

Some thoughts on Covid-19 communication transparency

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It has been advocated for years that transparency in communication is a key to establishing trust between people. As a popular say goes in many places in the world “an innocent man has nothing to hide”. We take “innocent” in its etymological sense; the word comes from the Latin ‘*innocens*’, meaning ‘*not causing harm*’. We should hope that public authorities as well corporate authorities and individuals do not want to cause harm to others. If we accept this hypothesis, which we must admit can be refuted as there are authorities or people who willfully want to cause harm to others whatever the reason, we can have a look at how this notion of transparency has been treated in the context of the corona virus pandemic that has hit the world. There can be little doubt that authorities of various kinds have sought to get the trust of people, as this trust is the basis for the support that people can manifest towards the actions undertaken by the authorities. Such a situation as the corona virus pandemic is critical in its primary sense, i.e. it is a moment of truth.

Authorities (we will first focus on ‘public authorities’, as this is where the issue is most critical in the virus pandemic situation, then we can turn to ‘private authorities’ –i.e. corporate communication) have claimed that they want to be transparent in their communication. But there can be a smaller or greater distance from the cup to the lips.

Let’s first have a look at the word ‘transparency’. ‘Transparency’ (Latin ‘*traspicere*’) means that you can **see through** something to see some objects. This implies that first there is an object to see, and second that the visual perception one has of this object is not distorted but faithful to the object *in ipso*. In our case, ‘transparency’ applies to the communication about an object (the object being, *lato sensu*, the ‘corona virus crisis’). We here are confronted with a first difficulty. The communication does not exist in itself; it is the product of a human being. Consequently it cannot be ‘neutral’, as a piece of glass could be. It is necessarily influenced by the emitter of the message, even if the latter acts honestly and in good faith. Moreover the visual, or here the mental perception of the communication, hence the message, is also influenced by the receiver. Everybody knows that what a receiver understands is not always, to put it mildly, what the emitter means. That is why in casual conversations we often say “Do you see what I mean?”. ‘Transparency’, then, in the context of human communication always encounters some limitations.

Second, knowing that ‘transparency’ applies to some object that is communicated, we need to interrogate ourselves about this object. In the case of the ‘corona virus crisis’, the object is a number of data about this phenomenon. Where do these data come from? How have they been constructed? In fact, we need to do with these data what we should systematically do with any data. Therefore, the questioning about the relevance of the object must come before that of the transparency of the communication about this object.

If the object is not relevant and the communication is not transparent, we are in complete darkness.

If the object is relevant and the communication is not transparent, the message is biased.

If the object is not relevant and the communication is transparent, this is useless.

If the object is not relevant and the communication is not transparent, we are in a situation of deceit.

If the object is relevant and the communication is transparent, we are in a situation of ‘mutual understanding’ between the receiver and the emitter, and trust between the two can be established, entailing the support of the latter for the former.

Now we can consider both the nature of the data and the nature of the communication that has taken place since the outbreak of epidemic. It is here of course out of the question to carry out an in-depth analysis as the data and information we have are very incomplete and nobody at present is in a position to analyze them in a somewhat scientific way. We just want to give some insight into the situation and provide some food for thought.

The virus appeared in the city of Wuhan in China around mid-December 2019. The medical doctors who identified the virus were forbidden to communicate about it, and even condemned for trying to do so, and declared ‘enemies of the people’ (according to the Chinese rhetoric). So at the beginning, the lack of communication, which of course means total opacity, was the root cause of the spread of the virus. The authorities only started communicating about the epidemic around mid-January 2020, when it was decided to quarantine the whole of the city of Wuhan and its surroundings. At that time there was hardly any communication in European countries, and close to none in the USA, although authorities knew about it and were aware, albeit to different extents, of the lethal character of the virus (For example we learnt later that the former French Minister of Health and the Prime Minister knew about the danger of the virus). So we started with a non-transparent communication. However, it did not have a great impact on populations at first, who *per force* were not aware of the danger, and hence on trust.

Concerning the data communicated during this period (i.e. mid-January to nearly the end of February), first only the number of *officially* infected people was communicated. We have to stress the word ‘officially’ because there was a significant difference between the figure given and the reality, simply because of the lack of testing of the people. Therefore the figure given was based on the number of people admitted to hospital because of the presence of significant symptoms of the Covid-19 disease, a number of them being only tested *a posteriori*. For example in Italy the total number of infected people also included ‘suspects’ but not serious cases with home health checks.

A critical moment was reached when a second figure about the disease started to be given first at irregular intervals of time but very soon daily. This is the figure of the number of people dying because of Covid-19. We are here confronted with another big bias partly coming from the non-transparent communication and partly coming from the relevance of the data. In a number of countries (e.g. France or Italy for different reasons), only the people passing away in a hospital were computed. It is only later (towards mid-March) that people dying outside a hospital (e.g. nursing homes or at home) were computed. The different criteria for counting deaths in the various countries has contributed to creating a great confusion in the population and in the media who, in a number of places such as Italy, Spain or France – not by chance the most affected countries (until the USA came to the forefront) - wondered why mortality in the country was much higher than in other countries such as South Korea or Germany.

Strangely enough, an important figure was for relatively long, not communicated about; that of people cured from the disease. We have to take into account of course that there is a time difference between the number of people admitted in hospital, the number of deaths and the number of people cured (the treatment can last from two weeks to a month or even more). Even so, it is surprising that this figure was ignored for a relatively long time. Indeed, this figure, compared to the one of people infected, is a key indicator of how effective the treatment of sick people is, and consequently on the effectiveness of the measures taken by authorities, and in turn on the trust that populations can have in the authorities.

Whichever figure is communicated, the absence or the fuzziness of the way it is computed can only have an adverse effect on the trust people have in it. Moreover, comparisons are very difficult as there are significant variations between the computing method used by such or such authority in such or such country, or even inside the same country where the management of public health is decentralized, like for example in Italy or Germany.

We can also mention the communication about tests and masks. Populations have expected to be ‘transparently’ informed about the situation. In Europe, for nearly two months, they were told that tests were reserved for persons showing clear symptoms of the disease and that masks were useless and reserved for medical personnel (finding ‘good’ medical reasons for that!). Then one day, somehow out of the blue, they were told that there would be systematic tests, but not for all, and that masks were a good, if not perfect, protection against the spread of the virus. Consequently they were imposed in some places, or recommended in others, or the situation remained fuzzy in others still. At the same time, Europeans knew that tests were systematic in a number of Asian countries, and the wearing of masks was obligatory (e.g. South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore). “*Truth on one side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side*” as Blaise Pascal wrote long ago? For some reasons – we leave them to the reader – public authorities have been unable just to say “*We cannot test widely for now, we cannot oblige people to wear masks, because we do **not** have enough test kits and enough masks*”.

A major problem at the time of the peak of the infection was that of the number of beds in intensive treatments available in the different countries.

The differences between countries is very high, in Germany at the beginning of the pandemic there were 6 ICU beds per 1,000 inhabitants, 3.1 in France, 2.6 in Italy and 2.4 in Spain. In Italy the places have more than doubled in the course of the development of the infection. The scarcity of places has led some doctors to say that they had to choose whom to put in intensive care or not, so whom to try to cure. Such a decision raises, of course, ethical questions. Doctors pointed out that it was a question of choosing according to emergency medicine ‘rules’ among people who were able to endure intensive care or not.

The communication in this regard has always been confused and when asked if it ever happened, the civil protection in Italy for example never replied with data such as the number of therapies and the number of persons hospitalized.

Such a communication situation can only leave people confused, to say the least.

All this confirms that ‘transparency’ is one thing, but that it becomes meaningless if the object of the communication is firmly and clearly established.

The communication, to say the least with limited transparency (Symptomatically, the French Prime Minister said in one of his addresses to the people that he would speak in ‘total transparency’, which, in good logic, means that before he was not, which is true), then varied over time with an ‘uncontrolled’ foundation, which people realized, causing a lack of trust in the authorities. A good number of opinion polls show that a sizeable majority, hovering around 60%, of people in different countries do not have trust in the communication of authorities (e.g. 63% in the USA, 66% in the UK, 67% in Sweden, 60% in France, [various polls]).

The confusion among people, jeopardizing trust and creating anxiety or false hopes, has been increased by the spreading of fake news about miraculous cures or vaccines or about the origin of the virus, and by the drastic differences of opinion between the scientists and experts, real or fake, who inundate the media networks every day.

Now, if we turn to corporate communication, what is the picture? It is difficult to say as information is piecemeal. Notwithstanding, this is an aspect of great importance because, as the Reputation track Institute underlines, people hold not only the state but also businesses responsible for blocking the pandemic.

It is therefore very important that companies at the time of resuming their activities are able to ensure the safety of workers and of their family members.

In this regard, there is little information, especially on small companies which opened despite the national lockdown because local authorities have granted many derogations.

A clear framework is needed based on constructive dialogues between representatives of companies and workers. Some companies, such as Ferrari automobiles, have acted in total transparency by showing the new internal organization of the activities.

However, it seems that on the whole businesses have been better at communicating both internally (though very difficult to appreciate for lack of information) in a reasonably transparent way and on the basis of sufficiently reliable company accounting data, such as the amount of sales, the level of cash or the use of production capacity.

We get the feeling – it would be preposterous at this time say otherwise – that people have been better and more thoroughly informed about the impact of the crisis by businesses than by public authorities. Certainly some ‘big’ industries like the automotive or aeronautics sectors and obviously the tourism sector, which has probably been the hardest hit and will be impacted for months, if not years to come, have communicated in a clear way to the public about the seriousness of the situation through the media.

We can also notice that companies have been remarkably swift to adapt their production to the necessities of the crisis. For example tele-working was promptly put in place where possible, production process were quickly modified to produce products needed to combat the pandemic (e.g. perfume factories making test kits, car factories making ventilators, garment factories making masks). Even if we take into account the fact that companies are submitted to much fewer contradictory constraints as public authorities, we can notice that their reactivity is quicker, we could say more rational, and consequently more effective, than that of public authorities.

As we stand now, what general lessons could we draw from the present situation for the future?

We believe that there is no doubt that transparency in communication is a necessity both in the ‘public’ and ‘private’ areas in order to establish trustful relationships between all stakeholders. But this transparency is not an aim in itself; it is a means or a mode of conveying information about some object. Therefore if the object itself is wrong or biased, the transparency doesn’t exist but in word. We can hope that both public and private authorities will realize for good that social relationships can only be beneficial for all with transparency and clear objects. One can win for a while by cheating, but not in the long term, as history shows. The present crisis is also showing, in an exacerbated manner, that people care and expect to receive trustworthy information. It is also showing that people can be fully committed to actions beneficial for all acting together for a common scope. What is revealed in times of utter crisis could be a regular behavior contributing to harmonious relationships and the well-being of societies and for this a clear, simple, engaging and transparent communication is fundamental. Transparency can be the sign of the awareness, responsibility and participation of the community in solving the present problem, and beyond it any social problem.

Let’s hope it is not just wishful thinking. *“Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret”* (Horace).