

UPF Rome, Italy's: The Role of Communication and Media in the Time of Covid-19

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Top row (left to right): Franco Ravaglioli of UPF, Gabriella Mieli of WFWP, Carlo Zonato of UPF, Dr. Francesco Fravolini. Middle row (left to right): Elisabetta Nistri of WFWP, Dr. Fabrizio Annaro, Professor Marino D'Amore, Dr. Carmen Lasorella. Bottom row: Dr. Marco Respinti

Rome, Italy -- The fifth webinar of the UPF "Peace Talks" series was held on the topic "The Role of Communication and Media in the Time of the Pandemic."

The online discussion on July 9, 2020, was held jointly by the Italian chapters of UPF and Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an affiliated organization, together with International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), a UPF project.

Approximately 350 participants joined the webinar, including those who watched the live stream on UPF-Italy's Facebook page and on the Eco dei Palazzi channel that broadcasts within the two houses of Italy's parliament.

The speakers were:

Professor Marino D'Amore, a sociologist of communication at University Niccolò Cusano, Rome

Marco Respinti, a journalist and director of the online magazine "Bitter Winter"

journalist Dr. Carmen Lasorella

Francesco Fravolini, a journalist and member of the board of the National Authority for Digital Transformation.

The moderator of the meeting was Dr. Fabrizio Annaro, a journalist and the director of the website "The Dialogue of Monza -- The Provocation of the Good."

The meeting was presented by Gabriella Mieli, vice president of WFWP-Italy, and greetings and an introduction to the theme were given by Elisabetta Nistri, president of WFWP-Italy, as co-sponsor. Carlo Zonato, the president of UPF-Italy, presented the IMAP project with a short video. Franco Ravaglioli, the secretary general of UPF-Italy, introduced the question-and-answer session, while the technical and directing aspect was conducted by Giorgio Gasperoni, director in charge of Voci di Pace (the quarterly magazine of UPF and WFWP).

Some highlights from the speeches:

Professor Marino D'Amore: Inclusive communication, moral media are all very appropriate terms, especially at this time. For a sociologist like me, this time of the pandemic has been an opportunity for study and comparison. I coined the term "Infopandemia" in this period, precisely because of the incredible overload of information often conflicting with each other, as if thinking about the (toxic)

information disease that often created cognitive dissonances. The same scientific communication was often conflicting within it. Nobody thought to structure a communication focused on containment measures with respect to too much exaggerated alarmism.

As said in the video, the word or "the pen kills more than the sword," and, of course, the daily hammering of reports on the deadly virus and the deaths has determined in the imagination a firebrand imprinted deep in the emotional sphere. We are in a society of image and in the middle of the digital season that exponentially amplifies the alarmist effect. Fake news, on the one hand, and unfounded information of hypothetical unfounded cures have contributed to the maximum confusion; great visibility but almost no truthfulness.

The information should actually contribute to passing a sense of unity, while sensationalism causes exaggerated closures and individualisms (remember the images of people who forced the blocks to take trains, etc., unaware that they could produce more collective damage).

Another aspect of the communication effect has been the fact that Italy has become contagious from an infected country to become a case study when the virus, which knows no borders, has exploded in other countries. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of synergistic sharing of communication and interventions, a sort of "pan-communication" shared, both between the scientific and institutional world. A form of "toxic communication" has prevailed instead of a "synergistic communication." A task force at the international level, well-structured and mixed between the medical, institutional, psychological and media areas, could have mitigated certain extreme effects in favor of a more controlled management of the situation. Even now, in a partly outdated phase, the focus is shifting from the virus to the economic crisis, but even here we are witnessing a communication deficit that tends too much toward the spectacular rather than being serious, punctual and clear.

Dr. Marco Respinti: I find myself very much in the reflections made in the previous report. I too remain convinced that an aspect of the spectacular has prevailed in communication, generating a form that has been defined as "toxic information." In fact, we do not yet fully know what we are talking about with regard to the virus; we have moved as if we were in a tunnel.

In this confusion, it is my opinion that a decisive role has been played by the communication relating to China, that is to say, the communication that has come from China and that has not been properly managed or evaluated. Unfortunately, China is a totalitarian country that does not know the fullest sense of the word "freedom" and that represses all dissidence in any form. This country has kept from us clear information about what was happening for some time.

I do not and am not a conspirator, but China certainly knew about the virus long before we did. So it was delayed information. We know for sure that the first doctors who tried to explain what was happening were denounced and silenced under threat. Perhaps too much was kept from us that we needed to know. This with the complicity of bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), unfortunately, which in the first period flattened on China's information version. And I have seen this type of information missing in our Italian context.

Today we still do not really know how many victims there have been in China. It is a reality in which the victims of repression remain a state secret; how can we trust their level of information? I feel a bit like the last dinosaur, because I still believe in the truth of things and that our job must have to do with the same truth. That's what I believe; we owe it to our own readers.

I was in Seoul when the IMAP project was launched [in February 2020], a challenging but exciting "tour de force," and what I am left with are the same words evoked in the initial video: "The pen hits more than the sword," and in this there is an ethical dimension of information; maybe saying it is old-fashioned, but I continue to do so because information must regain its moral and ethical role.

Dr. Carmen Lasorella: I've been a war correspondent for 10 years, so I'm familiar with dangerous situations. This pandemic crisis was a missed opportunity for information, and above all it marked a decline of democracy. It is clear that China is a totalitarian country; I have been in that situation of fake democracy for a long time. Financial power and economic power, unfortunately these are the powers that dictate the rules, including with regard to information. In fact, even before China spread information, news about the potential virus had circulated, but the information did not run its course.

I have found myself in many roles of responsibility and have tried always not to get used to the so-called centers of power, even paying for them myself. However, my experience also has put me in a position to reflect that one must be able to measure words well, precisely because of the damage that distorted or hurried information can do.

Speaking of the pandemic, beyond the conspiracy there are certain things that leave us perplexed about the very causes of the virus. Faced with the lack of clarity, half the world has been unleashed, but there

also have been great silences. The scientific community did not want to express itself. How can one make serious information by hearing this and that? We certainly have renowned experts, but everything has stopped in the "walls of the house"; we have not gone to see "outside." And unfortunately, in the long initial phase public television issued daily bulletins in a terrifying way, passing horrible messages that annihilated categories of people like the elderly. Only too much later it began to become clear that the public health service had been impoverished by favoring the private one. This created a major divide between the mainstream of public television and newspapers. There was a strong lack of reflection at that stage, which is what makes us grow and what makes us free.

In this reality, information has lost credibility, but not only in Italy; think of the United States, or Brazil with President [Jair] Bolsonaro. In this situation the free voice of the Web has emerged, but uncontrolled. In the field of digital, an accurate cultural education is necessary because also in digital we need an information ethic. This pandemic has turned the light off on everyone: on the poor, on immigrants, on the mistakes of governments. It has shown such inadequacy, unpreparedness and lack of responsibility.

Personally, I hope that it can still become an opportunity for deeper reflection. The role of the press must find itself again, because there are newspapers, even Western ones, not only Chinese, which are firing because those who write are not in line with certain "editorial dictates"; at this stage, the category of journalists has become much weaker. I hope that in the long wave of the pandemic there will re-emerge the sense of responsibility, ethics, sharing; not a situation of control but of right training, also in the Web, especially because there are still many young people who believe in the value of good and true information.

Dr. Francesco Fravolini: Very interesting the focus of the previous papers on communication overbooking and confused communication. The original sin of this pandemic is unfortunately born from the politics that did not manage well the different phases and did not transmit a certain tranquility, did not work "together" but doing too much the race to appear. This is also accentuated by the overly personalistic roles of various presidents of the regions.

Digitalized information also found itself unprepared, because it is not enough to know the technical aspects well, but to have a prepared cultural approach to digital communication. In essence, the pandemic has revealed the flaws in the Italian system, but not only that; in other countries it was no different.

There is a lack of an overall vision, a common vision of problem-solving, especially the ability to manage fear. We must ask ourselves whether, when faced with another possible virus of another kind, the international system will be able to hold its own with a truly comprehensive vision? If we still do not have a vision, how will we be able to cope? As far as the Web is concerned, my opinion is that it has saved many things; first of all, the relationships that have been able to continue thanks to the Web. And on the Web we should invest more, not so much in money, but in culture, in training, as we are trying to do: going to schools to convey to the "digital natives" that a proper culture is needed to properly manage digital information.