

What Society Expects and Receives –

The press conferences of the Operational Group during the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Perhaps there is no dispute that during crises, and especially global crises, social crisis communication requires a high degree of commitment to the public and communities. In times of health emergencies, effective communication, which in this case means epidemic-risk communication, cannot be a one-way communication; it should be based on dialogue and has to be a process of wide-ranging, multi-stakeholder, information- and opinion exchange. Its purpose should not be solely to communicate rules and statistics data and to express expected behaviours. The pandemic-related police communication is expected to strengthen, amongst others, (public) trust, to encourage the proper behaviour, to help the civilians with their decision-making, to provide an opportunity to articulate their concerns and doubts, and to respond to them professionally and authentically. On 31st January in 2020, the Hungarian Government decided to establish the Operational Group responsible for defending and managing the coronavirus epidemic. Till now, the daily press conferences of this Unit were (and still are) the base for informing the citizens. The press conference genre has been taken to a new level by restriction of the journalists and exclusion of spontaneous questions that cannot be asked directly anymore. The Operational Group selects the questions and mediums which are worthy of answers. In this paper, the societal expectations with the experienced (governmental and police) practice will be analysed, comparing them with the general principles included in the work of theoretical experts of crisis communication.

Keywords: Hungarian Police, SARS-COVID-19 pandemic, press conference, risk communication, operational staff.

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Introduction

By the time this article is published², we will have passed the third wave of the new coronavirus epidemic (SARS-COVID-19) in Hungary. The health emergency that governments and societies around the world are facing has brought unprecedented communication (and crisis management) challenges. The Hungarian Government has decided to set up an operational team (Operational Staff or Operational Group in the following) to manage the epidemic and has assigned it the task of informing the public about the same. In the following, I will outline the principles and practices that guided the communication and the role of the law enforcement sector in it. The basis for the analysis is provided by the operational staff's television press conferences, which have been subjected to critical discourse analysis. (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) A rhetorical analysis of the material of five complete press conferences, comprising of 75 minutes of media text, was carried out. Very briefly, we review the conclusion at micro, meso, and macro levels, i.e. reflecting on the content, the flow of messaging and the socio-political (historical) context (Jahedi et al., 2014).

The SARS COVID-19 pandemic and the responsibility of the media

The World Health Organization in its communication guide called the attention that the new corona virus is more than a medical crisis. It is a complex challenge, which we face on economic, social and informational level.

„Until biomedical tools such as vaccines or treatments are developed and widely available people's behaviours and their willingness to follow public health and social measures remain the most powerful weapons to stop the spread of the virus. Consequently, there is an unprecedented need to elevate the role risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) plays in breaking the chains of transmission and mitigating the impact of the pandemic“ (WHO, 2020a, p. 4).

Informing citizens even in peacetime cannot be limited to informing and communicating data. The media itself and by them, organizations and public offices sat-

isfy other demands of citizens also. Such as monitoring the environment, identifying challenges, presenting the possible social responses, mediating and passing on the cultural heritage (Lasswell, 1948), or entertainment (Wright, 1960), but meeting the need for connection or mobilization (McQuail, 2015).

The aim of crisis communication is to provide information on the subject of the crisis, commenting on and contextualising the information in a way that contributes to the opinion-forming process of the recipient. It helps them to prioritise their concerns and to disseminate content on the issue to a wide audience, encouraging debate at a societal level. (Anthonissen, 2008) All this is nuanced by additional tasks such as monitoring the environment, risk communication, uncertainty reduction, warning, evacuation calls, image reconstruction, giving explanation, experiencing grief, remembering, organisational (and social) learning, dialogue, networking and norm setting. (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013)

(Extremely) Centralized communication

The Hungarian Government has organised managing and communication of the pandemic extremely centralized. The Operational Group has become the tool for that. According to the *Government Resolution*³, the Operational Staff shall be headed by the Minister of the Interior with the involvement of the Minister of Human Resources.⁴ Centralization is not unfamiliar in crisis management, what is more, it is the main concept of responding. But centralization ought to serve the effectiveness of crisis management and the public trust via sharing reliable and authentic information (in real-time as far as possible, see Anthonissen, 2008). In

² An extended transcript of the oral presentation (5 minutes shout) of the 2021 CEPOL Science & Research Conference. Pandemic Effects on Law Enforcement Training & Practice: Taking early stock from a research perspective (6th of May, 2021)

³ 1012/2020. (I. 31.) Government Resolution on the Establishment of the Operational Staff Responsible for the Protection against the Coronavirus Epidemic

⁴ Members of the Operational Staff are:
a) the Minister of the Interior,
b) the Minister for Human Resources,
c) the Director General of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior,
d) the National Police Chief,
e) the Director General of the State Health Care Centre,
f) the Director General of the National Institute of Hematology and Infectology of the South Pest Central Hospital,
g) the Director General of the National Directorate General of Aliens,
h) the Director General of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management,
i) the Director General of the National Ambulance Service,
j) the National Chief Medical Officer,
k) the Director-General of the Counter-Terrorism Information and Crime Analysis Centre.

our case, the centralisation of government communication is accompanied by restrictions on the right of alternative sources of news (hospital directors, doctors, nurses, but also school, kindergarten, nursery school directors, managers of other social institutions, etc. to make statements) and the right of the media to document and broadcast.

The government's position is accurately reflected in the related statements by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and State Secretary for International Communication and Relations, Zoltán Kovács, on the media:

"Now is not the time to go into hospitals to make fake videos or create fake news." (Viktor Orbán)⁵

"Let the doctors and nurses work! Hospitals should be for healing, not for filming. The operational staff will inform the public every day." (Zoltán Kovács)⁶

At the same time, media researcher Ágnes Urbán pointed out a year earlier that the independent media's room for manoeuvre is being eroded at a time, when people are hungrier for news than ever and have more time to consume media products, because they are at home.⁷ In such circumstances, the responsibility of the Operational Group to provide information is even greater.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe had already pointed out in April last year that:

"The freedom of expression, including free and timely flow of information, is a critical factor for the ability of the media to report on issues related to the pandemic. Media and professional journalists, in particular public broadcasters, have a key role and special responsibility for providing timely, accurate and reliable information to the public, but also for preventing panic and fostering people's co-operation. They should adhere to the highest professional and ethical standards of responsible journalism, and thus convey authoritative messages regarding the crisis and refrain from publishing or amplifying unverified stories, let alone implausible or sensationalist materials";

and

"Any restriction on access to official information must be exceptional and proportionate to the aim of protecting public health." (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 7)

However, the Hungarian Government has made media restrictions general, not exceptional.

Press conferences without the press

Why do we need to deal with the genre? Because, as McQuail (2015) says, genre sets basic expectations in the recipient. A genre is a class of communicative events whose elements share some common communicative goal. As Lassen (2006) pointed out, the purpose can be explicit or implicit, derived from the text or the context. Furthermore, *the main purpose of a press conference is to make officials available to the public for questions* (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017).

Nonetheless, the Operational Group excluded the journalists from their press conferences. But the media do have questions – however they need to send those to the Operational Group in writing, but most of them are not being read out and are not answered. The Operational Group has no identifiable press officer and no designated spokesperson. The Operational Group is not available by phone; they can be contacted only via a single central email address. (Dojcsák et al., 2020, Döbrentey et al., 2020) It is neither allowed to shoot films in hospitals nor at vaccination points for the time being. Journalists cannot provide visual documentation to their news materials, which are substantial limitations in their profession.

At the same time, the Hungarian Government and the Operational Group did not clarify as to why they have restricted the media, why journalists cannot ask their questions during a real-time videoconference.⁸

5 Szalay, 2021

6 Magyar Nemzet, 2021

7 Bogatin, 2020

8 The Fundamental Law of Hungary (2011) declares that "Hungary shall recognise and protect the freedom and diversity of the press, and shall ensure the conditions for the free dissemination of information necessary for the formation of democratic public opinion" Article IX. (2).

Yet worrying processes have begun⁹. As media researchers had already pointed out in the first wave of the epidemic, it seemed that the ruling party was taking advantage of the emerging epidemic (and the health emergency declared in its wake) to take action against the independent media (Urbán, 2020). Concerns were also confirmed by subsequent waves of the epidemic. On March 31, 2021, in the third wave of the epidemic, 28 editors wrote open letters to the Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Officer to allow objective information, including press participation in press conferences (either online or outdoors, subject to respecting the distance rules). In their argument, the WHO recommendations and the universal principles of the communication profession were included. In vain. So far, more than a year has passed by since journalists were last able to ask their questions live (March 19, 2020).

Intertextuality – The press conferences and the information running parallel

The method of discourse analysis calls the attention to the fact that texts never exist in themselves, but are embedded in contexts; they are responses to other texts and sources of further communication. The meaning of the Operational Staff's press conferences are influenced by other centralised channels of government communication, such as the Prime Minister's Friday radio interviews, his official Facebook page¹⁰, the official Coronavirus information page¹¹, its Facebook page¹², and the Government Info held on Thursdays.

Press Conferences without any substantive questions are narrative pair of the coronavirus homepage. (Communicators did no more than list figures on the spread of the outbreak and police measures, several hours after the website was updated.) Recipients can listen to the data of deaths, the new infected patients, num-

ber of persons who need invasive ventilation and who broke the rules. And they can read this data on the central corona website. (See the red numbers below.)

On the coronavirus homepage, users can find daily statistics about the pandemic and many articles about the governmental initiatives in a strong political framework¹³.

The "blue section", shows the numbers of police measures, it is the up-to-date statistic of the warnings, on-the-spot fines, infringement reports, administrative authority procedures, fines and closures against shops, restaurants, clubs, etc.

The Operational Group reads almost exclusively this data during the press conferences. But what messages do these numbers convey? Does it have news value? Does it have news value on the fiftieth day or the one hundred and fiftieth day? We have to admit, this type of communication without any contextual information, without the managing of the meanings, is empty. The coronavirus homepage does not provide retrievable data, shares only the current daily status reports. Users do not receive objective guidance to evaluate these. This lack of transparency has led to some media¹⁴ and NGOs (and enterprises¹⁵) launching virus¹⁶, corona¹⁷ and other vaccine monitoring¹⁸ applications and websites.

The shortcomings of the Hungarian corona virus information page - in international comparison - are illustrated in the figure below:

9 According to the 2010 CLXXXV. Act on Media Services and Mass Communication § 15. In case of state of emergency, preventive defence, terrorist threat, unexpected attack, emergency, the Parliament, the Defence Council, the President of the Republic and the Government, as well as persons and bodies specified by law may oblige the media service provider to the necessary extent, they may prohibit the free publication of notices of public interest related to the existing condition or situation in the form and time determined by them, or the publication of certain notices and programs.

10 <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor>

11 www.koronavirus.gov.hu

12 <https://www.facebook.com/koronavirus.gov.hu>

13 According to an independent media research, nearly 20 % of the pandemic communication on the coronavirus website is governmental propaganda. It means that every sixth article is biased towards the ruling party (Bátorfy & Szopkó, 2020). It is debatable whether this is too much or too little, but the fact is that searching for the English version of the corona virus information page and clicking on the icon for the foreign language version you will land on the about Hungary page (abouthungary.hu), that is the mouthpiece of the Prime Minister's Office. There is not an English-language equivalent of the corona information page.

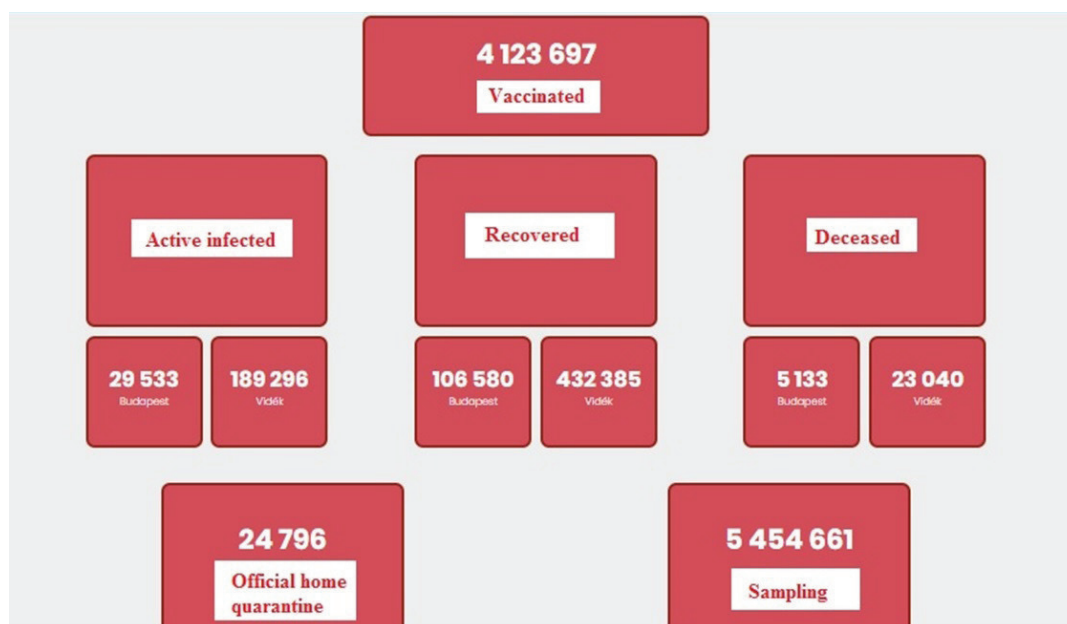
14 <https://444.hu/koronavirus-covid-19-jarvany-data>

15 <https://hazikaranten.hu/>

16 <http://pandemia.hu/>

17 <https://atlo.team/koronamonitor/>

18 <https://www.omnicalculator.com/health/oltasi-sorrend-magyarorszag>

Figure 1. Pandemic related data


Source: www.koronavirus.gov.hu¹⁹

Figure 2. Police measures

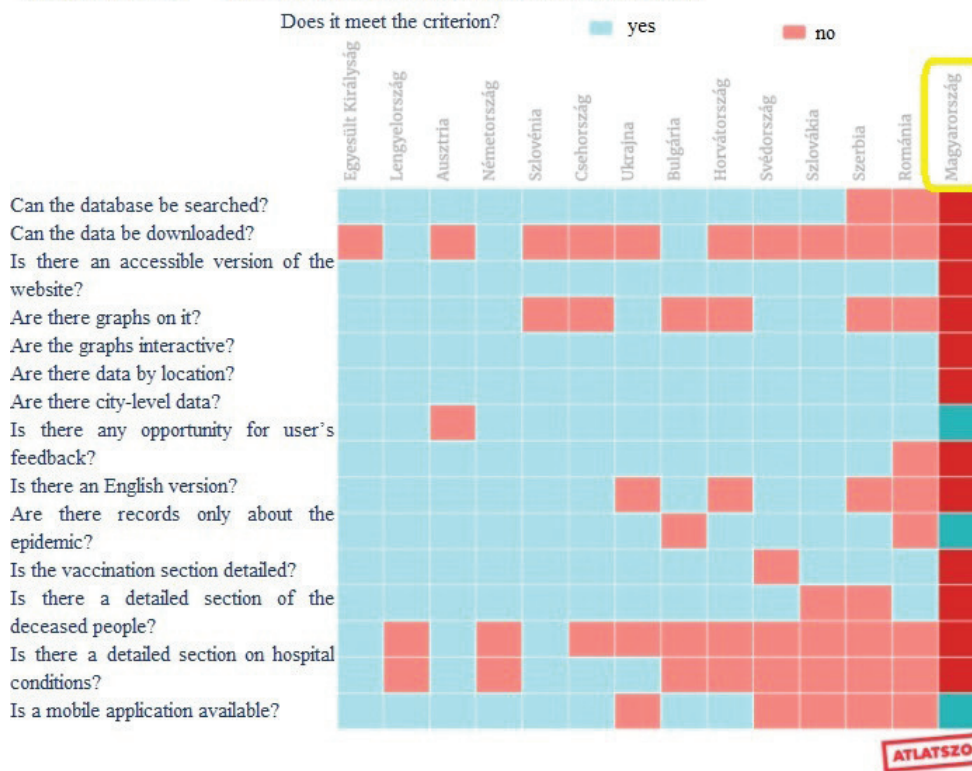

Source: www.koronavirus.gov.hu²⁰

19 Status of 27th April, 2021

20 Status of 3rd of May, 2021

Figure 3. The functionality of the Hungarian Coronavirus Information Page (Countries from the left to the right: the United Kingdom, Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Croatia, Sweden, Slovakia, Serbia, Romania, Hungary)

Compared to the European epidemiology portals, the Hungarian government information page lags significantly behind (the Hungarian side meets only 3 of the 15 criteria)



Source: https://adatujsgiras.atlatszo.hu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/03/koronaportalvilagoscikk_1536x1336.png (texts reedited by the Author)

Tools and dramaturgy go against communication objectives

The World Health Organization found that people, who get tired in the first two waves of the pandemic, tend to underestimate the risks and lose confidence in government actions. Mechanical communication of pandemic data only exacerbates fatigue and does not help the community engagement, which is a key element of the successful response to the virus. The purpose of COVID-19 and vaccine communication should be none other than to empower people to make evidence-based decisions and to stimulate trust in health-care workers and vaccines (WHO, 2020b).

The content requirements are clear. Moreover, the related tools have long been clarified. To manage a continuous, protracted crisis successfully, as Altheide (1985) has stated, the following conditions are required:

1. access to information and the location of the crisis,
2. high-quality visual materials,
3. drama and action,
4. relevance to the audience,
5. thematic unit.

What did the Hungarian public get instead? A vacant, seemingly informative, heavily uniformed character with law enforcement dominance. First of all, the police - in addition to the national chief medical officer - became the face of the crisis, three to be exact: Colonel Tibor Lakatos, (Head of the Operational Group on Call Centre) Lieutenant Colonel Róbert Kiss and (Deputy Head of the Operational Group on Call-Centre) Lieutenant Colonel Kristóf Gál (spokesperson of the National Police Headquarters).

Being a television genre, we cannot forget the power of visuality, which is illustrated by the following picture - a typical one:

Figure 4. The Operational Staff say Goodbye²¹



Source: MTI/kormany.hu/Gergely Botár

You cannot forget that the press conferences had been held without journalists, so the only source of images was the central state news agency, MTI. Editorial offices of newspapers and other media took over its

photographs and published them uniformly. Specialised news sites, magazines, tabloids etcetera presented below illustrate the mechanical content management processes:

Figure 5. The spread of photos from the central news agency on the internet



Source: image search with Google based on the MTI-photo²²

²¹ Zoltán Kovács, State Secretary for International Communication and Relations, was not a permanent participant in the operational press conferences, so we do not classify him as a face of the crisis.

²² Non-exhausted list of mediums they are republished the picture: (blikk.hu, blikkruzs.blikk.hu, dailynewshungary.com, 444.hu, facebook.com, demokrata.hu, koroshircentrum.hu, kepek444.hu, 888.hu, index.hu, vecses.hu, egeszseginfo.hu, cs3.hu, klubradio.hu, vehir.hu, szeged365.hu etc.

Access to the information for the Operational Group was granted (1.). The location in our case is difficult to interpret, as it is “everywhere and nowhere” that best expresses the nature of the virus, and the pandemic has brought a different type of crisis event to our lives. So, for lack of a better description, the place is the whole country and the venues are all its human communities in it. The government have not got any access to all of the location of the COVID-19 but can keep under control the information, and has access to the location of the epidemic- and crisis management. First requirements of Altheide is not achieved.

(2.) The briefings of the Operational Staff did not use the power of ‘visuality’, they did not line up substantive images, film documentation. They only use two types of infographics to present the data of affected people of the virus and the number of police measures.

(3.) The Operational Staff lacked the drama and the action. Those made the press conferences rather boring and their effect became doubtful. The dramaturgy of the press conferences showed a high degree of constancy. Kristóf Gál or Róbert Kiss greeted the audience and gave the words to the Chief Medical Officer (or the invited expert, politician), who reported on the current measures (as successes or milestones), followed by police statistics (sanctions) on protection measures and the current epidemiological situation. If there was a measure related to the crossing of national borders or new regulations came into force, this came to the forefront of the news. In such cases, the police measures took place after the invited expert’s statement, and the chief medical officer closed the briefing.

(4.) The Operational Staff was unable to make good use of their strongest tools, the relevance - everyone can be affected by the epidemic, anyone can become a victim at any time - and the thematic unity (5). Thematic monotony, a flat system of tools, repeated but not penetrating messages to boredom characterized all three waves of the epidemic. What aroused serious concern, however, was not the abandonment of a significant part of the crisis communication principles, but the issues of credibility, honesty, dialogue and involvement.

Content analysis of the text showed that the Operational Staff talked much more about themselves (police officers and doctors) than about their audience:

The self-centred communication of the Operational Staff is surprising because the central theme of the third wave was vaccination. They should have talked about who, why and how should take the vaccines, what the benefits are. Instead of the former, the discourse was dominated by sanctions, police measures and epidemiological restrictions, like obligation to wear a mask.

The watchdog perspectives

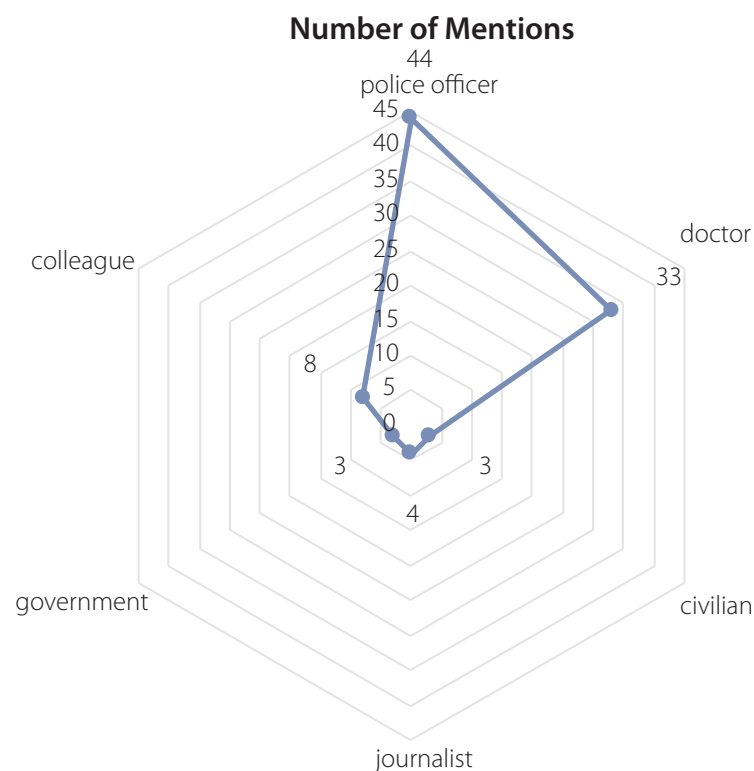
In this section, we need to talk about the third party, which were not involved in the public communication of the professional public debate. Hungarian human rights NGOs called attention to how important clean hands and transparency during an epidemic are (Döbrentey et al., 2021). It is thought-provoking that:

- access to epidemiological data is still not properly provided
- communication about vaccine registration is controversial
- there are many communication anomalies related to the possibility to choose between vaccines
- communication about police measures lost its credibility (there is a contradiction in visual and verbal information provided by the media and the operational group and the testimonials by citizens e.g.: breaking the rules after the reopening, obligation to wear a mask etc.)
- Several mediums are completely disregarded by the Operational Group²³, and because of this, some journalists and major news portals collect their ignored questions weekly and present them to their readers in a bunch at weekends.

Where dialogue is entirely missing, and there is a complete lack of alternative news sources, there is a danger to all those, who do not trust government actions, who want complete information, who feel left alone with the responsibility of decision-making (e.g. to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, which vaccine is safe for which person?).

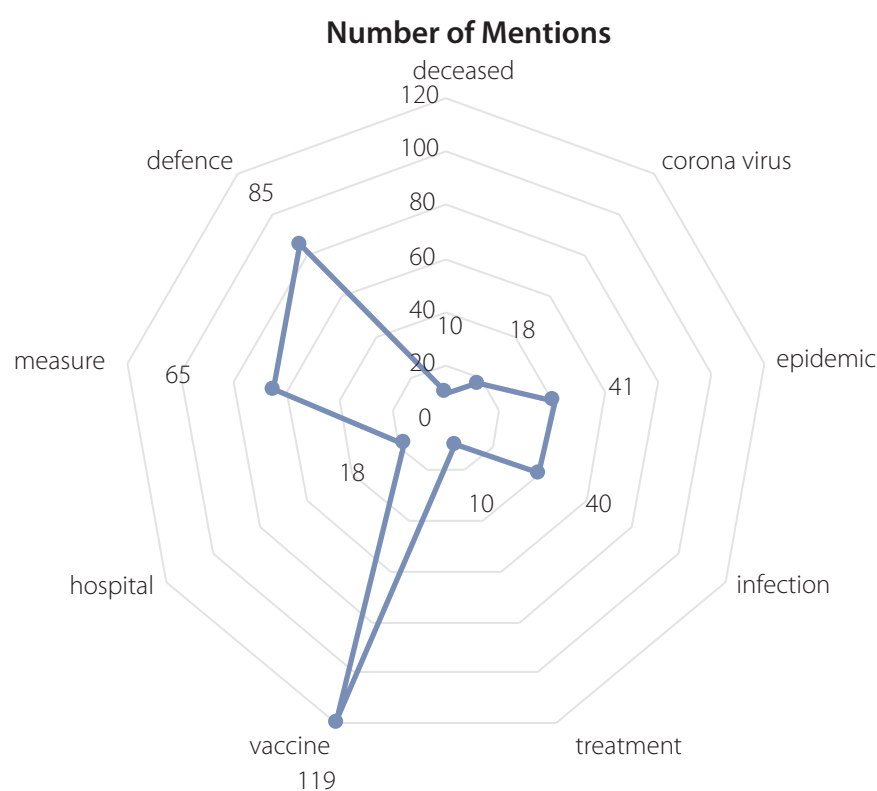
²³ Just to illustrate the magnitude of the problem, Telex, as a significant online news portal, received no answers to its 225 questions from the Operational Staff in a two-months period, and experienced the same in case of their 31 photography or filming requests, all of them were rejected (see <https://telex.hu/belfold/2020/11/30/telex-kerdesek-hiaba-ertel-metlen-infografikak>). The Magyar Hang (<https://telex.hu/belfold/2020/11/30/telex-kerdesek-hiaba-ertel-metlen-infografikak>), the HVG (https://hvg.hu/itthon/20210322_operativ_torzs_vakcina_kerdesek), and the 168 Hours (<https://168.hu/itthon/koronavirus-operativ-torzs-sajto-183329>) also complained about the same (all downloaded: 27th May, 2021).

Figure 6. Number of Mentions of each agent



Source: edited by the Author

Figure 7. Dominant themes in the third wave



Source: edited by the Author

Conclusions

The media analysis has confirmed that the briefings - as texts, as linguistic constructs - are linguistically rather poor, reduced, schematic. The aim seems obvious: to say as little as possible in an as impersonal way as possible. The citizens themselves appear as statistical data ("persons" or "individuals" without their gender and age and social role) in the communications, which does not help to build solidarity at a societal level either (and especially solidarity with vulnerable groups) in an epidemic situation. Press conferences are mechanical statistical releases without vivid messages. Constancy creates stability but is not conducive to achieving objectives (as emphasised by the WHO) such as outreach, mobilisation, trust-building, community engagement or overcoming apathy and indifference. (Especially when the communicators are talking about themselves, instead of their audience.) Press conferences in the third wave do not reflect the emotional needs of the recipients (mourning, attachment, uncertainty reduction). What we see is communication that serves political purposes without explicit political messages, which is mainly referred to by long silences. The communicators talk more about themselves, law enforcement, epidemiology, police and doctors (and especially data), than about the citizens. The credibility of central government communication is repeatedly called into question by the activity of alternative content and alternative news sources, which are active, despite the government's repeated efforts to cut them. However, the face of communication with uncertain credibility and statistics is the police. The reason is clear: values of law enforcement and media profession are conflicted in the public and the press conferences are under the pressure of politics.

What are the risks for the police?

The Operational Group is a political formation with strong political messages and because of that, it cannot be the tool of trust-building for a wide range of society. Police officers via representation of the Head of the Operational Staff On-Call Centre and its Deputy became political actors and this effect can be harmful to the police. Police occur as to be the partner of the government in actively hiding necessary data from the public, like vaccination plan, city-level data for proactive actions.

However, as the Hungarian police communicated about the pandemic exclusively through the Operational Group's press conferences, the genre - as is self-evident in the case of media genres - gained even stronger political influence through intertextuality. Informative genres must be objective (which also means politically neutral) but social mobilisation and commitment, requires the use of opinion genres, the evoking of emotions, the addressing of people not only as conscious beings, but as sentient, acting creatures.

Police officers need to be taught how to protect their profession from unwanted political influences and how they can/could preserve their credibility, their authenticity, and reputation of their profession. Police officers and especially the leaders should learn how they can reframe information, events, and messages to strengthen their reliability and how they can take part in crisis communication at the governmental level as an independent professional entity, which can build trust in difficult situations. It is necessary to use professionally the media genres, both the informative/factual and both the opinion delivering press genres.

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