

# COVID-19 and the Media : the Reinforced Impact of Traditional Media does not Prevent the Spread of False Information

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#### ABSTRACT

*During the Covid 19 pandemic, the media was the main source of information and had a strong impact on the perception of the crisis by citizens, on the acceptance of sanitary measures or on the propagation of conspiracy theories or false information. The Covid 19 major crisis took place in a context where the media world has undergone profound upheavals in the last decade, with the so-called traditional media (television, radio, press) being increasingly challenged by online media and social networks, which has led to a transformation of the citizens' relationship to information. Memorandum 7 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database*

During the Covid 19 pandemic, the media was the main source of information and had a strong impact on the perception of the crisis by citizens, on the acceptance of sanitary measures or on the propagation of conspiracy theories or false information. The Covid19 crisis is taking place in a context in which the media world has undergone profound upheavals in the last decade, with the so-called traditional media (television, radio, press) being increasingly challenged by online media and social networks, which has led to a transformation of the citizens' attitudes towards information.

The studies in the WPRN database provide several important keys to understanding the role of the media during the pandemic.

Media coverage of the coronavirus has been considerable, and citizens have favoured traditional media to get information about the pandemic. The reliability of information provided by the media has been uneven, and the strong audience of «legitimate» media has not prevented the development of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

## Strengthened legitimacy of traditional media in a news context largely dominated by the health crisis

Citizens have learned about the pandemic through several sources: traditional media (television, radio, print), social networks, but also through instant messaging and family networks. While social networks seemed to take precedence over traditional media in recent years, information through legitimate public media, considered more reliable, was particularly popular.

In France, an [INA study](#) referenced on WPRN used algorithms to analyze the level of media coverage of the coronavirus on different media, determining the characteristic word sequences of the coverage of the epidemic and noting their frequency of airing.

This detailed quantitative analysis concluded in particular that over the duration of the confinement, 80% of the total content of the continuous news channels, and nearly one out of every two AFP news were related to the coronavirus. A difference in the distribution of content was found between television media and social networks. On television media, the increase in the media coverage of Covid19 appears from the first case of contamination in France, whereas on Twitter it only appears after the televised speech of the president to announce the lockdown. These results tend to show that the coronavirus only became a central concern for the French people when their lives were directly affected by it. The author wonders about the risk of saturation of the media space posed by such media exclusive focus on a topic, the other

themes being necessarily relegated to the background or completely ignored. According to a [VivaVoice survey](#) conducted on October 1st, 2020, 60% of French people thought that the media coverage of Covid was too important.

There has therefore been a massive supply of information on the coronavirus in the various media outlets. A [German study](#) available on WPRN sought to measure the sources of information most favoured by citizens. The survey, which has a solid methodology based on a significant number of respondents from a representative panel of the population, was carried out in two waves: the first one the day after the announcement of the lockdown and the second one 3 weeks after this announcement. The study shows that a majority of Germans got their information through the public media, with 2/3 of Germans informed daily through the public media. 48% of those questioned believe the public media can be trusted, compared to 18% who do not, which is interpreted as a good score. 45% of the respondents used social media on a daily basis.

The study shows that citizens' search for information has clearly decreased between the two periods, with a more marked decrease in the use of non-journalistic sources. As a result, citizens trusted the traditional media more for information on the topic and increasingly trusted them over time. A [Spanish study](#) registered on WPRN has analysed data from Pew Research Center surveys and finds similar results for the United States. The study found that 92% of Americans consulted daily news related to the pandemic, an increase of 32% in the number of people consulting news daily compared to the previous

period. Above all, the pandemic has led citizens who were far removed from information to reconnect with it. The people who increased their daily consumption of information the most as a result of the pandemic are those who were previously the most distant from information, particularly young people (+47% of people who consumed information) and those with little education (+38%). These data confirm similar data found for European countries, showing for example that 20% more young people have watched the news since the beginning of the pandemic.

Citizens' opinion of the media has also improved, with 70% of Americans rating media activity positively, an increase of 4% compared to before the pandemic and 16% among the less educated. The author considers that these figures show the usefulness of traditional media. According to him, they challenge several theories indicating that traditional media would be in decline today, but rather show a coexistence between traditional media and online media, with a preference for traditional media in crisis situations.

## Information has been unevenly reliable and many false news and conspiracy theories have spread

The above-mentioned [study](#) notes that 47% of Americans were exposed to false information about the pandemic and at least 3,800 false reports

were circulating around the world in connection with the pandemic. Citizens informing themselves mainly through social networks were more exposed (52%) to false information than citizens informing themselves through the press (37%). The study shows that the citizens who follow the news most assiduously are the most likely to thwart such misinformation.

The reliability of the information provided by the different media is very uneven. Sources on the internet offer an often questionable quality of information. In France, the aforementioned [INA study](#) shows that chloroquine and Professor Raoult have been a major topic on social networks, with the two words generating up to 100,000 tweets daily at the end of March, i.e. up to 5% of daily tweets in France.

A [study](#) by the University of Amsterdam, available on WPRN, showed on the contrary that Wikipedia, which is an important source of information with 4,500 pages created at the beginning of the epidemic on the subject that gathered more than 250 million views, offers reliable information on the pandemic. Initial results of the analysis of the sources of the articles show that Wikipedia faithfully reflects the state of academic research and the articles are based on a large panel of the most cited studies on the topic.

While the traditional media are reputed to convey verified information, this is not necessarily always the case. A [US study](#) on WPRN highlights the role of misinformation that politically right-wing media have played during the pandemic. The method is based on the use of analysis software and shows in particular that the right-wing media

(FoxNews, Breitbart) put forward 2.5 times more false information about the Covid (Chinese biological weapon, a vaccine already exists, etc.) than the traditional media. As a result, the study found, based on survey data from the Pew Research Center, that people watching right-wing media are twice as likely to believe in conspiracy theories as people watching non-politically oriented media.

In the face of this unreliable information, belief in conspiracy theories has grown. In the United States, a national survey by the Pew Research Center cited in this [study](#), shows that 38% of Americans consider one of the 5 misinformation tested to be accurate (22% think, for example, that the Covid was deliberately created in a laboratory). According to a (pre-print) [psychological study](#) on WPRN, the belief in conspiracy theories is further reinforced by what psychologists call the «Dark Triad»: narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. This study finds that people with a Machiavellian personality and antisocial behaviour have a greater belief in conspiracy theories about Covid 19, even at equal levels of knowledge, which may be due to a general distrust of others.

A [study](#) by the South Asian forum for environment, based on an analysis of four previous disasters, points out that misinformation is very common during disasters, and can emerge and continue to spread intensely several years after the events. The author therefore recommends that public decision-makers maintain their efforts to provide educational explanations to the general public by using all possible communication media.

At the height of the crisis, the pandemic occupied most of the media content. Citizens preferred the recognised traditional media with a large audience (radio, television and written press) for information, and part of the population far from these media (young people, populations with few qualifications) returned to them. While the sources conveyed by the traditional media and certain websites (Wikipedia) appeared relatively reliable, false information circulated, most often online, but sometimes also on mainstream television channels, particularly in the United States. The audience for conspiracy theories has thus been high, as seen in previous smaller crises. Public decision-makers must double their efforts to communicate reliable and audible information, even after the crisis has ended, as the spread of conspiracy theories may increase over time. Academic research could therefore focus on the long-term evolution of misinformation, and further study the forces that generate mistrust of official information.

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