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Characteristics of Croatian News Portals Reporting on the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 in the Pre-crisis Period

Abstract

Public health crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic is the issue that marked 2020 the most from various angles, as well as the communication one. This paper examines media echo of COVID-19 pandemic crisis in pre-crisis time in Croatia, before the first registered case of the infection. The most important result of the performed research is that the media coverage of the analyzed news portals in critical period may be valued as credible because the media releases used multiple sources and the authorship was transparent. Group of actors that in pre-crisis gained the most visibility were politicians. Research also demonstrated that news portals emphasized numerical data concerning crisis in media releases, while explicitly marking the situation with the word 'crisis' did not occur in large-scale.

Key words: crisis communication, pre-crisis, COVID-19, news portals, media credibility.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is the event that marked the year 2020 to the greatest extent in the world. At the beginning of the year, information began to arrive through the media about a previously unknown infectious disease that initially appeared in the city of Wuhan in the Chinese province of Hubei. One of the negative consequences of globalization processes manifested itself at the moment when the wave of new cases of infection began to spread unstoppably throughout the world at high speed. The first case of infection in Croatia was recorded on February 25, in a male person who was staying in Milan (Vrabec, 2020). After that event, the curve of the increase in the daily number of infected people in Croatia gradually increased, reaching double-digit, triple-digit, and even four-digit figures in the last quarter of the calendar period of 2020. However, it should be pointed out that there was a kind of „respite“ from the pandemic in Croatia, i.e. the drop in the number of infected people that occurred with the warmer weather, one of the factors that usually favors the reduction of the transmission of infectious diseases. That's how Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković pointed out during the summer that „we defeated COVID-19 in the first wave“ (Vlada.gov.hr, 2020). Regardless of the real intensity of the health threat, which varied, as well as the population's perception of it, the COVID-19 pandemic is a typical example of a crisis situation.

In general, a crisis can be defined as an emerging risk, a phenomenon that has been known for a long time, or was not noticed and occurred suddenly (Töpfer, 2006, p. 353, quoted according to Tomić and Milas, 2007, p. 140). There are many types of crises. One can talk about the difference between, for example, ecological and economic crises. Nevertheless, health crises are specific insofar as they affect the spectrum of occurrence associated with categories that, regardless of culture and heritage, are assigned the highest value - human life and health. Chen et al. (2004, p. 1984) point out that health-related risks threaten the development and security of countries. In other words, health is the base and necessary prerequisite for everything else. The crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has, among other things, quite clearly demonstrated the devastating effect that the threat to health and related political moves have on the entire economy of the country, with a special emphasis on the hospitality sector.

The paper analyzes the communication aspect of the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many actors - politicians, scientists, health workers, businessmen and others - communicated about this crisis (and still do). In addition to the analysis of the direct channels available to them for the placement of certain messages, for example through press releases, the characteristics of the communication of these actors can also be read in an indirect way, through research that focuses on the media coverage of the topic. Analysis of media content can offer an answer to the question of which group of actors was the most represented in the media. Likewise, it is possible to bring crisis communication into relationship with journalistic ethics. Crisis situations, along with media content intended for children, are topics where the highest standards of journalistic calling are expected.

The general liberalization of the availability of channels for broadcasting messages, along with numerous benefits, also brought risks of the spread of unverified information and hate speech and a kind of degradation of journalism - the issue of official licensing of persons who perform journalistic work becomes somewhat redundant in conditions where anyone who owns a mobile phone with internet access. According to research on media habits in the Republic of Croatia, the dominant medium is the Internet, which achieves even more than a double advantage compared to the medium that follows it, television (24sata and IPSOS, 2019, p. 7, cited according to Mučalo, 2020, p. 97) . The growing importance of the Internet as a means of disseminating information is greatly favored by technological progress that enables the appearance of new practical devices that have the ability to connect online. This paper focuses on news portals as the central place of information dissemination in the Internet space, whose importance in the media and advertising market, as well as in public relations, is recognized by Skoko and Vrdoljak (2018, p. 95). The paper investigates the characteristics of crisis communication in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic on Croatian news portals. The key questions on which attention is focused are which actors are the most represented in the media and to what extent news portals reflect the standards of credible journalism. The analysis is limited to the period that preceded the acute crisis, i.e. the first registered case of COVID-19 in Croatia.

The paper commences by examining crisis communication as a multi-stage phenomenon. It is shown that most crises consist of several recognizable stages. The context of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is then described, after which the methodology used in the paper is explained. After that, the results of the conducted research are presented. The final part of the paper is the conclusion.

Crisis communication as a phase phenomenon

Crisis communication is classified in the field of topics studied by public relations. Plenković (2015, p. 114) defines it as a process that deals with the collection of different types of data with the aim of planning strategic concepts in the domain of politics, economy, science, media and military, religious and sports issues. Coombs (2009) connects crisis communication with the response of management structures to the crisis. A crisis should be seen as the occurrence of conditions in which regular procedures are disrupted. Tomić and Sapunar (2006, p. 298) point out that the areas most susceptible to crises are air and maritime transport, railways, chemical industry, nuclear power plants, oil refining and transportation, power plants, oil and gas pipelines, mining and construction. When any large-scale industry is mentioned, one of the first vivid associations is the production plant and the daily effort of workers performing physical tasks. They are used to the usual procedure that takes place almost automatically, without much room for creative breakthroughs. Such conditions are desirable because they ensure a satisfactory degree of predictability, however, a moment of inattention is enough and things can go in the wrong direction - human error can lead to an explosion that disrupts the routine of doing work. More importantly, the very lives of workers may be at risk.

The crisis refers to the described situation. It is about a rupture that affects the previous rules. In the highly mediatized environment of the modern world, every such event usually attracts a lot of attention from journalists and other communicators. The aforementioned air transport illustrates this very well. Despite the repeated statistics that talk about automobiles as a riskier form of transport, airplanes are traditionally perceived as more dangerous for the reason that every airplane accident is, as a rule, a highly resonant case in the media that „breaks“ the rule that says that information in order to be valuable as news should to be geographically or locally relevant, so plane tragedies are reported regardless of the part of the world in which they occurred. Đuzel (2020) picks out the aviation industry as an area that is characterized by specific crisis communication. Regardless of the industry in question, today there are no stakeholders who can afford the luxury of ignoring media influence. In the modern world, the power of different media has reached the point where they can dictate trends and cause tectonic changes in politics and economics.

„The media become direct initiators of social changes, but also participate in the structure of social power. This is manifested in the fact that modern technology has made it possible for part of the media to be freed from the control of the state and big capital, and thus freed media strive for social power, and direct this power mainly in relation to politics and politicians. This, as a result changes, i.e. weakens, the previously unquestioned model of parliamentary democracy , and the media are gaining more and more social power“ (Dulčić, 2014, p. 96).

In the context of effective crisis communication, it is expedient to carry out thorough monitoring of the environment in order to spot and recognize in time all the forces that have the potential to initiate processes that will lead to problems - we are talking about -both immediate ones, which include direct threats to life and health, and “soft”, reputational risks for an organization. In crisis communication, it is strongly recommended to follow the media agenda as a source that brings useful information about trends in society, the most important topics and a type of perception. There are crises that cannot be qualified by that term until the moment the media announce them, that is, draw attention to a specific event. Such an understanding of crisis communication points to the fact that it is a layered phenomenon. Intuitively, one could assume that it only implies communication that takes place during the duration of the crisis, but this is approach is too limited.

Coombs (2015) approaches the topic of crisis communication through a three-phase model. It distinguishes between the pre-crisis period, the crisis event and the post-crisis period. Sellnow and Seeger (2013, cited according to Obrovac Lipar, 2020) interpret that in the first phase there is recognition, creation of plans and anticipation of a bad event, the crisis event implies confrontation and quick reaction, while in the post-crisis period there is a kind of relaxation and attention is focused on returning to regular functioning. Đuzel (2020) also mentions communication before the accident, communication during the accident and communication after the accident, while Griffin (2018, cited according to Klepić, Lesko, Bošnjak and Mabić, 2020) in the specific area of social networks in crisis circumstances uses the terms „prevention“, „intervention“ and „postvention“.

Certain theories go in the direction of including two more phases. Thus, Bulajić (2010, p. 87) talks about five stages of crisis: beginning, rise, peak, fall and end. For Fearn-Banks (2016, p. 4), the five stages of crisis are: detection, prevention and preparation, containment, recovery and learning. The last item is extremely important because it affects the adoption of forms that can prevent the appearance of a new crisis in the future, as well as improve the organization of work in general. To that extent, every crisis, in addition to being a threat, is also an opportunity for a breakthrough.

It is obvious that crisis situations have their own genesis. Characteristic poorly set patterns, for example unclear procedures and inadequate communication of team members in an organization, can produce dramatic consequences at the most inconvenient moment with a domino effect. Although there are indeed crises that occur at high speed and unexpectedly, for example explosions and natural disasters such as earthquakes, a deeper examination of such events leads to the conclusion that many outcomes could have been more favorable if at least some neuralgic points had been noticed beforehand.

The above is especially true in terms of information dissemination. In the light of the modern media environment characterized by communicators that multiply every day, the media's responsibility to provide timely and verified information is increasing. The research in this paper deals with media reporting in the pre-crisis period, that is, the period before the escalation of the crisis. Coombs (2015, p. 10) points out that in crisis management at that stage it is important to identify warning signs and collect information related to them, which is then analyzed. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, a certain period of time passed from the appearance of the first news about the new infectious disease in China to the first registered case in Croatia. The news reported by the media was followed closely, initially to a lesser extent, and then increasingly so.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic

News portal *Jutarnji.hr* (2020) presents a chronology related to the beginning of the crisis in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. On January 17, 2020, the Chinese authorities announced that the viral pneumonia that started in the city of Wuhan claimed another victim. The virus itself, which comes from the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) family, was discovered a month earlier. A week later, China began measures to contain the spread of the disease, which also appeared in neighboring countries - Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. The first case of infection was also confirmed in the USA, and Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that the country is in a difficult situation because the epidemic is accelerating (*Jutarnji.hr*, 2020).

Already in January, the World Health Organization declared an international public health threat, while in March cases of infection with the new disease were reported worldwide, which is why a global pandemic was declared (Grbeša, 2020, p. 57). The first registered case of infection with the virus in Croatia occurred on February 25 (Vrabec, 2020), and the pandemic soon became daily

headline news in print media, radio, television and the Internet. As a result of the increase in the number of infected people, in order to prevent mass gatherings of people, there were restrictions on a whole range of activities and gradually, as in many other countries, „closures“ and the transition to a „quarantine“ way of life.

Methodology

The aim of the paper is to examine the characteristics of reporting by Croatian *news* portals about the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 in the pre-crisis period, before the first registered case of infection in Croatia. Although the pandemic was officially declared in March, i.e. after the appearance of the first case of infection in Croatia, this term is used in the paper to describe the crisis, for the reason that it precisely defines the type of public health threat in question and in whose genesis, looking retrospectively, the pre-crisis and acute phase can be clearly identified. The research questions that are the focus of the work are:

1. How was the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 on the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* during the pre-crisis period?
2. During the pre-crisis period, which group of actors were the most represented in the reporting of the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* on the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020?
3. To what extent did the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* in reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 in the pre-crisis period insist on labeling the situation as a crisis?

In the challenging times of the crisis, the role of ethical media reporting is further emphasized. Vilović (2003, p. 963) sees responsibility as the basis of the ethics of journalistic profession. Elementary ethical standards of quality journalism include signing the published content, as well as citing sources. In addition, it is extremely important to ensure the greatest possible degree of objectivity through pluralism, i.e. to approach the topic from different points of view. In crises, including the period before the actual escalation, the intensity of experiences increases, emotions are also present, and confrontations often occur between groups representing their interests. In a public health crisis such as a pandemic, three basic groups of actors can be identified: politicians, scientists and health professionals.

In this paper, the term politicians is understood as government representatives such as prime ministers, presidents, ministers and mayors. Scientists represent people employed at various institutes and faculties, while the term health workers means doctors (including epidemiologists) and other medical personnel and hospital directors. The specific crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in its later development, has given rise to another significant stakeholder group - businessmen dissatisfied with the restrictive measures that affect their business. Finally, understanding the seriousness of the situation is sometimes conditioned by an apparently prosaic category, language. The media has a responsibility to call a spade a spade, as renaming can in some cases be seen as a misleading strategy (Jugo, 2012, p. 196).

The paper uses the quantitative-qualitative method of content analysis. According to Berelson (1952, cited in Dragojević, Kanižaj and Žebec, 2004, p. 99), content analysis is a „research technique of objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of means of communication“. It is a method that is used to determine the relevant features of a media text by collecting numerical indicators related to the analyzed material, and in addition to examining the most important qualitative determinants that can be used to draw valid conclusions. The unit of analysis is the media publication of the news portal. Each of the analyzed media publications was assessed against a re-defined matrix containing relevant categories that are important for the subject of the research. The news portals Večernji.hr and Tportal.hr were selected for analysis, which in the critical period were among the most read in Croatia based on the number of „unique users“ (Rating.gemius.com, 2020). The algorithm of „unique users“ refers to „the number of individuals who visited a certain website during the analyzed period, regardless of the frequency of visits to that website, the number of devices, or cookies used, with which they visited that page or the duration of their visits“ (Skoko and Vrdoljak, 2018, p. 87).

News portal Večernji.hr recorded 1,860,268 „unique users“ in January 2020, and 1,807,321 in February of the same year. At the *news portal Tportal.hr*, 1,807,957 or 1,728,246 „unique users“ were recorded in the same time period. These are *news* portals that bring relevant news from Croatia and the world every day and that are not owned by the same media entity, therefore they are guided by different editorial policies and attract an audience of various ideological values. The analysis includes publications found by searching for the keyword „coronavirus“, from January 1, 2020 until the publication reporting the first case of COVID-19 infection in Croatia on February 25. The sample consists of a total of 588 media announcements, 253 on the *news portal Večernji.hr*, and 335 on the *news portal Tportal.hr*.

The results

Credibility of the media

The information needs of the parties involved, as well as interested observers, in a crisis are twofold. Negative news traditionally generates more publicity. In human psychology, a known mechanism is present that directs attention towards situations that represent a change in the *status quo*, the introduction of some new dynamics. Burić (2009, p. 532) points out that events such as serious murders, crimes, violence, economic affairs and personal dramas of prominent individuals and suicides represent content that dominates the news. Journalists often deal with negative topics in a targeted manner according to the principle that the story is presented in sequels, which, in addition to showing fresh interesting elements, also means a greater chance that more readers, viewers and listeners will come into contact with the media release. On the other hand, the often invoked function of the media as a corrective in relation to other actors in times of crisis can be especially confirmed or denied.

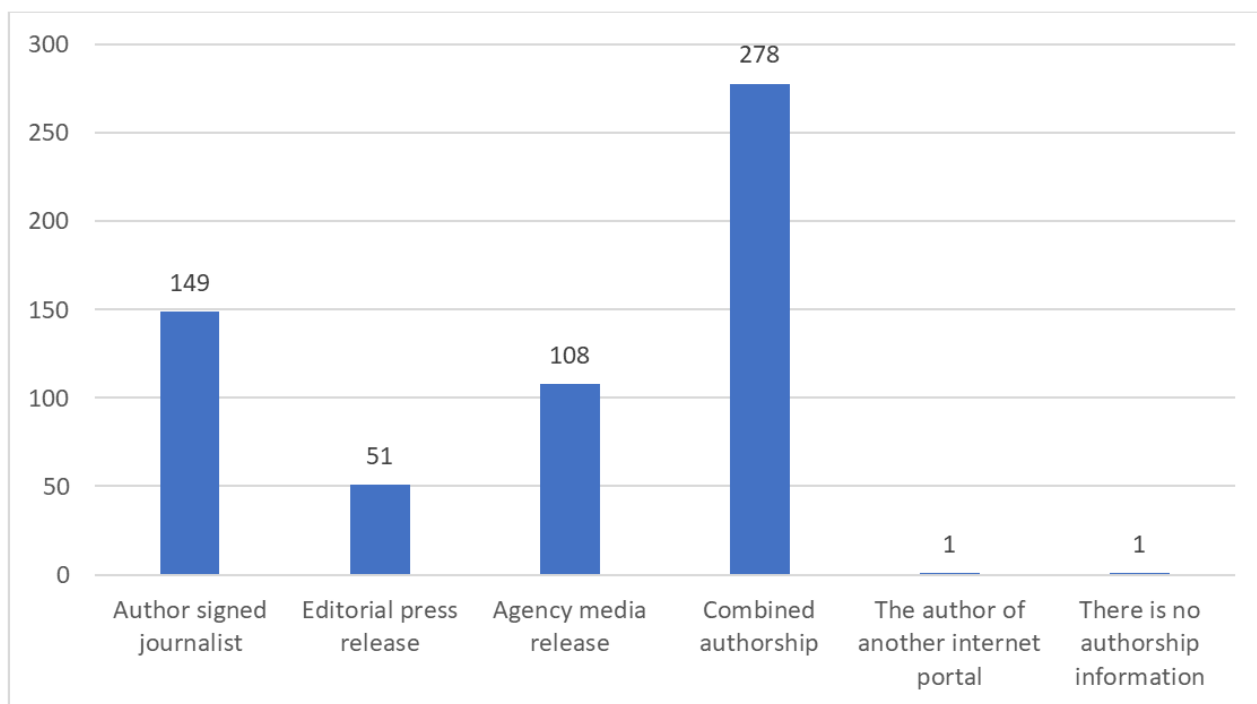
First of all, ethical and timely journalism is extremely important because people deal with a limited amount of information. In addition, contemporary trends that characterize the global media scene include *fake news* phenomena that introduce uncertainty into categories such as truth, clarity, precision, groundedness, context and credibility. In unstable times, there is a logical and understandable need for an „information sanctuary“, a safe place where you can get valid data that determines opinions and behaviors.

„It is crucial to properly inform people what exactly is happening so that they can understand the situation in which the role of the media, which has great power in informing and educating people, creating desirable attitudes and behaviors necessary in dealing with crisis situations and in promoting mental health, is extremely important“ (Babić and Babić, 2020, p. 26).

Instead of the concept of ethical journalism, but by no means in conflict with it, this paper uses the concept of media credibility. The key principles of credibility, according to Gavranović (2009, p. 127), are transparency, truthfulness and authenticity. In the domain of journalism, transparency and authenticity imply the unequivocal possibility of establishing a correlation between the content presented and its authorship. Every media text intended for a wide audience is a type of individual and collective representation of journalists and their editorial staff. This should be especially taken into account in the current conditions of fragile intellectual property. The principle of truthfulness is somewhat more problematic because, as stated by Vreg (2007, p. 174), „the problem is not only in the interpretation and selection of journalists, but in the representation of reality and the social role of the media and journalists“. In other words, it is clear that the „raw“ data processed by the journalist, for example statistical indicators, must be true, but even their simple interpretation is subject to a certain amount of subjectivity. Therefore, more and more people are talking about honesty as a substitute for the hard-to-achieve ideal objectivity. Honesty is primarily reflected through balance in the sense of the opportunity for multiple sources to have the opportunity to achieve visibility in the final journalistic work that is marketed to the public.

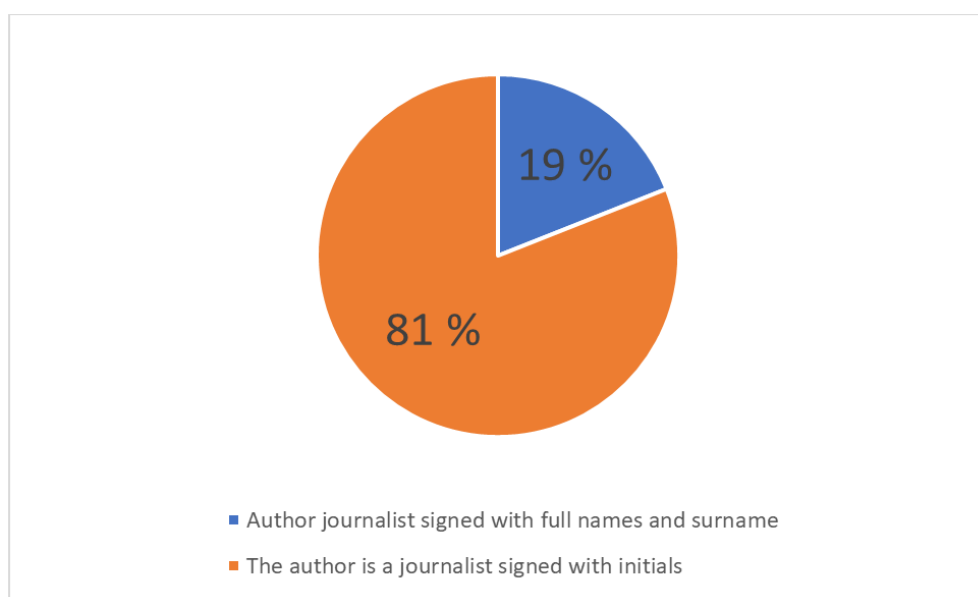
As for the authorship of media announcements, overall looking at the two *news* portals analyzed (Figure 1), *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr*, it is evident that combined authorship dominates. This means that media releases are signed by the author, journalist and some other source, several journalists, or for example the editorial office and the news agency (Hina). In terms of frequency, they are followed by the signature of one journalist as the author of the agency announcement, while 51 media announcements are editorial. In the analyzed period, *Večernji.hr* had one media publication in which the authorship was not stated, and on the same *news* portal, in one media publication, the Internet portal *Poslovní.hr* was listed as the author.

Figure 1. Authorship of a media publication on the news portals Večernji.hr and Tportal.hr (N=588)



In the case where one journalist is the author of the media announcement, certain differences can be observed between the analyzed *news* portals. So *Večernji.hr* in all such media announcements, with one exception, uses a model according to which the journalist is signed with his full name and surname. On the other hand, on the *news* portal *Tportal.hr*, journalists sign with their initials (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Signing of a journalist as the author of a media announcement on the *news* portal *Tportal.hr* (N=93)

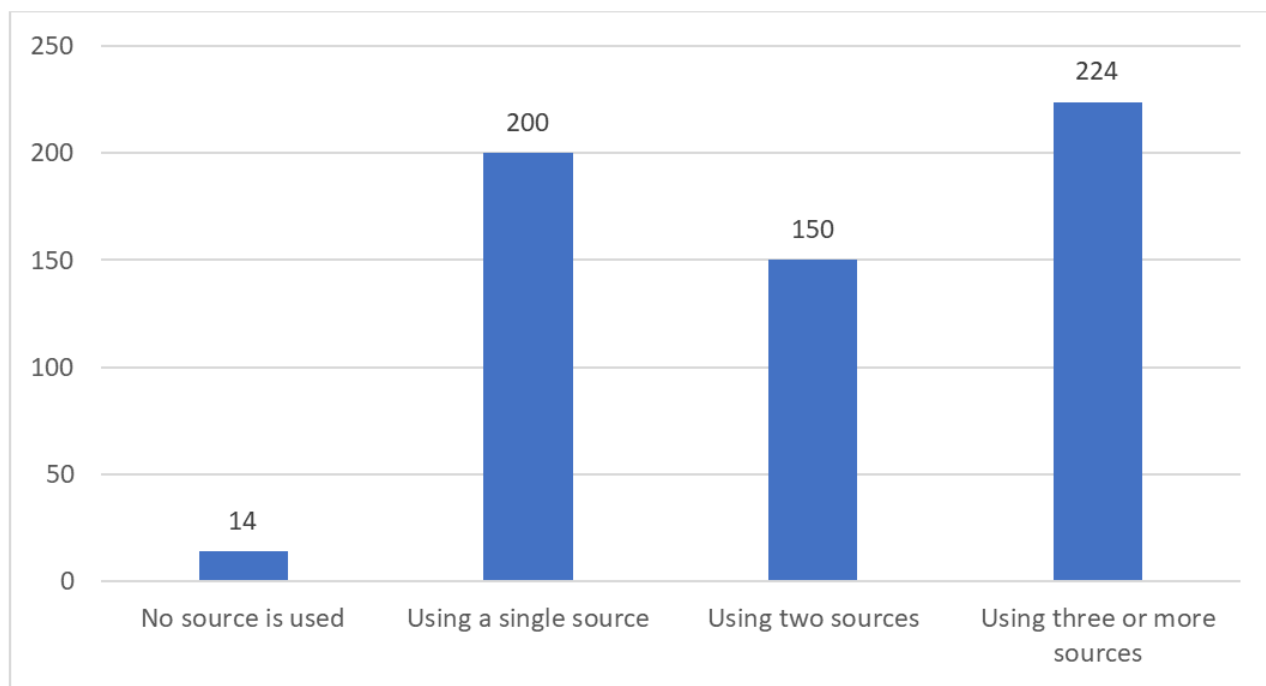


It should also be pointed out that in the total number of analyzed media publications, in terms of authorship, the category editorial media publications and media publications originating from the news agency (Hina) refer only to *Večernji.hr*. In other words, on the *news* portal *Tportal.hr*, media publications in the observed period are signed either by the author or the journalist, or it is a matter of combined authorship. Considering the fact that in the analyzed *news* portals only in the case of one media publication the author is not mentioned, it can be said that the principle of transparency was respected in the pre-crisis communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. If it were to be viewed as an individual component, one could speak of complete authenticity if there were media publications in which the author appears as an individual journalist signed with his full name and surname. Although in some cases it is inevitable due to the functional organization of work, editorial authorship represents a kind of diffusion of responsibility towards the produced content. However, the specific pre-crisis context in the circumstances of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic should be taken into account.

Given the seriousness of the topic in question and the potential consequences of misplaced information, it is not surprising to find that *news* portals have taken a more cautious approach. For this reason, the item of authorship is in most cases in the analyzed period a combined category. In light of the dominance of new media, which Kovačić and Baran (2018) describe as the initiators of new methods of manipulation, where individuality is expressed but also problematic (due to the possibility of using fake names in virtual space), it seems that in times of crisis, elements are more often reached for “old school” journalism - relying on news agencies to obtain verified information. A similar, more “cautious” pattern is visible in the use of sources.

In the search for truth, which in a radically skeptical sense represents the interpretation of the ultimate recipient of a media message, one of the general places of journalistic credibility is contained in the legal principle of *audiatur et altera pars*, that is, the use of multiple sources. When it comes to a crisis caused by a completely new phenomenon, such as a previously unknown infectious disease, it seems that the media has no choice but to serve as a platform where numerous, of course relevant, sources will get an opportunity for visibility. Out of the total number of analyzed media publications, in the largest number of cases three or more sources appear in the text (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Citation of sources in media announcements on news portals Večernji.hr and Tportal.hr (N=588)

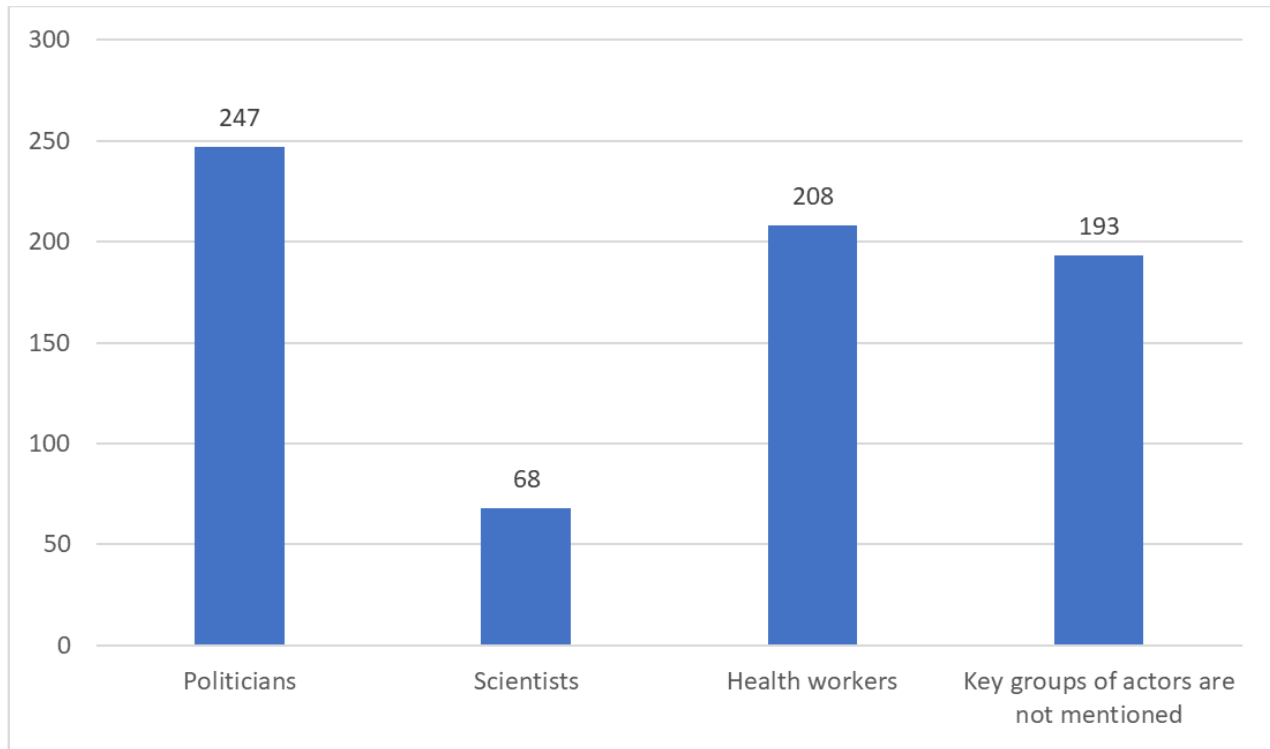


In slightly more than 2% of analyzed media publications, the source is not used. Seen individually, *Večernji.hr* relied on three or more sources in the largest number of media publications, while *Tportal.hr* cited one source. The explanation for that finding could be in the fact that *Večernji.hr* belongs to a business conglomerate that unites several media, Styria Media Group, and therefore has a greater possibility of “network expansion” in the field, that is, access to relevant sources. As pointed out by Gans (1980, p. 117-124, cited according to Poler Kovačić, 2005, p. 14), the success of journalists in finding sources depends on four interrelated factors: value, power, the ability to obtain appropriate information, and geographical and social proximity. On the other hand, the increased share of one source in the media release could be the result of the gradual profiling of key actors who participated in crisis communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as the development of events became more and more dynamic.

Key actors

The COVID-19 pandemic as a key global topic in 2020 has, as expected, attracted political attention. Although it is only one of many public policies, health policy has great social significance and is the subject of many public discussions, as well as everyday life decisions (Zrinščak, 2007, p. 193). The great interdependence of politics, healthcare and the economy was demonstrated in the acute phase of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the pre-crisis period, in the analyzed media publications, the most frequent references refer to politicians (Figure 4). Health professionals follow, while scientists are the least represented.

Figure 4. Reference to key groups of actors on the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* (N=588²⁰)



If the analyzed *news* portals are observed in particular, it is an interesting finding that *Večernji.hr* mentions politicians and health workers in equal proportions - both groups of actors appear in 109 media announcements. As the crisis became more and more serious, it was necessary to make certain political decisions, and the engagement of healthcare workers who had direct contact with patients and potentially infected persons increased. The scientific community, due to the characteristic distance it demonstrates in some cases, as well as for other reasons, can hardly match the world of politics in terms of media visibility even under regular conditions. According to the results of the research, it seems that in the pre-crisis this dichotomy was even more pronounced, and in the acute crisis that occurred after the first registered case of infection in Croatia, certain members of the scientific community and political actors entered into open conflict.

Looking individually, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and Minister of Health Vili Beroš have been identified as the most important political actors in Croatia. The results of the research show that the first man of the executive power did not achieve great media visibility (Figures 5 and 6).

²⁰ In some of the analyzed media publications, there are no references to key groups of actors, while in some, one, two or all three key groups of actors are mentioned

Figure 5. Reference to Prime Minister Andrej Plenković in a media release on the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* (N=588)

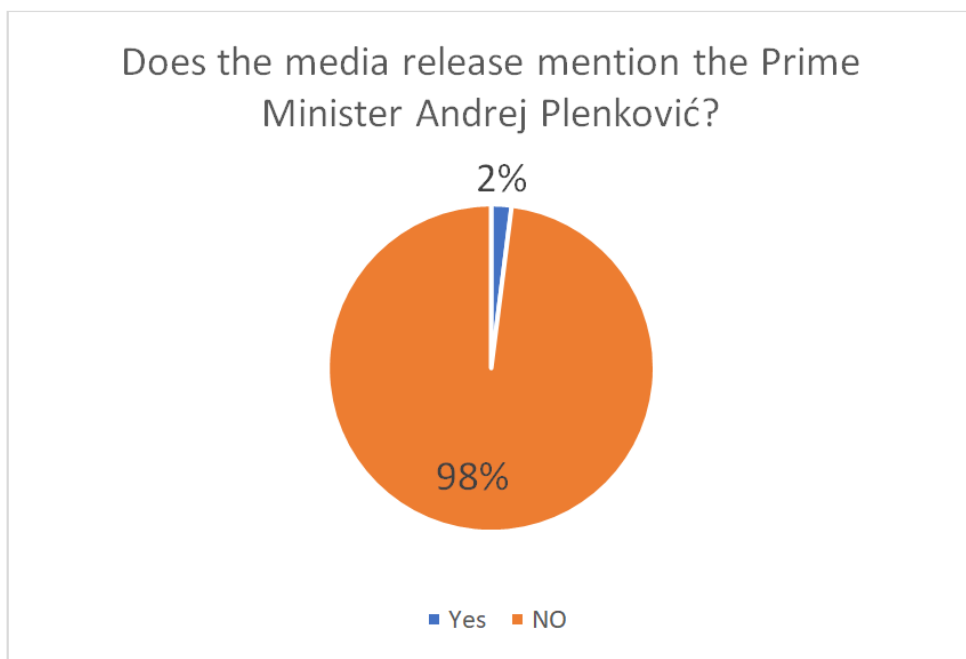
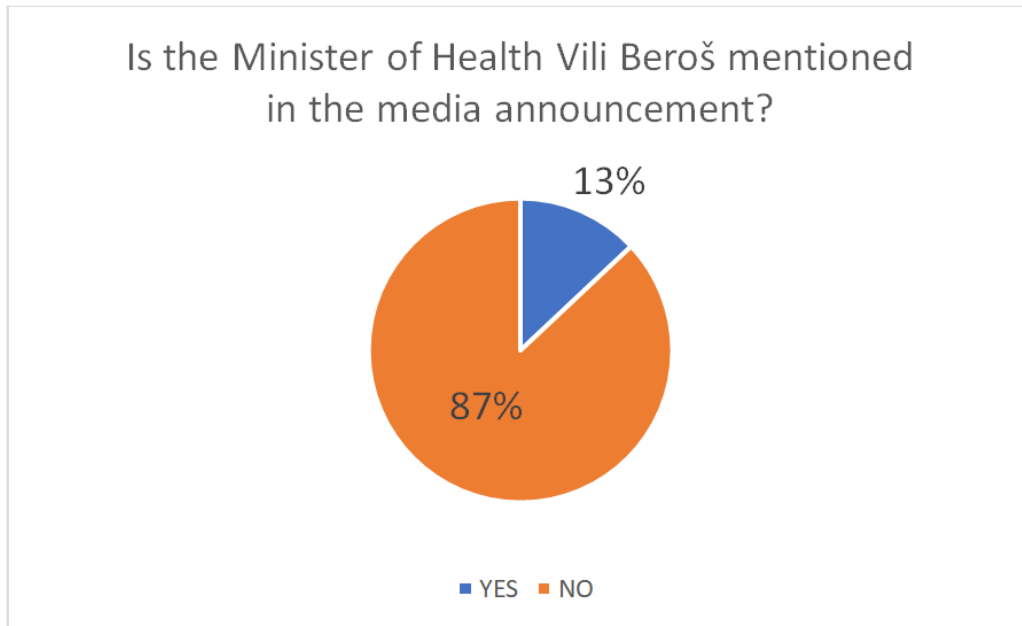


Figure 6. Reference to the Minister of Health Vili Beroš in a media release on the *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* (N=588)



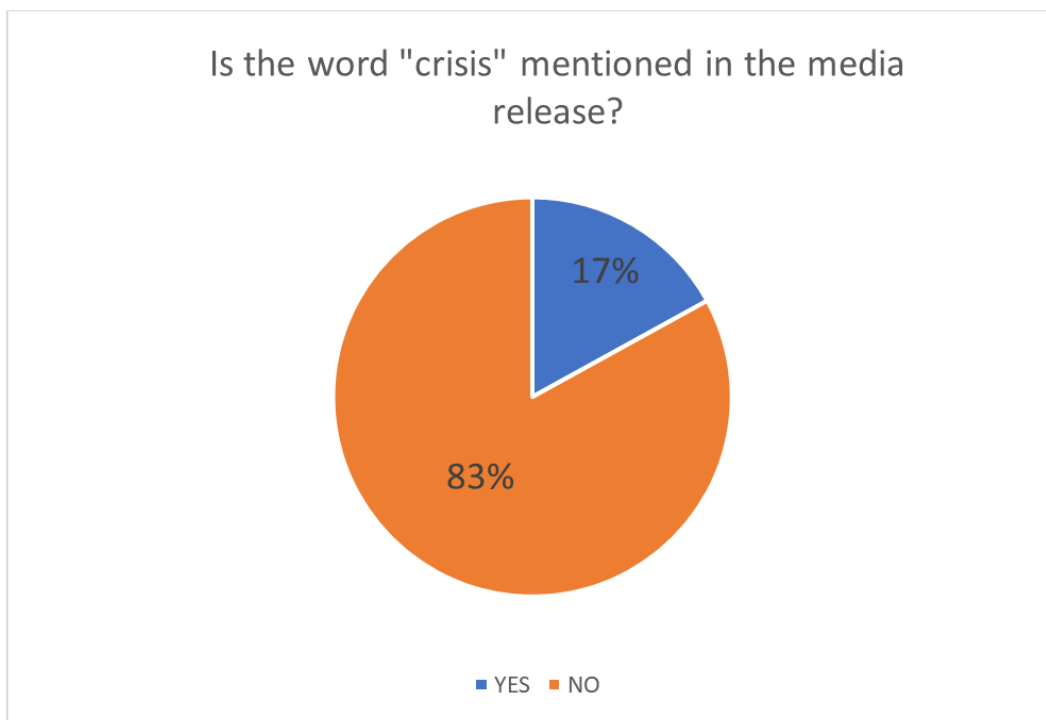
It seems that in the pre-crisis period, while the threat could still be suspended, the role of leader was delegated to hierarchically lower structures. The behavior and communication of the first person of an organization or state is extremely important in crisis situations. His presence and effective moves are expected. Tomić and Glavač (2019) refer to symbolism, which is important in raising

morale among people. On the other hand, the true skill of quality leaders is reflected in a prudent assessment of the real level of threat that a specific crisis represents. As emphasized in the paper, the crisis is a phase phenomenon. Proactivity is certainly desirable, but luckily sometimes a truly minor problem does not reach crisis proportions, and greater damage can be caused by unnecessary panic that has been triggered. As in many other fields, the quality of performance depends on experience and the ability to see problems from multiple perspectives.

Marking the situation as a crisis

The correct use of language in crisis communication has at least two roles. Labeling a phenomenon as a crisis clearly suggests the extent of the danger that threatens. Also, for persons who may be affected by the crisis, conditions must be ensured in which instructions on expected behavior are issued in a clear and comprehensible manner. The public health response, for example, to threats from biological and chemical weapons implies relevant guidelines and manuals (Kello, 2003, p. 145). Of the 588 analyzed media announcements, 98 (17%) of them mention the word crisis, through the designation of the situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the establishment of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Mention of the word “crisis” in media announcements on *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* (N=588)



The mentioned finding indicates that language alternatives were used to a greater extent to indicate a crisis situation. Some of the typical examples that appeared on the analyzed *news* portals on January 30 are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of language alternatives for the term “crisis” in media publications

News portal	Date of media release	An example of a language alternative for the term “crisis”
<i>Večernji.hr</i>	30.01.2020.	“global danger”
<i>Večernji.hr</i>	30.01.2020.	“international state of emergency”
<i>Tportal.hr</i>	30.01.2020.	“shock”
<i>Tportal.hr</i>	30.01.2020.	“challenge”

Finally, the use of numbers in the context of the crisis is important primarily for the reason that the scientific discourse suggests, that is, grounding and verifiability. Various numerical indicators create a basis for making certain claims, as well as justifying the measures taken. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a crisis where the numbers that appeared in the public space related to statistics on infected, deceased and tested persons, as well as indicators related to the economy and the state of volatile capital markets (Table 2). The results of the conducted research show that in the pre-crisis period, the use of numbers was present in more than 2/3 of the analyzed media publications, and in the *news* portal *Večernji.hr* in almost 3/4 of the analyzed media publications (Figures 8, 9 and 10).

Table 2. Examples of the use of numerical indicators in media announcements

News portal	Date of media release	An example of the use of numerical indicators in the context of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic
<i>Večernji.hr</i>	14.02.2020.	“Compared to the same period last year, the number of cars of all brands, delivered to Volkswagen’s most important single market, fell by 11.3 percent. In total, VW delivered 343,000 vehicles to China in January. The decline in Chinese deliveries was also reflected in the overall figures, which showed 5.2 percent fewer cars delivered globally - a total of 838 thousand cars” (Večernji.hr, 2020).
<i>Večernji.hr</i>	15.02.2020.	„According to the latest data, the coronavirus killed 1,523 people in China and infected more than 66,000 of them. The new strain of the virus has spread to more than 20 countries, but the vast majority of those infected and almost all of them died in China” (Večernji.hr, 2020).
<i>Tportal.hr</i>	07.02.2020.	“The foundation of Bill Gates and his wife Melinda promised on Thursday to give 100 million dollars for the global response to the epidemic of the new coronavirus, from which almost 500 people have died so far” (Majetić, 2020)

Figure 8. Mention of numerical indicators in media announcements on *news* portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* (N=588)

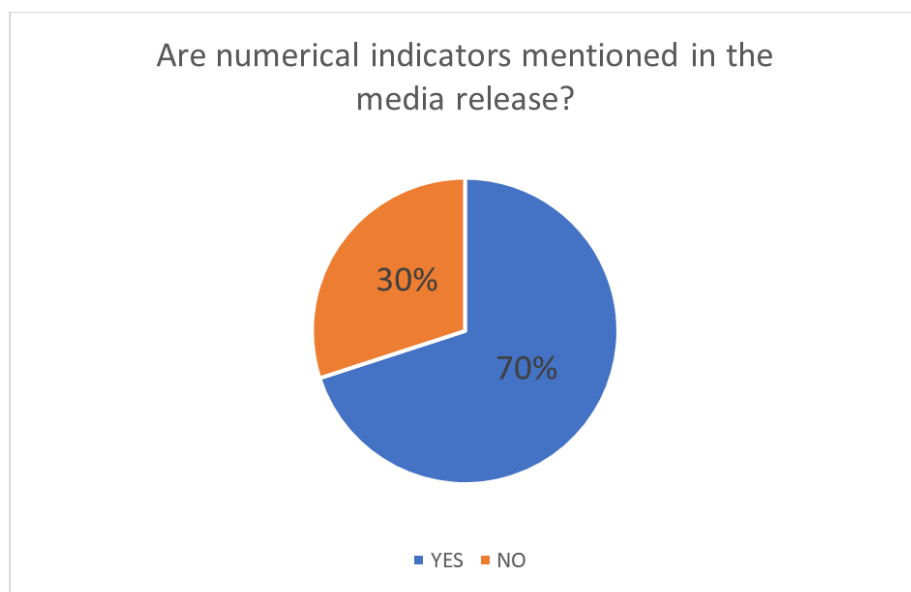


Figure 9. Mention of numerical indicators in a media announcement on the *news* portal *Večernji.hr* (N=253)

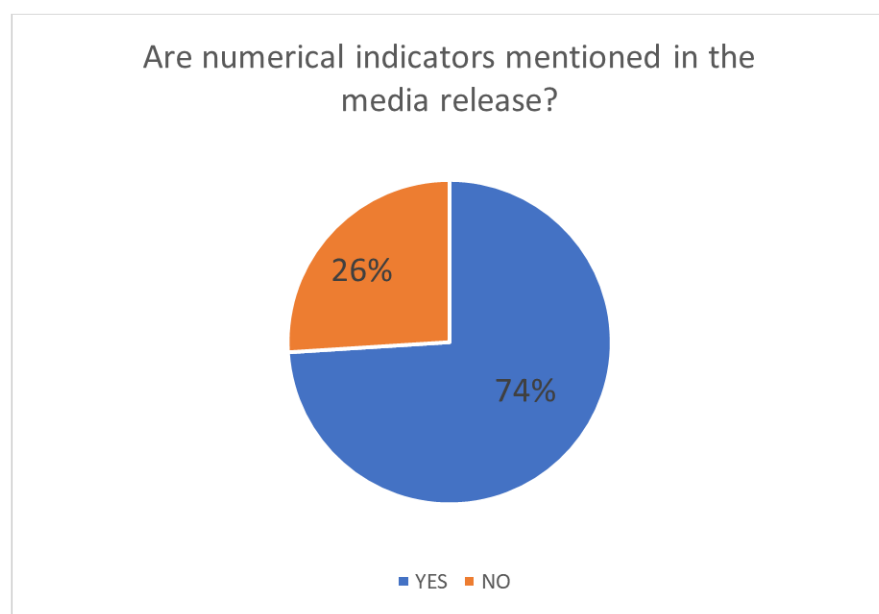
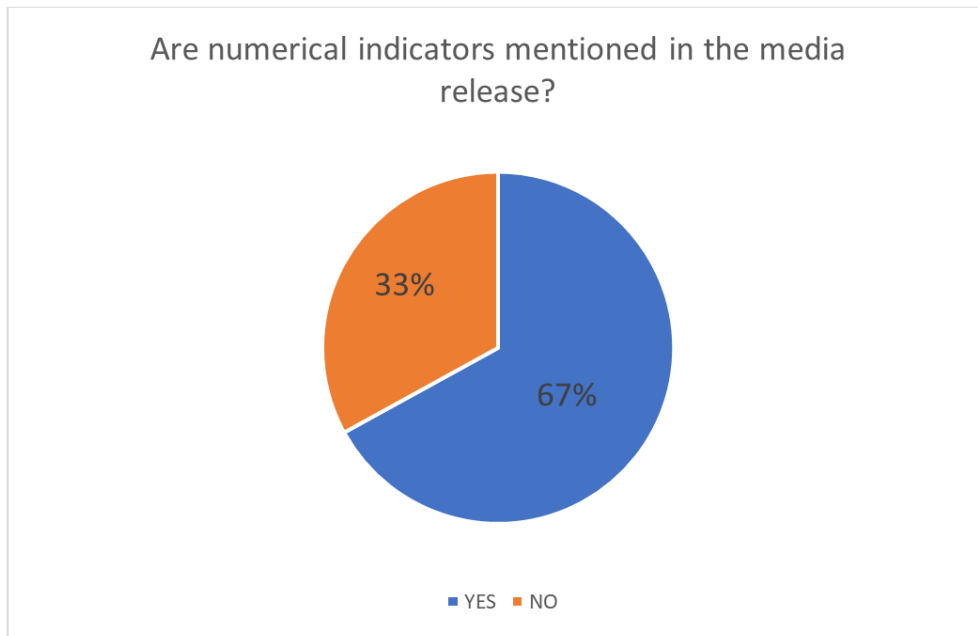


Figure 10. Mention of numerical indicators in a media publication on the *news* portal *Tportal.hr* (N=335)



Conclusion

Crisis communication is a branch of public relations that deals with communication aspects related to crises, situations in which difficulties caused by various reasons disrupt normal processes in business, politics and society in general. There are threats that are remedied in time and do not grow into large-scale crises, but in retrospect, in numerous examples of crises, they have a clear genesis - the initial problem of a limited scope grew larger until it escalated. Therefore, crises can be described as phenomena consisting of at least three parts: pre-crisis, acute phase and post-crisis. This paper deals with the pre-crisis period of the public health crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that marked the year 2020. The paper explores crisis communication through the prism of media coverage of the topic on Internet *news* portals, means of information that, due to rapid technological development and modern mobile forms of organization of private and business life, are gaining more and more importance. In crisis conditions, for the purpose of disseminating reliable information, the standards of credible journalism have a special value. In addition, the work investigates which group of actors achieved the greatest visibility in the media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, the analysis of media coverage of news portals *Večernji.hr* and *Tportal.hr* in the pre-crisis period can be assessed as credible due to the use of multiple sources and transparency in terms of authorship. Combined authorship dominated media publications. This means that authorship is attributed to a journalist and another actor, for example a news agency, or several

journalists are working on the story. This finding leads to the conclusion that convergence trends are not significantly expressed in the crisis communication of *news* portals. Instead, recent trends in newsrooms worldwide, due to improvements in the technical competence of journalists themselves and difficulties related to media financing that lead to cost reductions and workforce reductions, are moving in the direction of an increase in the proportion of journalists who operate on a freelance basis and independently perform various aspects of journalistic work. It seems that the public health crisis as a topic for the organization of journalistic work means reuniting and collective work on the same story with the division of work, as well as relying on the reports of news agencies, media actors who until recently were forecasting a gloomy future due to sluggishness and the inability to follow modern trends, especially expressed if they are state-owned.

The authenticity of journalistic content certainly depends on the number of media publications that are signed with the full name and surname of the journalist who worked on them. Considering the initiatives that are moving in the direction of better regulation of the online space, especially regarding the comments that appear on social networks, positive developments can be expected in the near future in terms of the absence of doubts regarding the question of who should be responsible for the written word. In addition to the sovereign authority as the prescriber of norms, an indispensable and even more important item in this sense refers to appropriate self-regulation that monitors all changes in the media market and acts proactively in the direction of a satisfactory level of „hygiene“ of public space. Nevertheless, the unique circumstances of the beginning and development of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in a remote part of the world offer a kind of alibi, that is, a justification for a more cautious approach toward media content authorship. In crisis situation certainly means circumstances in which the diffusion of responsibility regarding authorship may not be viewed as overly problematic. The research shows that collectivity in the sense of authorship of media announcements is also monitored in the source segment. The majority of media publications included three or more sources. In slightly more than 2% of the content, the source could not be identified, which is an extremely satisfactory percentage that testifies to how the news portals in this case truly served as a platform that follows *audiatur et altera pars* thinking.

As for the actors who achieved visibility in the pre-crisis period, the research identified three most important groups - politicians, health workers and scientists. Given the representation it has in the media even under normal circumstances, it is not surprising to find that politics dominated in this situation as a whole. Nevertheless, on the news portal *Večernji.hr*, health care workers joined politicians in equal proportion in terms of visibility. The most significant individual political actor, the research showed, was the Minister of Health Vili Beroš, who was referred to in the media more than five times more than Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

Future research could explore the role of a political leader such as a prime minister during the acute phase of a crisis. Finally, the research found that the analyzed news portals explicitly used the word „crisis“ in 17% of cases in the pre-crisis period. Research that may be undertaken in the future may

also explore this issue in the context of the acute phase of the crisis. The paper led to the finding that in the pre-crisis „construction“ of the media story related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of numerical indicators that point to seriousness and scientific discourse was important. Such a result suggests that media audiences came into contact with quality information on the basis of which they could form attitudes regarding the crisis situation.

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Obilježja izvještavanja hrvatskih news portala o pandemiji COVID-19 u 2020. godini u pretkriznom razdoblju

Sažetak

Javnozdravstvena kriza izazvana pandemijom virusa COVID-19 događaj je koji je u najvećoj mjeri obilježio 2020. godinu s različitih aspekata, pa tako i onog komunikacijskog. U radu se istražuje medijski odjek krize izazvane pandemijom virusa COVID-19 u pretkriznom periodu u Hrvatskoj, prije prvog registriranog slučaja zaraze. Najvažniji rezultat provedenog istraživanja je: kako se izvještavanje odabranih news portala u analiziranom periodu može ocijeniti vjerodostojnim iz razloga što se u medijskim objavama koristilo više izvora te je autorstvo bilo transparentno. Skupina aktera koja je u pretkrizi u medijskim objavama ostvarila najveću vidljivost bili su političari. Istraživanjem je također utvrđeno kako je u medijskim objavama news portala naglasak stavljen na brojčane pokazatelje u kontekstu krize, dok eksplicitno označavanje situacije putem riječi „kriza“ nije bilo zastupljeno u većoj mjeri.

Ključne riječi: *krizna komunikacija, pretkriza, COVID-19, news portali, vjerodostojnost medija.*



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