

# NEWS MEDIA AND POLITICAL AGENDA DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

The year 2020 marked the largest human pandemic in the world since the first century. Covid19 crossed the borders of China and found habitat in the whole world, paralyzing the most powerful countries of the globe, causing hundreds of thousands of victims, postponing thousands of businesses, cancelling millions of flights, keeping enclosed at home millions of people and giving the Nature the freedom to breathe, like never before. The aim of this paper is to explore how the news media and political agendas were shaped during this unprecedented crisis. Did the news media agenda reflect the overall worries of the citizens about the sources of this pandemic? Did it offer a larger view of the reality, of the ramifications and of the solutions to the locked down citizens? Does it have an impact to the political agendas? The overall findings of this research showed us that during the Covid lockdown, the news media agenda was full of information about the pandemic situation and all its economic, political and social consequences but it was also full of information about the welfares of this situation to the Nature. The visual, print and online news media offered to the public not only statistics and emotional videos from hospitals but it also offered extraordinary pictures of the Earth in pause and pictures of the Nature in peace. The news media discourse put the spotlight on the urgent need to stop the human violence towards the Nature. The political discourse shifted from elections to the pandemic situation. Parliamentary, local and presidential elections are postponed in several countries.

*Keywords:* news, Nature, sanitary crisis, discourse

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## 1. Introduction

By definition, violence is “the use of force” (Le Grand Robert, 2001, p.1854). The violence is present in the everyday life of humans, both in the real life and on the media. In most cases, man is the author of violence over man. By definition, violence is the law of the bully and it may take any possible form. The human being knows how to exercise a variety of different types of violence such as physical violence, symbolic violence, political violence, psychological violence etc. The only form of violence that doesn't come from human being is the natural violence. It is expressed in different natural forms such as: storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and other natural disasters. It can also be expressed in an invisible form such as a virus. According to Georges Franju « the violence is not the goal, the violence is the means ». As such, during the history, violence is used by humans for different purposes in order to reach different goals, mainly used for religious and political purposes. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Machiavelli has claimed that the violence sometimes is necessary in order to achieve political goals “man can use cunning, violence and even murder if it is absolutely necessary to found a nation, if his sole interest is the common good and does not seek any personal gain (power, money...) [...] it is not violence that restores but violence that ruins that must be condemned”.

However, « violence, in whatever form it occurs, is a failure » (Machiavelli, 1532) even if “all means are good when they are effective” (Sartre: 1948). Nowadays, violence is much larger as a concept. We see its application via all means. For the philosopher Jean-François Malherbe « the violence which has to do with speech is characteristic of the human. It also suggests that animals are not, strictly speaking, violent: their behaviors simply obey the inexorable laws of nature. "Animal violence" is therefore only an anthropomorphic projection on animal behavior ». So the possible first step before acting out is verbal abuse. According to the writer Isabelle Alonso: “verbal violence is the first step in general violence “(2001). Indeed, except the violence coming by the Nature, all other violence in our world comes from humans. Even in the 21st century, human violence is fully present in the world. It is expressed human versus human and human versus Nature (and all the other living beings). Criminality against state laws ends up often by being punished but often criminality against Natures ends up by not being punished even if it is foreseen by the Penal Codes of most of the countries. The modern society for centuries has been building its development over the violence towards humans and towards the Nature. As the French philosopher has mentioned since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the evil-doers are so stupid that repeated violence ends up seeming to them as right. Exactly after once century from Spanish flu of 1918-1919 the world is facing another pandemic called Covid19. The whole world is exposed to it; the most powerful countries are cruelly affected. The industry stopped, all transports stopped, the work stopped and the state borders are closed. The economy is severely damaged. China, Italy, France, Spain, United Kingdom, Iran, Brazil, United States lived in emergency situations. The over developed world of 21<sup>st</sup> century was found unprepared to confront such a crisis: it lacks face masks, screening tests, emergency equipment, hydro-alcoholic disinfectant gel, hospital beds and respiratory equipment and even medical staff. Millions of people were closed in their homes, some of them lost their jobs and some of them worked from home or were left in partial employment. Life savers: doctors, nurses and other hospital workers were at the front line. Police, food producers, grocery stores, public cleaning and services, governments, journalists, are those who continued to work. Most of populations were locked inside homes. More than ever we needed the media and the internet (CNews, 2020a). We needed news in order to be informed about what is happening now and what will go to happen in the future.

## **2. Methodology: Political agenda and political discourse (in front of the power of Nature)**

It may be interpreted as random or not, but in November of the this year the United States of America withdraw itself officially from the Climate Agreement, as announced in 2017 (Le point, 2020a). Signed since 2015, “*this text, resulting from the negotiations at the COP 21 conference, the fruit of years of laborious negotiations between nearly 200 countries and different entities, aims to limit the increase in average temperature on Earth to below 2°C caused by human activity*” (L’Express, 2020a). So, the giant of world economy such as US decided to definitely abandon this agreement for protecting the climate of our planet and the “official reason for the withdrawal is that Washington considers the agreement unfair for the United States” (L’Express, 2020b). News media headlines like “Paris Agreement: China, Russia Deplore US Withdrawal” (Le Point, 2020), marks that “[two] largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet” (Le Monde, 2020a) are in disaccord concerning vital issues. This political agenda is a clear demonstration of the lack of consensus about the damages caused to our planet. This agenda continues to ignore the urgent need of Nature for care. May it be interpreted as ironic that both these countries are now in a diplomatic crisis because of the Covid19? (BBC, 2020). The “Chinese virus” is causing enormous damages to the American economy in 2020, also the year in which the presidential elections in the US were supposed to be held but which

may be even postponed (BBC, 2020b). In France, the first round of local elections took place just at the beginning of the pandemic on March 15. As the lockdown was announced to start on March 17, the second round of those elections was postponed for an indecisive date once the crisis is over.

*“French citizens went to the polls on Sunday for local elections despite a nationwide lockdown announced just a day earlier brought on by the corona virus outbreak – and which might end up convincing many voters to stay at home. President Emmanuel Macron, for whom the two-round polls are a crucial mid-term test, has insisted that the polls to elect mayors and municipal councils must go ahead to assure democratic continuity in the country”* (France24, 2020).

“Could democracy resist to the virus?” was called a live discussion on the French television CNews (CNews, 2020b) on 17 March, the day that the national lockdown started in France. The extreme measure in a time of peace was announced by the President “in a somber address to nation” arguing with the solemn words ‘we are at war’. (Reuters, 2020). Parliamentary elections were also postponed in North Macedonia (Balkan Insight, 2020), a small multiethnic country in the western Balkans, newly accepted as a member of NATO wishing to integrate the EU. During the pandemic North Macedonia made a big step forward its European future, but it was not as much celebrated as it should, because of the sanitary crisis.

*“European Union ministers say they have approved beginning membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania, with a top German official calling it “good news in these gloomy times [...] the agreement was reached during a videoconference [...] The agreement must still be confirmed and approved in written form. That is expected to happen on March 25, although conditions posed by the corona virus could delay that move”* (Radio Free Europe, 2020a).

In the three cases mentioned above, the invisible virus was able to shift and to adapt political agenda of big and small countries. The pandemic crisis forced governments to take decisions they would probably have never taken before over elections and polls, and also to make the public health a priority. As political researchers mention, agenda-setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Indeed, during the lockdown of the pandemic 2020 happened that “the information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics” (Protest, McCombs, 1991, p. 17) and as such news media and politics were consumed together by the public. In the case of Covid19, the governments all over the world had to manage a situation unprecedented and never seen before. They were in front of a reality where their popularity would get measured by the degree of ability they will demonstrate to manage the crises during this year 2020. Usually, “public attention is a scarce resource, the allocation of which depends on competition within a system of public arenas [...] problems must struggle to occupy space in public arena” (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). The pandemic crisis Covid19 and all its consequences was not such a case and it automatically took the whole public attention, even the enormous attention that usually political elites, media and public give to the elections. No other issue seems more urgent than the wide public health.

### **3. Results: Media agenda and discourse (on the Nature’s side)**

In 2020 the violence against humans took the form of an invisible enemy. For us humans, 2020 was supposed to be a nice symmetric, symbolic, fancy year. The pandemic crisis condemned millions of people to be lockdown, to be afraid, and to change their life routines. In other terms, we lost our freedom, which was gained by Nature on the other hand.

In times of crisis like a pandemic lockdown, news media remains the only credible source of information for a confined public. As a result, during this pandemic Covid19 news media had quite the monopole of information to suggest to people “what to think” and “what to think

about”, as scholars affirm to be the power of media influence for persuasion (Neuman et al, 2014).

News media showed pictures of governments working online, parliaments working in half capacities and with social distancing, presidents wearing masks, prime ministers and health ministers being infected and hospitalized (for example the British prime minister and the Iranian deputy minister of health). Media discourse focused on how we humans of 21<sup>st</sup> century, are reduced like this and that much more attention from governments of developed countries should have been accorded much earlier to the relevant issues of our time like the protection and respect for the Nature, the public health care professionals and supplies, the national production of medicaments, the public hygiene and media literacy. The simple hygiene gestures, the need to pay the nurses better, the need for more hospital beds, the need for national face mask stocks and many other issues, should be *permanently* on the top of political agendas and at the center of attention of public arenas. Media of different countries showed pictures of big cities totally empty, abandoned and scary. Wuhan, Paris, Rome, Milan, Tirana, Prishtina, Skopje, Barcelona, New York etc. The main public television channel of France, *TF1* broadcasted for about two months a special chronicle called “France viewed by the sky” (*La France vue du ciel*) showing different cities and villages of the country empty and quiet like never before. “*What does our country look like when it is almost at a standstill? For the past week, we have been showing you images of our towns, villages and countryside as you have never seen them*” (TF1, 2020a), announced the news anchor Gilles Bouleau in March 26<sup>th</sup> during the main news program. Rarely people interviewed randomly outside say “it is quiet but very sad”, “Nature is taking a rest”, “the air pollution is low since we humans are staying inside”.

Wildlife is living quietly at the time of Covid19. *CNews* television channel in France shows how animals around the world are coming quietly inside cities walking on the roads and squares (CNews, 2020c). Pictures of ducks in front of the main French theatre (*Comédie Française*) or the dolphins on the channels of Venice are commented in studio by the journalist and guests. They confirm their belief that Nature is having a rest since there is no pollution by cars, no noise by airplanes, no tourists, and no people outside and so animals are breathing in freedom (Radio Europe1, 2020a). Also people who live close to airports are reported to be having another kind of life during the lockdown, the channels of Venice are clearer than ever, the air pollution indicators are lower than ever. This peace on planet Earth is confirmed by the satellite views presented from the weather anchor Louis Bodin during the main news program of *TF1* the 5 April (TF1, 2020b). The ozone layer made the headline of world media by the end of April. *CBS* announces in its article “The largest Arctic ozone hole ever recorded is now closed” (CBS News, 2020) that “*despite corona virus lockdowns leading to a significant reduction in air pollution, researchers said the pandemic likely was not the reason for the ozone hole closing [...] It's been driven by an unusually strong and long-lived polar vortex, and isn't related to air quality changes.*” But, *Tehran Times* of Iran, one of the most affected countries in the world, writes “Earth Day 2020: nature is a beneficiary of corona virus” (Tehran Times, 2020).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The sanitary crisis of 2019-2020 reminded the policymakers, media and public that global and national political agendas should put the environmental issues on the top in the list of their priorities. The problem of human violence on Nature should be on top of the political, media and public agenda after the pandemic crisis in order to avoid the model of Chinese phenomenon of pollution explosion after crisis, as the media is already alerting: “*Let's not forget that previous crises are rich in lessons, after 2008, CO2 emissions in China exploded the following*

year. When we enter the post-corona virus period, we can legitimately fear that the economic recovery will justify putting aside climate concerns” (Radio Europe1, 2020b). During the pandemic crisis Covid19, news media gave to the Nature and to the environment the accurate place on its agenda. Talking and thinking about the Nature and its preservation was a good experience of reflections for all generations of public during this six months pandemic crisis (January-June 2020) since the news media was the main and the most credible source of information for millions of people confined at home. This experience will probably remain in the collective memory and will be expressed in future electoral choices because “individuals' explanations of political issues are significantly influenced by the manner in which television news presentations “frame” these issues” (Iyengar, 1987). On the other side, how political parties reacted via the communicated agenda in terms of the measures to be taken during the pandemic, will probably influence the next polls of the postponed elections in some countries and even the next elections in other countries. Scholars conclude that “in situation of crisis, communication can sometimes bring the organization a more positive reputation than it had before the crises” (Fearn-Banks, 2017) but it still remains to be seen how this will apply in different countries in the next elections.

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