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Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism

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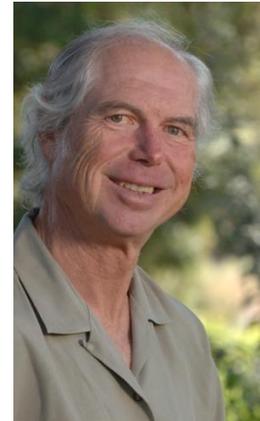
Why pandemic communication and populism?

For years we have done a lot of exercises, tabletop scenarios, playing out, you know, what-ifs. And you come up with all these crazy schemes of, like, what could happen? What could go wrong? You know... this chemical gets released, this bomb goes off. And you play out all those scenarios. **Never did we play out the potential element that the White House, the President, the Vice President of the country, would completely disagree or say things contradictory to what the scientific experts within the government were saying....**

Communication official in the Department of Health and Human Services, USA

PANCOPOP Project: Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism

- Mihelj (Lead PI, UK), Hallin (USA), Klimkiewicz (Poland), Laruelle (USA), Rothberg (Brazil), Štětka (UK) + Atreya (USA), Brandão (UK), Ferracioli (Brazil), Stojiljković (UK/Serbia), Rao (USA), Vanevska (Poland)
- Two key aims:
 - Advance the understanding of the impact of populist politics on health crisis communication
 - Improve crisis communication strategies & build more resilient media organisations
- Impact partners
 - European Platform of Regulatory Authorities, European Federation of Journalists, European Broadcasting Union
 - National Federation of Brazilian Journalists, Brazilian federation of scientific and Academic Associations of Communication, Brazilian Journalism Researchers Association

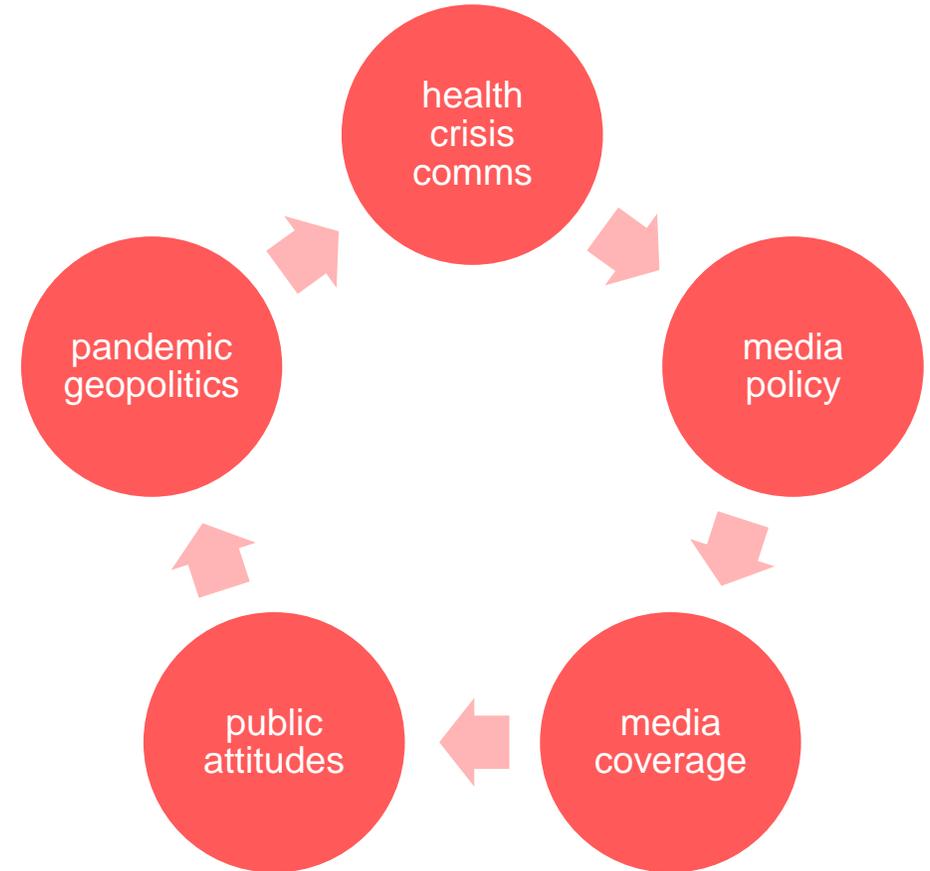


Traits of populism that may hinder effective pandemic communication

- Populism thrives on division and polarization between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and between ‘us’ and various ‘others’ (e.g., Moffitt, 2020) ► populist leaders might find it difficult to abandon this strategy, even during a crisis
- Populism is associated with strongman rule (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) ► populist leaders may seek to take control over crisis communication and displace medical/ public health authorities
- Illiberalism – populist leaders tend to adopt illiberal responses and policies, colonize the state, silence opponents (Blokker, 2021) ► this may hinder freedom of information during a crises
- Populists are well-versed at using social media (Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018) ► social media can be used to undermine the legitimacy of established epistemic authorities in a health crisis (incl. public health authorities, medical experts, news media)
- At population level, populism-driven anti-elitism can go hand in hand with epistemic populism & distrust of established political and expert institutions (Brubarker, 2020; Saurette and Gunster, 2011) ► populists’ challenges to expert guidance can fall on fertile grounds
- Populist politics goes hand in hand with polarization (e.g., Schulze et al., 2020; Vachudova, 2019) among the electorate and the media, which may make it difficult to establish/sustain unity

Research design and methods: Comparative analysis of the pandemic communication cycle

- Five strands: health crisis comms, media policy, media coverage, public attitudes and news habits + pandemic geopolitics (China & Russia)
- Methods: elite interviews, policy analysis, media content analysis (frame analysis + machine learning), population survey, public records and other secondary resources
- Comparative analysis of four countries led by populist leaders who adopted different approaches to the pandemic:
 - Brazil & USA: Downplaying the threat
 - Poland & Serbia: Taking the threat seriously





[Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism - YouTube](#)

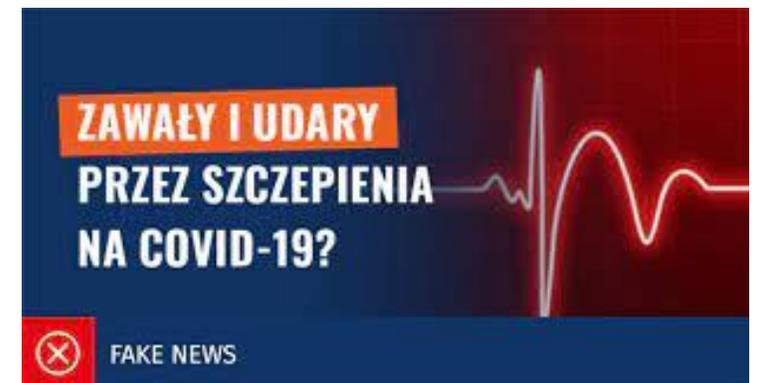
Health crisis communication

- Methods: elite interviews + public records
- Two models of populist response to the pandemic, with different consequences for HCC
 - US & Brazil: Populist leaders redefine the health crisis as a conflict between the elites and the people & between the leader and his enemies; interfere with expert response and HCC from the start; spread misinformation
 - Poland & Serbia: Populist leaders initially take the pandemic seriously, align with expert advice & present themselves as defenders of the people vs. virus; later politicize and weaken measures or abstain from promoting them due to protests/ fear of backlash; illiberal responses to criticism throughout
- Similarities: Politicians control or interfere with crisis comms (strongman rule); politicization and polarization in all countries (people vs. elite, us vs. them), but at different points in time



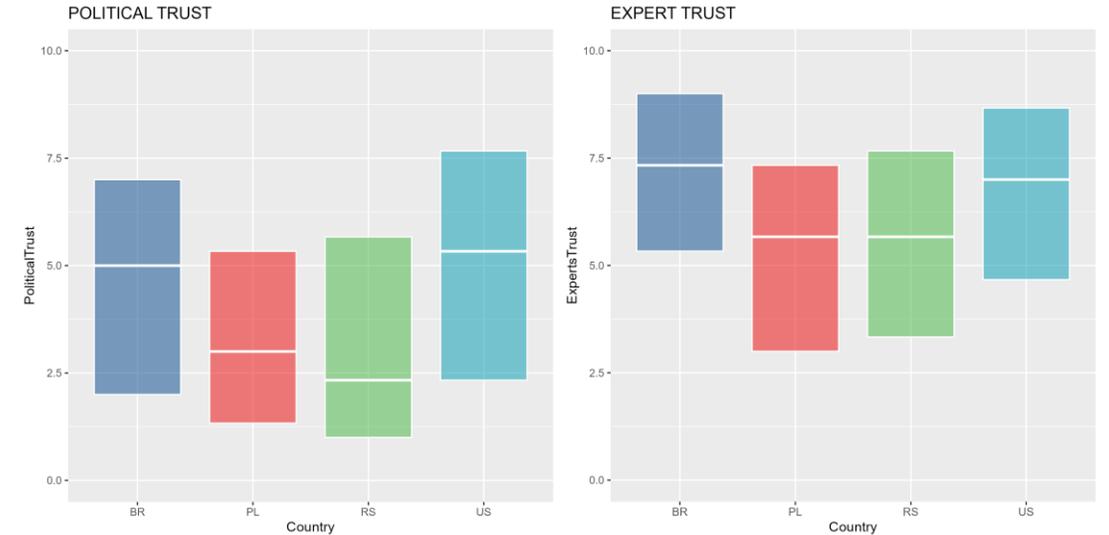
Media policy

- Methods: Media policy analysis + interviews + public records
- Freedom of information becomes limited during the pandemic in all four countries, despite constitutional guarantees
 - New restrictions on journalists' access to information
 - Attacks on journalists in two of the countries
- Untransparent and/or unfair distribution of state advertising or public funding for media during the crisis in three of the countries
- Unsystematic or even non-existent efforts to combat health misinformation + top-down spreading of misinformation in two countries



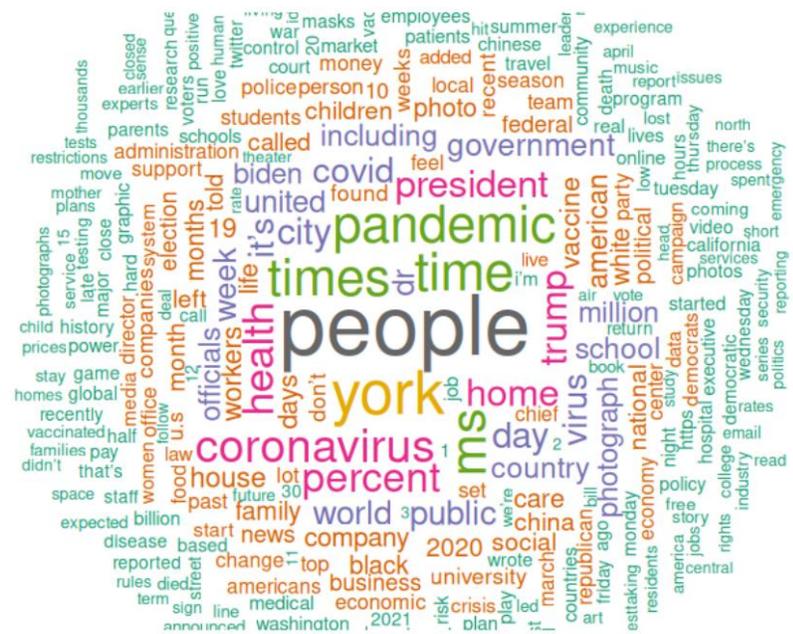
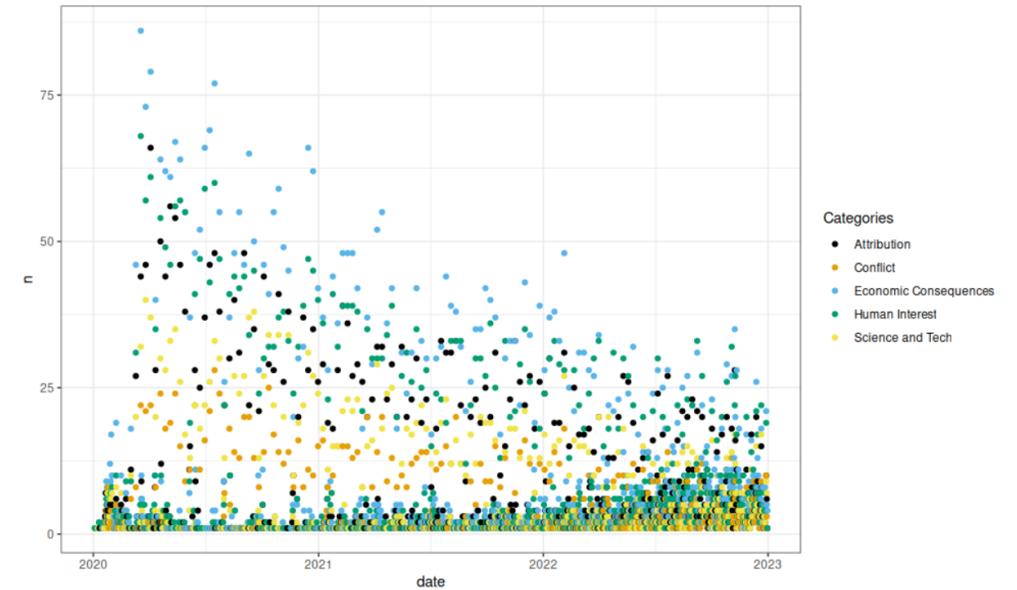
Public attitudes and news consumption habits

- Methods: Representative population survey
- Trust in expert institutions consistently higher than trust in political institutions
- People who hold populist attitudes are less likely to trust institutions
- Close link between beliefs in false information and distrust of expert institutions
- People who relied on messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Viber) for COVID-19 news were more vulnerable to misinformation



Media coverage & pandemic geopolitics (in progress)

- Sample:
 - Jan 2020 – Dec 2022; constructed week
 - 3 media outlets in each country
- Method:
 - Computational frame analysis (full sample); Multinomial Naive Bayes (best performing algorithm)
 - Qualitative frame analysis (c. 500 per country)
- Results:
 - Generic frames
 - Economic consequences
 - Human interest
 - Attribution of responsibility
 - Science and technology
 - Conflict
 - Issue-specific frames



Health crisis communication in a new environment



A new political environment

Populism makes it less likely for politicians to set divisions aside in a crisis

Populist attitudes increase resistance to scientific guidance & vulnerability to misinformation

A polarized electorate is difficult to unify in a crisis



A new communication environment

Digital platforms & 'many-to-many' communication – greater variety of voices, but also threat of misinformation

Old models of public health communication, which rely on the 'one-to-many' model of communication are obsolete

Implications?



- Is the global rise of populist politics changing the nature of crisis communication?
- From too much unity to too little unity?

Adapting to the new political environment

Actively manage the relationship between science and politics

- Expect public health measures to be **politicized**
- Cooperation with government officials and politicians should go hand in hand with a **separation of responsibilities**
- Engage with politically, ideologically and culturally diverse actors to develop **multipartisan responses**

Review public health emergency training and tools

- Integrate **scenarios involving negative influence of political leaders** in public health emergency preparedness training for public health professionals
- Prepare **tools for managing the negative influence** of political leaders

Ensure primacy of science and expertise in official communication

- **Foreground experts** in official communication campaigns
- Maintain **publicly visible separation** between experts and politicians

Adapting to the new communication environment

Implement networked public health comms model

- Integrate **dialogic elements** in public health comms
- Prepare **comms strategies to counteract resistance** to preventative measures
- Engage with **culturally and ideologically diverse** objections
- **Involve social scientists** in the development of new strategies

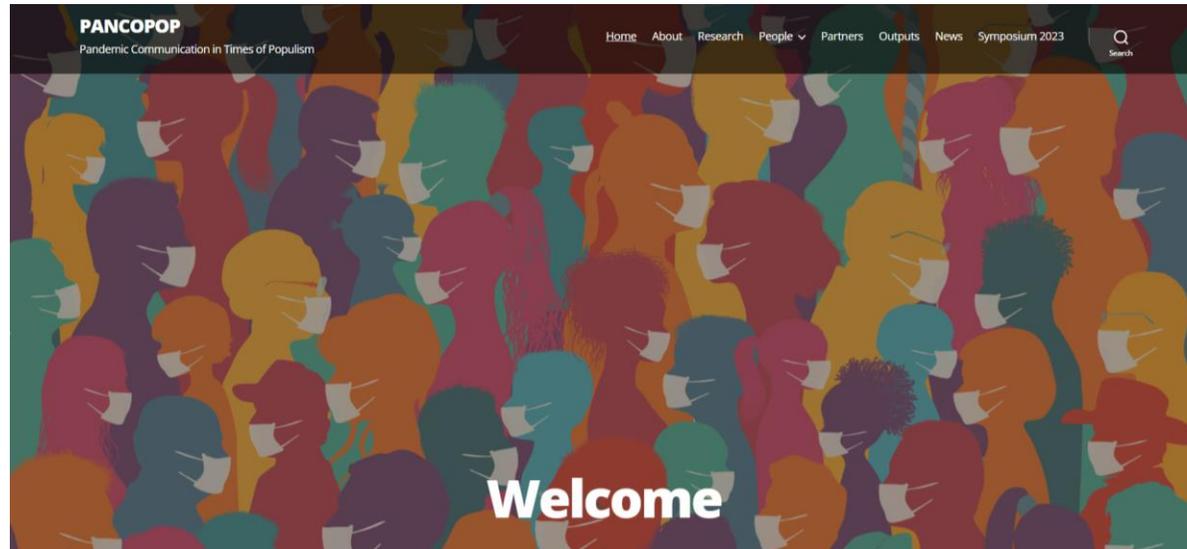
Strengthen strategies for combatting misinformation

- Acknowledge the possibility of **top-down misinformation**
- Work with local authorities, NGOs and communities to **develop local channels to counteract misinfo**
- Develop an **integrated approach to combatting misinformation online and offline**

Facilitate public access to trustworthy health information

- Ensure public access to trustworthy information **throughout the crisis**
- Ensure that journalists have **access to right experts**
- Work with regulators to **bolster freedom of information protections** during a crisis
- Work with digital platforms to ensure **greater visibility of trustworthy expert health advice**

Thank you & further information



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