

T5.1.2

Methodological paper on the strategy and main activities of the press centre

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T5.1.2 Methodological paper on the strategy and main activities of the press centre
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To create a comprehensive TELL ME communication strategy, we first analyzed how the media have dealt with the last pandemic influenza (2009). Based on the results of the analysis we have outlined a possible strategy for the action of the Press Centre both towards the media and towards the stakeholders, focused on the idea of becoming a benchmark for balanced, independent and science-based reporting of controversial issues such as vaccines, microbes and pandemic outbreaks. Finally, the paper intends to present a first (and temporary) communication roadmap from now by the end of the project.

1. A road map for a communication strategy by TELL ME

In order to create the TELL ME communication strategy project we must first of all ask ourselves who is interested in reading information relevant to a communication project regarding the pandemic risk. Generally speaking the people that are most interested are those working in this field. To increase the number of those interested we think it would be useful to broaden communication regarding epidemic and pandemic flu in their various aspects by focusing in particular on risk information and what action needs to be taken to eventually confront a pandemic. This way we can get a larger audience, and in particular the media, to follow us. Our aim will be to arouse the media's attention on this issue and on the TELL ME project.

It is for this reason that we think it is useful to go over the stages of the last pandemic flu and to summarize some analysis of how the media went about describing this epidemic.

First of all the following are the key dates of the 2009 epidemic:

- 30 March: influenza first reported in a child on a naval base in San Diego.
- 6 April: Mexican authorities report a respiratory infection that has spread to La Gloria (State of Veracruz)
- 23 April: the CDC confirm that all cases can be traced back to the new strain of swine flu H1N1.
- 26 April: The WHO states that the flu could be pandemic.
- 26 April: Keji Fukuda, the WHO Assistant Director, states that preliminary work began with the aim of preparing the vaccine in case it was necessary.
- 29 April: 9 countries have reported confirmed cases of A1H1N1.
- 30 April: First case of H1N1 in Italy confirmed.
- 4 May: confirmed laboratory cases worldwide exceed 1,000 and the number of countries involved are 20.
- 20 May: More than 20,000 registered cases.
- 11 June: The flu is declared pandemic (phase 6) with 28,000 cases registered. 2 % of those who fell ill have serious consequences. Those aged 30 to 50 are the ones that risk the most. Margareth Chan of the WHO states that at least 2 months are needed to prepare the first vaccines.
- 15 September: The food and Drug Administration approved four vaccines for the United States.
- The end of September: The EMEA recommends the European Council to authorize placing on the market two vaccines against the new flu: Pandremix, a GlaxoSmithKline product and Focetria produced by Novartis.
- October: the vaccines are ready but the population – due to the perception that the new 'pandemic' is not particularly dangerous – does not undergo vaccination as is recommended by the health authorities.

1.1 Communication between the pandemic flu and the vaccine

In managing communication the WHO pursued the same strategy that had already been used in previous years during the avian flu and SARS following the guidelines for reporting epidemic emergencies that had been established in 2005 (WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines). The aim of the guidelines was to gain the public's confidence, be timely and achieve communication transparency by not concealing any

uncertainties and grey areas of the pandemic's evolution. In principle the Ministries of Health of various nations adapted to the WHO guidelines by trying not to give alarming information.

How did the media behave? It is difficult to give an unequivocal answer. The way the media followed the pandemic information not only varies from country to country but also depending on the type of news organization. One of TELL ME's communication office tasks is to gather and summarize the analysis in recent years regarding the media's behavior on recent pandemics. From the analysis we've been able to carry out up to now it appears the European press has not been excessively alarmist as some believe to be the case. Look at the British press for example. In December 2010 it issued a report on the pandemic flu media coverage in the UK newspapers. The study took into consideration 2,374 articles published in eight national newspapers between March 1 2009 and 28 February 2010.¹

According to the authors of the research, the results lead to the conclusion that the media did not create any alarmism. The press followed the pandemic closely when it reached its peak in England and when, at the same time, the scientists' uncertainty regarding the real dangers of the virus was at its peak. Later on, during the autumn months, the flu reached its second peak but by then the uncertainty margins regarding its danger were considerably reduced: as a result of this change in considering it less dangerous the media progressively reduced its coverage. The authors conclude stating that the media coverage in the united Kingdom reflects a true scientific uncertainty and that there is no evidence of the fact that the risks were either distorted or amplified.

It is thus possible that the media hype problem is much less important than is commonly led to believe and that in part this issue reflects the real difficulties in trying to manage communication risks which is always communication of uncertainty.

In a sense, from a journalistic point of view, the 2009 pandemic was (fortunately) a failure (flop)...and this is the reason for which – as we will see later on - the media's attention swayed to establish whether the 'pandemic' wasn't simply considered a 'business opportunity' to sell vaccines and drugs.

Studies regarding the Italian situation confirm the media's peak interest in the pandemic during spring as the public's interest dropped which coincided with the vaccination flop in Italy as well.²

As can be seen in the Google chart (Chart 1) the word pandemic became commonly used by Italians two times in the last seven years: in the second half of 2005, in relation to the avian flu, and then in 2009. In 2009 however the word pandemic was particularly clicked during the March-April period and then had a variable trend but always to a lesser extent than during spring. It appears therefore that the term pandemic was of great interest during the early stages of the world-wide warning. Then it lost interest as the risks appeared to be disappearing.

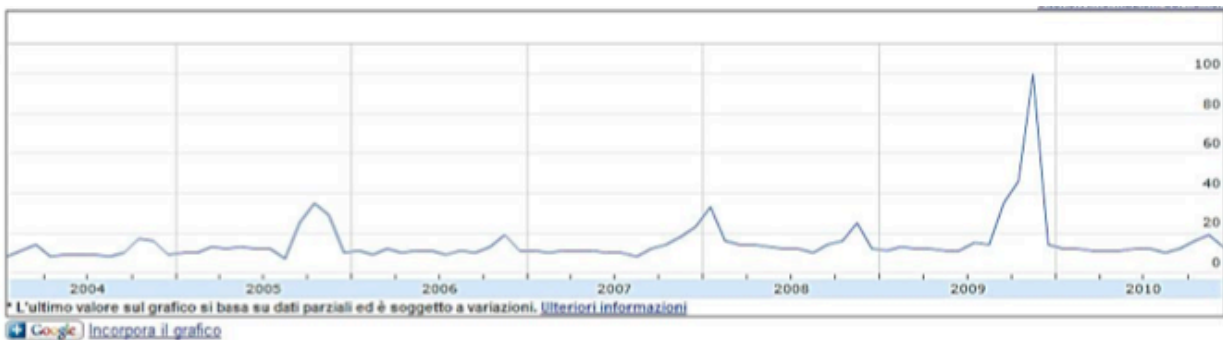
CHART 1



Fonte: Google Insight [<http://www.google.com/insights/search>]

The chart clicks show a different trend as far as the word vaccine is concerned which has a significant peak around November.

CHART 2



Fonte: Google Insight [<http://www.google.com/insights/search>]

This shows us that probably the public's poor response to vaccination throughout all of Europe was not due to indifference, and that actually – as is demonstrated by other media analysis – people were informed, though often incorrectly.

In effect the analysis carried out on the press as well as on sites and blogs on the net shows a considerable majority of articles that give an extremely negative image of the anti-flu vaccine. The vaccine is considered dangerous for its side-effects (partially due to adjuvant substances found inside it such as squalene and mercury); and the flu, as well, does not appear to constitute a real risk. Its dangerous effects were inflated by the media and by an industry that has an interest in selling news, vaccines and other drugs.

Summarizing, we can state that an important part of the media (particularly on the web) erased any uncertainty regarding the pandemic's possible evolution. After an initial moment of suspense the media began to deflate the 'pandemic issue' by considering it a business issue. The WHO's ambiguous definition of the pandemic certainly didn't help the issue; it gave details of the pandemic's geographical extension but not its dangers. Regardless of the number of times Ministers and experts explained the issue, the public appeared not to have understood them. The term pandemic evokes an extremely grave scenario like in the movie Contagion; if this does not occur then it isn't a pandemic. This way of perceiving the pandemic, which is deeply rooted in the public and media, must be taken into consideration by TELL ME's communication.

1.2 A few fundamental points

The media's analysis agree in highlighting the following points:

- The media has not had a particularly alarmist role in this flu outbreak. As a matter of fact, after an initial alarmist role it appears the media took on the opposite role. They resized the issue and negated the risks of the vaccine's use and safety. Sometimes the alarm was overtaken by a form of reasoning (equally incorrect) of conspiracy and deception.³
- For the first time the web appeared to pay more attention to the pandemic events than the printed press and television (which gave the usual forms of communication: such as filming patients with masks on in hospitals every time a new case of flu was discovered).
- In countries where the government communication worked well the media appeared to follow the pandemic issue better. In some countries (in Italy for example) the institutional communication was poor. This gave way to both mystifications and the birth of independent and scientifically based information (a minority) which contrasted the 'conspiracy' theories of the anti-vaccine movement. As a result there was a polarization between those pro and those against the vaccine that often made it impossible to establish clear and attentive information regarding the public's diverse health conditions.⁴
- Above all, we saw the scientific information on the web being distorted and manipulated in favor of the anti-vaccine theories. Authoritative sources that expressed caution in the use of vaccines, highlighting some uncertainties (such as adjuvant) were interpreted by bloggers (and by the printed press journalists as well) as a conviction of the vaccine. The element of uncertainty was completely cancelled.

1.3 An action strategy on the media

In light of the above-mentioned considerations we can try to establish some actions on the media in Europe to support the TELL ME project.

Who to inform: Since it is impossible to reach all the journalists whether they be from the printed press, the television, the radio or the web, we shall try concentrating on those journalists throughout Europe that are the most representative and responsive to the issues this project deals with. The journalists selected in the last three editions of the European Union Prize for health journalists, the main schools for science journalism in Europe, the press offices of the national and international health organizations, the European sites and radio-television networks and the health sections of the major European (and U.S.A.) newspapers and magazines.

How to inform: The media and other stakeholders will not only be informed of the TELL ME progress, but they will also be informed of the most relevant scientific issues regarding the pandemics, vaccines etc. This will be carried out by way of a site managed by a specific editorial group of scientific journalists working alongside the TELL ME website. Priority will be given to multi-medial and cross-medial information as opposed to written info. Seeing how the scientific information has been manipulated, particular attention will be given to providing journalists with scientifically based analysis and information regarding the risks, in particular on vaccines, and other controversial issues.

When to inform: It will be important – particularly in the second part of the project – to inform continuously, through all available channels, as soon as the first signs are visible. It will be opportune to

increase information during events and periods where the media is more sensitive towards the flu and vaccines (autumn, winter and possible pandemic outbreaks. Or when scientific news sparks the public's interest in the flu, such as the recent news on genetic manipulation of the H5N1 virus.)

Based on these guidelines the following is an initial, temporary strategy that TELL ME's Communication and Press office intends to implement with the various tools it has available and that will be discussed with the project's partners:

- a. TELL ME's institutional website: the project's documents and reports will be uploaded on an ongoing basis. News, video interviews with the project partners, relevant theme links (both institutional and journalistic, including blogs) will also be uploaded. A regular newsletter will give an update on the latest news. The site will be updated, from time to time, with articles and news that talk about TELL ME and also any information that deals with the risks should there be a pandemic outbreak in order to provide a complete press review on the issue.
- b. social media: TELL ME pages have been launched on Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube in order to spread the site's contents and comment on scientific work (on information regarding pandemic risks) and on any interesting news. It will be important to find pages on Twitter, Facebook and blogs that deal with the pandemic flu and vaccines and to interact with them.
- c. scienceonthenet.eu A special section will be launched on the English version of Scienzainrete which will act as a platform for publishing articles, news and information in English of a scientific nature regarding past pandemics, viruses and communication analysis relevant to the issue. Ideally this should become an updated area on "pandemic flu", "pandemic communication" and "flu vaccine" with the aim of becoming a reference point for European medical-scientific journalists. This channel too will send out a newsletter and will update the Twitter and Facebook pages of Scienceonthenet.
- d. wikipedia: monitor Wikipedia entries that cover flu, pandemic, vaccination etc. with the aim of correcting any possible misinformation.
- e. aimed information action to publicize TELL ME, its purpose and results to the following people and institutions:
 - (i) the European health/science journalists and submit to them (via the net) a questionnaire (to be prepared) in order to understand needs, critical points etc.;
 - (ii) the main European and international health organizations (starting with EU Health and the WHO...);
 - (iii) European radio and television (web and non-web) networks that deal with health care issues (including television news, ideally);
 - (iv) major online newspapers, health and consumer newspapers.
- f. as of 2013 participating in all the major conferences regarding the flu and pandemic in Europe in order to show the TELL ME results and programs and to make contact with journalists and relevant operators.
- g. organizing webinar with the journalists (towards the end of the project) regarding the TELL ME communication kit.

- h. creating (to be completed towards the end of the project) a “video clip” on the pandemic and relevant policies and communication techniques to be circulated as much as possible to interested parties (media, European decision makers and health agencies).
- i. final press conference regarding the project.
- j. final report listing the achieved results, achieved and missed objectives to be given to the European Commission.

1.4 The TELL ME communication roadmap

- March 1-2 2012: meeting kick-off
- April 30 2012: place and launch website online with initial text and video
- May 30 2012: release definitive version of the TELL ME leaders video interviews
- June 15 2012: launch the TELL ME FLU channel on the scientific culture site scienceonthenet.eu
- July 15 2012: upload media address on the website
- September 15 2012: TELL ME press release and newsletter
- November 2012: press release on the Report with reference to WP1 conclusions (meeting validation)
- November 2012: launching activities on social media
- January 01 2013: TELL ME press release and newsletter
- March 2013: completion of the TELL ME project presentation to the EU media.
- May 15 2013: press release (regarding the WP2 conclusions) and TELL ME newsletter
- June 15 2013: checking of pandemic, vaccine etc. information on Wikipedia
- September 15 2013: press release and TELL ME newsletter
- October 2013: report on WP3 validation meeting
- November 2013: completion of the TELL ME project presentation to European and international health institutions
- January 15 2014: press release and TELL ME newsletter
- May 15 2014 press releases (on Communication kit, legal ethical aspects, WHO threat index) and newsletter
- June 2014: creation of the TELL ME video to be sent to radio-tv media
- September 15 2014: press releases and newsletter
- November 2014: webinar with journalists (?) regarding a particular aspect, to be

- established, on pandemic risks.
- January 2015: “Agent Based Social Simulation” Presentation
- March ? 2015: Final conference with the stakeholders
- March ? 2015: Dissemination Report

¹ S. Hilton, K. Hunt, UK newspapers' representations of the 2009_10 outbreak of swine flu: one health scare not over-hyped by the media?, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* doi:10.1136/jech.2010.11987.

² Marina Innorta, *Il virus nella rete (The virus in the web). The new flu and the vaccine in the web debate.* Tesi SISSA, 2011.

³ Simon Jenkis, There is no known antidote for panic, *The Guardian* (online version), 5 maggio 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/05/swine-flu-panic>.

⁴ Thomas ABRAHM, The price of poor pandemic communication, *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* 2010, 340:c2952.