) too. Moreover, the study covering Brazil, Chile, Germany, Mexico, Spain, the UK and the US demonstrates the predominance of political sources of information in the media over other ones (51.2%), making the pandemic a predominantly political issue (Mellado et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the findings report politicization of the pandemic through the emphasis of certain issues. For example, Canadian reporters used a transparency and leadership frames through which changing of the public health guidelines was considered a political

failure (Capurro et al., 2021), while in Russia the coverage of the pandemic had been politicized primarily through the coverage of official statistics and vaccine development (Mukharyamova et al., 2021).

Finally, Covid-19 crisis was exploited by the government as an opportunity for political propaganda (Cho & Wang, 2021; Sukhankin, 2020).

The studies also report the political polarization encouraged by the media. Political controversies are addressed by presenting the opposing views on the measures and steps undertaken by the state, and the impact they may have on the population (Schmidt, 2022).

The effects of politicized messages on the public cannot be ignored. Generally, in media reports a tendency towards promoting certain political views at the expense of public health can be observed, as political actors see health concerns as more of an opportunity to create a political platform and reinforce partisan division rather than take care of their voters (Ibid.). This tendency can result in amplifying mistrust and negative attitudes of the public, as Fowler et al. (2022) conclude, "Exposure to media messages emphasizing politicization increases negative emotional reactions with respect to irritation and distress in particular".

Public trust

A growing media consumption rate, uncertainty, politicization of the issues and negative media discourse seem to have a certain impact on the level of trust of the audience to the information being disseminated and the actors responsible for it.

As public's risk awareness is considered a major predictor for the implementation of recommended health-protective behaviors, we can assume that intensive risk communication along with the increased media consumption should have resulted in a growing level of trust (Teufel et al., 2020; Naumann et al., 2020). However, having overviewed the studies devoted to the credibility issue, it can be concluded that the results seem rather controversial.

On the one hand, there seemed to be some improvement in the level of credibility towards media in general due to the increase in the consumption. For example, Casero-Ripolles (2020) in his study on the impact of coronavirus on US media reports the increase in the news consumption, which brought about a more positive assessment of the media coverage associated with credibility. Furthermore, those citizens who had mistrusted the media before the pandemic seemed to reconnect with the information about public affairs during the crisis. While citizens' trust in news organizations such as broadcasters or newspapers increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in news received from other sources decreased (Vermeer et al., 2022). According to the results obtained in China, central government media were still the most trustworthy and authoritative media platform
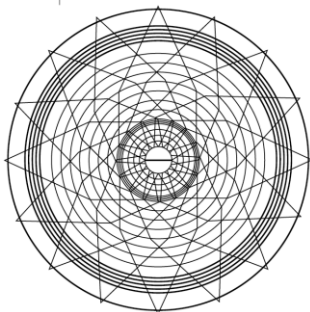
during a public health crisis. More significant effects of media use on health behavior of those with a high level of media trust were also admitted (Wu & Shen, 2021).

On the other hand, public mistrust in the government as the source of information led to the mistrust of the information presented by the media, as people assume that the media is influenced by the government (Van Scoy et al., 2021). This thesis is supported by the study of Makusheva & Nestik (2020) involving Russian citizens. The results reveal a low level of trust in official information about the pandemic in the media, which has been declining over the period in question.

Finally, the evidence obtained from the study covering eight countries worldwide (UK, US, Germany, Spain, South Korea, Japan, Argentina, Brazil) suggests that around half of the respondents in all the countries in question trust the information provided by news organizations, which is higher than their trust in national government as the source of news (the UK is the only exception) (Nielsen et al., 2021).

It seems clear from the evidence that the attitudes formed in society towards the information transmitted by the state and state-funded media before the pandemic hardly changed. In countries where the major public trend was to mistrust the government and consider the information in the state-funded media as propaganda (as in Russia), no frames and themes managed to make a dramatic difference.

Thus, media frames, which were supposed to resolve ambiguities and uncertainty, acting as an intermediary of the state, seemed not to reach the objective. For example, 47.8% of participants in Germany report finding it difficult or very difficult to judge whether they can trust media information about the coronavirus (Okan et al., 2020). People put emphasis on the media being overloaded with politics, while people simply demanded facts. This led me to the conclusion that in media politics was prioritized over scientific evidence and human health.

Racism and discrimination

Identifying and stigmatizing a scapegoat is crucial at the times of uncertainty, as in the case of state's failure to effectively deal with the crisis, alongside with the decreasing trust in official sources of information in the media, the responsibility must be shifted off the state's shoulders. Thus, guided by the fear and uncertainty the media triggered xenophobic reactions and behaviors such as discrimination, hate crimes, and harassment against Chinese individuals at the outset of the pandemic.

The starting point in discriminatory campaign was the media discourse claiming the genetically manipulated origin of Covid-19 in a laboratory in Wuhan (Wang et al., 2021) which finally turned into a flow of racist speech.
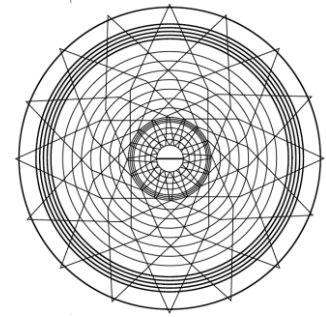
Ittefaq et al. (2022) in their study of The New York Times, The Guardian, and China Daily through the lens of social representations theory (SRT) confirmed that various nicknames such as "the China virus" and "Kung Flu" were employed by the media internationally blaming Chinese for the virus. The labels attached by some media were misleading and discriminative (race-driven). For example, "China kids should stay home" (Wen et al., 2020). Thus, the media failed to cover the pandemic objectively while adopting "the strategy of naming, shaming, blaming, and taming against China" instead (Jia & Lu, 2021).

However, the Chinese were not the only ones being stigmatized. For example, Mayer et al. (2021) in their study of the ski resort in Austria, Ischgl, as a superspreader of Covid-19 all over Europe, demonstrated that the majority of the newspaper coverage had a strongly negative tone and wording towards Ischgl, making it a scapegoat for the spread of Covid-19. In Sweden, the elites were to blame for spreading the virus. The media portrayed traveling and partying as a threat (Skog & Lundström, 2020).

The researchers also found a link between the number of cases of Covid infection and increasing discrimination against national groups. For example, respondents (North or South American, former USSR, and Asian) were more likely to report covid-associated discrimination when the number of infections in their administrative region of residence increased (Dollmann & Kogan, 2021).

Studying the response to discriminatory rhetoric of Asian Americans in the USA Li and Nicholson (2021) assume that such Covid-related discrimination is fostering the grassroots movements mobilizing not only Asian Americans of various ethnic backgrounds but also other communities of colors. Thus, there is no way the state could benefit from supporting the discriminatory rhetoric in the media.

Conclusion

To draw a line, it seems that the pandemic of Covid-19 was the first global crisis in the modern history, which revealed the weak spots of the global order. Having scrutinized the available research on state response, media, Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact on society the following conclusions can be drawn.

Overall, the media worldwide employed the intimidation strategy constructing such frames as "danger", "risk", "war", "enemy" and "death". In line with the key principles of risk communication, the states tried to threaten the public in order to make people comply with restrictive measures. The evidence suggests that perceptions and the level of trust to the state and official sources of information was built long before the pandemic started and the attempts of the government to alter the dynamic seemed to fail. Generally, it can be concluded that people tend to trust media more than the government, but at the same time both the government and state-funded media delivering official information gain less
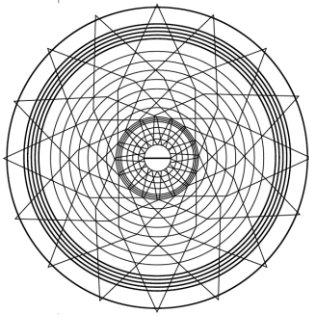
credibility than other sources such as social networks, various experts and opinion leaders. Thus, the state had to turn to cooperation and collaboration with the above mentioned trustworthy sources in order to deliver their messages to the public to encourage compliance.

Furthermore, politicization of information was revealed in all the countries scrutinized, as political sources prevail over scientific ones. Despite the seeming non-political nature of the pandemic, still the matter was deeply politicized by global as well as domestic media as political regime and propaganda seem to be the key agenda- setting force. Here, I agree with Radina (2021) who claims that the theoretical field of propaganda seems to be productive in the study of media discourse, as it should be taken into account that the media do not just transmit "knowledge about the world", but this "knowledge" reflects the point of view of the transmitter and the forces/actors directing the work media. In case of coronavirus, the governments were uncertain about the virus that led to a mess in agenda setting and the information transmitted by the media, and as a result brought about the rise of the opposition.

It seems also probable that the declaration of impotence, uncertainty in agenda, and lack of trust at the beginning of the pandemic resulted in discrimination. The responsibility had to be shifted on to the third party. The scapegoat was identified and stigmatized. The Chinese were to blame all over the world, but there were also domestic culprits (either certain destinations or social groups).

Thus, as the dependency on the media is growing, people become more vulnerable to information they receive. This seems to be a blind spot that any crisis brings about making the state and the media benefit from it. By imposing certain agenda and by constructing lucrative frames both actors are trying to impose certain behavioral patterns and to gain public's trust. Trust is crucial as, eventually, it assists in overcoming the crisis. Therefore, it seems that to study the collaboration of the state and the media and their joint impact on people, such concepts as frames and foci, politicization, discrimination, and credibility prove relevant.
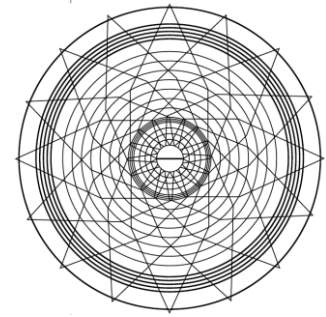
My research still has some limitations. I neither considered the issues of misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy beliefs, nor the way the media combat them. Furthermore, the influence of the news on mental and psychological well-being was also beyond the scope of the present study. Finally, the data scrutinized was limited by the English and Russian languages.

The proposed framework and the issues discussed in the article seem to further our understanding of interrelationship between the state, media and public at the times of a global crisis and to present a real possibility for all the parties involved to benefit from the knowledge gained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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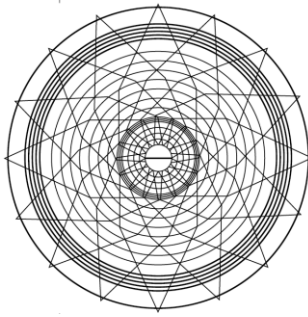
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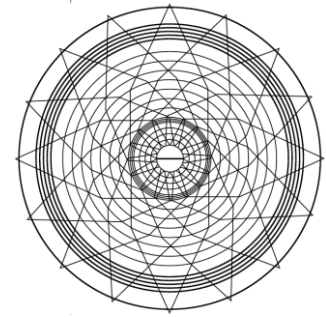
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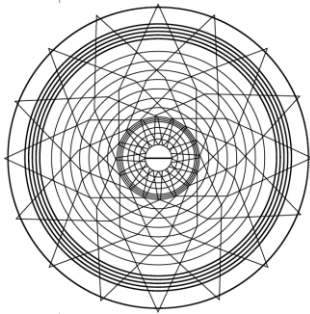
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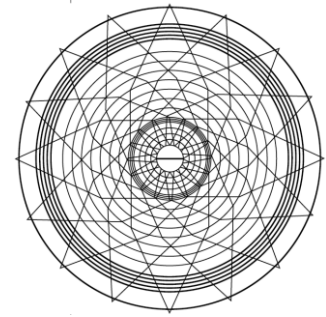
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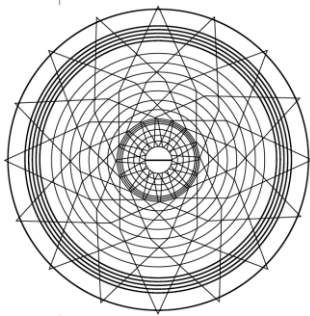
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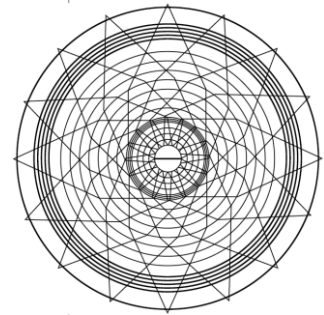
ГОСУДАРСТВО, СМИ И ОБЩЕСТВО В ПЕРИОД ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19

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Аннотация:

Цель представляемой теоретической работы заключается в экспликации взаимосвязи между государством, традиционными СМИ и обществом в начале пандемии COVID-19 с помощью предлагаемого четырехкомпонентного подхода. Методологически исследование основано на теории повестки дня (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) и теории зависимости (Ball-Rokeach, S.J., & DeFleur, M.L., 1976), выдвигая на первый план вопросы эффективности традиционных СМИ как ключевого транслятора государственной политики населению. В итоге, можно заключить, что, несмотря на эксплуатируемые в СМИ фреймы и темы в соответствии с ключевыми принципами информирования о рисках, государству не удалось наладить эффективную коммуникацию с населением. Кроме того, из-за неопределенности на государственном уровне в начале пандемии в повестке дня СМИ наблюдался определенный сумбур, что привело к тому, что государство не смогло стимулировать общественное доверие ни к СМИ, ни к правительству. Дискриминационная риторика использовалась для перекладывания ответственности на третьих лиц, чтобы оправдать неудачи и отсутствие определенности. Представляется, что предложенная схема и комплекс обсуждаемых вопросов могут рассматриваться как универсальный подход к изучению взаимоотношений государства, СМИ и общества в условиях мирового кризиса.

Ключевые слова: общественная реакция, СМИ, COVID-19, политизация, доверие