

The Digital Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Health of Côte D'ivoire in the Fight Against Covid-19

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Abstract

The Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage of Côte d'Ivoire (MSHPCMU-CI) is at the heart of the crisis communication around Covid-19. In this vein, this Ministry has developed communication strategies, including digital communication. What is the digital communication approach of the Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage of Côte d'Ivoire in the fight against Covid-19? The aim is to analyze the digital communication of this Ministry during the health crisis related to Covid-19. The data collection in this study is guided by Lasswell's communication model, the Health Belief Model and the theories related to Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (*CERC model*). The method used is mixed, i.e. both qualitative and quantitative. This paper highlights the crisis communication of MSHPCMU-CI on traditional media in the fight against Covid-19 and the digital communication strategy of said Ministry in addressing the Covid-19 crisis. Crisis information consists of a unilateral transmission of data. However, crisis communication incorporates the feedback loop and takes into account the expectations and needs of the target population during the crisis period in question.

Keywords: *Covid-19T, Crisis communication, Digital communication, Public communication, Ivory Coast*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone to varying degrees. It is in the interest of society as a whole and of all societies that this crisis is brought to an end so that a gradual return to a "normal" situation can take place. In this crisis, communication plays a major role. Its main missions are to inform of the existence of the crisis, but also to make all stakeholders understand the crisis. Communication will also allow to push the population to adopt new behaviours, considered as favourable to a sustainable exit of the crisis. It is referred to as communication during a crisis or crisis communication. However, the latter should be carried out in accordance with best practices in this area, which are themselves based on lessons learned from previous crises.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage is at the heart of this fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. For that purpose, this Ministry has developed communication strategies including digital communication. Hence the main question of this study: what is the digital communication approach of the Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage of Côte d'Ivoire (MSHPCMU-CI) in the fight against Covid-19?

In other words, this research aims to analyse the digital communication of the Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage of Côte d'Ivoire in the health crisis related to Covid-19. On the one hand, it involves the analysis of the overall crisis communication strategy of the MSHPCMU-CI in response to the crisis related to Covid-19. On the other hand, it aims to make an assessment of MSHPCMU-CI's communication on digital social networks during the crisis caused by the Coronavirus 2019 disease.

The Covid-19 crisis is an unprecedented crisis. It has surprised many observers worldwide, both by its sudden appearance and by its multiple impacts. It requires the various states to implement prevention measures that reduce physical contact between citizens to a minimum. However, since communication is an essential element of daily and crisis management, it must be maintained, whether or not there is a crisis. Digital communication tools are therefore becoming the preferred means of communication. Digital technology is already very much a part of our daily lives, and it appears to be a suitable means of managing crisis communication. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were able to see that digital crisis communication stood out as a full-fledged practice whose codes must be grasped.

Theoretical and methodological framework of the study

1.1. Theoretical framework

The data collection in our study is guided by two central theories, namely Lasswell's communication model and the Health Belief Model. In addition to the latter, there are theories related to crisis communication, i.e., the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (*CERC*) model.

Lasswell's communication model shows the vision of a simple and pragmatic theory of communication. It is a conceptual framework that grounds the functionalist sociology of media. This theoretical model was created in 1948 by Dwight Harold Lasswell. He defined the field of study of communication sciences according to a functionalist media model: "Who (says) what (in) which channel(to) whom (with) what effect"? This model mainly concerns mass communication or communication in the mass media. It served as a basis for analysing the communication actions undertaken by the MSHPCMU-CI on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Health Belief Model (GLANZ, RIMER, VISWANATH, 2008) is a psychological model used to explain and predict health-related behaviours, particularly the use of health services. It was developed in the 1950s by Rosenstock, Hochbaum, Kegeles, and Leventhal. According to this model, individuals' beliefs about health problems, perceived benefits and barriers, and self-efficacy explain the adoption or non-adoption of a health behaviour. In addition, a stimulus must trigger the new behaviour. It allows for the analysis of the content and effect of messages disseminated by MSHPCMU-CI through digital social networks.

The *CERC* model or Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication model (CDC, 2018), outlines the fundamental principles of crisis and emergency risk communication and how they should be implemented in each phase of the crisis life cycle. Within the field of communication studies, it should be noted that several authors and researchers are interested in crisis communication. Some have focused on crisis communication in Western contexts (Michael Orgrizek, 2000; Thierry Libaert, 2020), but also on crisis communication in the Ivorian context (Kacou Goa, 2021).

Methodological framework

Our research takes place in Côte d'Ivoire, at the MSHPCMU-CI. The method used is mixed, i.e., both qualitative and quantitative. It therefore involves two types of populations, namely a

qualitative survey population for which we have constituted a corpus of analysis, and a quantitative survey population for which a survey sample of 385 people representing a portion of the population has been defined. The corpus is composed of 302 posts shared by MSHPCMU-CI on its official Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/mshpcmu>, between February 27, 2020 and July 15, 2020. These texts are the MSHPCMU-CI's posts on digital social networks. The MSHPCMU-CI has an account on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (sante.gouv.ci) The epistemological positioning is post-positivist. It is about highlighting observable facts in order to validate the theoretical approach and reasoning developed.

For qualitative research, data collection techniques such as desk review and interview were used. For the analysis of our qualitative data, we used thematic content analysis. This method of analysis consists of "*identifying recurring general themes in verbal or textual expressions that appear under various more concrete contents*" (HOTIER, 1996, p.259). The inductive coding method is used to define our thematic codes. The analysis of our corpus allowed us to identify the themes evoked, their content as well as the way in which they are articulated to each other.

In the context of quantitative research, the questionnaire survey is used. For the quantitative analysis, the deductive approach is used. Our respondents are the recipients of the MSHPCMU-CI's crisis communication actions, in order to measure the impacts of its crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. The objective is to obtain figures on the opinions, expectations, and level of knowledge of the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire of the MSHPCMU-CI communication targets. The quantitative method will allow us to accompany our survey results with figures, in terms of numbers and percentages, representative of the general population.

MSHPCMU-CI crisis communication on traditional media in the fight against Covid-19

The Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage (MSHPCMU-CI) is in charge of implementing and monitoring the Ivorian Government's health and public hygiene policy. In addition, since April 2021, the said Ministry is in charge of piloting the Universal Health Coverage program in Côte d'Ivoire. In accordance with its missions, the MSHPCMU-CI is leading the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic in the country. During a health crisis such as that of Covid-19, the authorities in charge of its management promote new behaviours that are supposed to lead to a slowing down of the spread of the virus and to a

reduction of the crisis. Consequently, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Côte d'Ivoire, through the MSHPCMU-CI, finds itself using communication principles and techniques to influence the Ivorian population to accept, reject, modify or voluntarily abandon certain behaviours for the benefit of society. Public communication and crisis communication thus use persuasion to encourage behavioural change. One of the central functions of public communication is to accompany decisions, defend values and promote responsible behaviour (Pasquier, 2012).

The MSHPCMU-CI's departments include the Communication and Public Relations Department (DCRP)¹, which is responsible for designing and implementing the MSHPCMU's communication strategies. The Director of Communication and Public Relations is responsible for the overall communication and public relations policy of the MSHPCMU. He or she defines and implements the internal and external communication strategy in line with MSHPCMU's overall strategy. As the head of a team that he coordinates and leads, he is the guarantor of the Ministry's image and the values it conveys. The DCRP plays a key role in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic in Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, it is the starting point of the awareness raising messages and of all the communication actions aiming at limiting and reducing the negative impacts of the crisis caused by the epidemic of the Coronavirus 2019 disease.

In the context of Covid-19, mass *media* are means of disseminating information to a wide audience. The main means of mass communication are the press, public display, film, radio and television. It is to these that we refer when we use the expression "traditional media". In fact, this term designates all the means of disseminating information to a large audience, with the exception of the Internet and/or digital media, on which we will come back later. The term "traditional media" is consistent with Marshall McLuhan's concept of mass media. McLuhan (1964) presents the phenomenon of "mass media" according to the following main characteristics: one person or group communicates to several persons or groups; the message is unilateral: no feedback is possible; the information is undifferentiated: no segmentation or targeting, everyone receives the same information at the same time. On this basis, the new media and the Internet cannot correspond to such a description. Indeed, the latter, with the advent of Web 2.0 in particular, have institutionalized two-way communication, segmentation

¹ See Article 2 of Order 0312 MSHP/CAB/ of 07/12/2020 on the organization, attributions and functioning of the Directorate of Communication and Public Relations.

and targeting of audiences according to specific criteria. Communication on "traditional" media can also be described simply as off-line communication as opposed to communication that takes place online. A crisis communication strategy can be based solely on offline communication, or on digital communication, or both.

Television and radio

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic in Côte d'Ivoire, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire, through the MSHPCMU, used the mass media to warn the entire population of the ongoing health crisis and to try to contain it. Apart from digital media, "traditional media" such as Television, Radio, Billboard and Press were the main means used by the MSHPCMU to address the millions of residents of Côte d'Ivoire.

In its crisis communication approach in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the MSHPCMU has used television channels broadcasting in Côte d'Ivoire as a relay of information to the public. Television is often presented as the ultimate mass media. In fact, studies show that public television channels such as *"all the television channels of the Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI) have a record cumulative audience of about seven million viewers per day"*.² In order to face the health and information crisis caused by Covid-19, programmes were planned and produced by experts from the Ministry of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage, on the main public television channel RTI1. At first, there was the daily press briefing by the Minister of Health, Public Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage to report on the Covid-19 epidemic in Côte d'Ivoire. When the latter was absent, this conference was given by the Director General of Health of MSHPCMU.

This daily press briefing aims above all to inform stakeholders of the evolution of the number of confirmed cases, cured cases, active cases and deaths. The MSHPCMU authorities also take the opportunity to remind the population of the measures taken by the Government to fight against the spread of the coronavirus as well as the prevention measures to be observed in order to protect themselves and others.

It is also necessary to add the press conference organized and conducted by the Centre for Information and Government Communication (CICG) in collaboration with the MSHPCMU, the Ministry in charge of Communication and the Ministry in charge of Security. This press conference is a way for government actors in charge of managing the Covid-19 crisis to

² Fausséni Dembélé, Director General of RTI on April 26, 2021 on <https://rti.info/societe/4817>

maintain dialogue with stakeholders (especially the media) in order to gather and respond to the concerns of the general public. Initially a daily event, it later became a weekly event.

Moreover, in its effort to communicate with the public, the MSHPCMU has produced audio-visual awareness-raising clips on compliance with the Covid-19 prevention measures. These clips were produced in French and in about thirty local languages. Indeed, the adoption of these new gestures that reduce the risks of transmission of the coronavirus from one individual to another represents one of the major challenges of the MSHPCMU crisis communication.

Therefore, with the support of the World Bank, the MSHPCMU designed and produced a series of 180 awareness-raising video vignettes of 10 episodes, each lasting about 5 minutes. The aim of these audio-visual productions was to alert the population on issues related to Covid-19, but above all to educate them on the new behaviours to adopt in order to fight the spread of the coronavirus. Television is not the only channel used to reach the masses during communication campaigns. It is part of a global strategy and a media mix in which radio broadcasting is also central.

In Côte d'Ivoire, according to Afrobarometer (2020), 58% of Ivorians listen to the radio "every day" or at least "a few times a week". This means that one out of every two Ivorians can be reached through radio broadcasting. It is an effective way to reach millions of Ivorians at the same time. Radio is a relatively accessible medium. Today, in addition to inexpensive radios, mobile phones also make it possible to listen to radio broadcasts even in the most remote parts of the country. In times of crisis such as the Covid-19 health crisis, the use of radio can quickly reach a maximum number of people, especially those in the most inaccessible areas of the country. In Côte d'Ivoire, *"approximately one million listeners tune in every day to Radio Côte d'Ivoire and Fréquence 2"*³. Under the authority of the MSHPCMU, several information, awareness-raising and educational audio spots on the observance of prevention measures and decisions taken were produced in French and 30 local languages and broadcast on public and private radio stations.

They were broadcast on 198 local radio stations throughout the 31 regions of Côte d'Ivoire. The objective of the MSHPCMU was clear: to ensure that crisis information was received by all the country's inhabitants. The radio is present in 72% of homes in Côte d'Ivoire, regardless of their geographical or economic location (Afrobarometer, 29 July 2020). And, *"radio is the*

³ Op. cit.

*only medium to be present in both rural and urban areas and with the smallest difference according to the level of poverty experienced"*⁴.

1.2. Print and Billboard

The written press encompasses all means of disseminating written information, namely daily, weekly, monthly and other periodical publications (Larousse en ligne, 2022). In 2021, there were 27 dailies, 26 weeklies and bi-weeklies in the Côte d'Ivoire media landscape (AIP, 2021). However, it is clear that the print media sector has been losing momentum in Côte d'Ivoire for nearly a decade. *"From 2011 to 2020, sales have dropped from about CFAF 5.4 billion to just CFAF 1.3 billion in 2020. Sales in the first quarter of 2021 are (also) down by more than 40% compared to 2020"*⁵. Only 23% of Ivorians claim to use it for information (Afrobarometer, 2019).

Our interview with the Director of Communication of the MSHPCMU, dated 28/02/2022, reveals that the written press is not an integral part of the mass media directly used by the MSHPCMU in its crisis communication towards the Ivorian population. However, the analysis of print media published during the pandemic indicates that the print media is a relay of messages and communication actions initiated by the MSHPCMU. The written press is therefore one of the indirect resources of the MSHPCMU, which is put to good use thanks to the press and public relations of the Ministry. It thus contributes to informing the public of the communication and crisis management actions of the Covid-19 implemented by the MSHPCMU.

However, the written press is facing a great challenge, that of the illiteracy of the Ivorian population. Indeed, nearly one in two Ivorians can neither read nor write in French, the country's official language. 43.8% according to The Minister of National Education, October 09, 2017⁶. This data somewhat corroborates the results of the study conducted by Afrobarometer in 2019, which tells us that 58% of Ivorians surveyed never get information through written newspapers. These findings make it difficult to use them in a health crisis

⁴ Joseph KONE and KaphaloSégorbah SILWE, " Face à l'hégémonie de la télévision et la radio, l'Internet et les médias sociaux continuent leur popularité grandissante en Côte d'Ivoire " Dépêche No. 379 d'Afrobarometer | 29 Juillet 2020. P.2

⁵ Samba Koné, President of the National Press Authority (ANP)
<https://www.aip.ci/cote-divoire-aip-une-perte-de-76-de-chiffres-daffaires-des-quotidiens-ivoiriens-de-2011-a-2020-selon-lanp/> Accessed on 13/04/2022 at 12:25

⁶ Statement by Kandia Camara on the illiteracy rate in Côte d'Ivoire during the 51st edition of International Literacy Day on Saturday 7 October in Abidjan - Gouv.ci <https://bit.ly/3KHQ4pW> - Accessed on 13/04/2022 at 11:55 am

context where information and the speed of its dissemination play a decisive role in the evolution of the crisis and the protection of the public's health. In a context such as Covid-19, the accuracy of the information transmitted, its transmission at the right time and to the right audience determine the outcome of the crisis.

Out-of-home (OOH) advertising is also used. OOH is now used for social marketing, which is called social cause marketing and is aimed at the public good. In the context of Covid-19, the greater good is public health (or the health of the public). The goal of the crisis and risk communication campaigns is to safeguard the health of the public by protecting them from the new coronavirus. To achieve this, the MSHPCMU used posters to get the various populations to implement the prevention measures.

Thus, following the media mentioned above, urban billboards are a means of reminding people of prevention measures and of the steps to be taken to combat the spread of Covid-19. These posters are located in high-traffic urban areas and reach thousands of road users on a daily basis. For example, 12m posters² and 40x60 posters have been designed and put up along the main routes of the Greater Abidjan. This is a visual communication action. The messages concern physical distancing, wearing a mask and regular hand washing. All this without omitting to indicate the numbers to contact in case of symptoms. The posters emphasize the new behaviour and the benefits of adopting barrier measures to avoid Covid-19. The MSHPCMU places great emphasis in its messages on self-efficacy in implementing the recommended behaviours. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perception of their personal competence to successfully practice a behaviour (Glanz *et al.*, 2008).

The messages emphasize the relative simplicity of the actions to be taken to better protect against Covid-19. For MSHPCMU-CI, regular hand washing, maintaining physical distance, and wearing a mask, to name a few, are relatively easy to apply. In addition, billboards can be perceived as a proximity medium insofar as the populations reached are in their city, their municipality or even their neighbourhood. This characteristic guarantees that the message is accessible 24 hours a day. The user of the public highway comes into contact with this message as many times as he or she uses the highway. The message is therefore repeated almost daily. This confirms the educational power of this mass medium, which is a tool of public communication.

Any institution exercising a public service mission engages in public communication when it undertakes communication actions. According to Pierre Zémor (1995), public communication

is a formal communication that implies the exchange and sharing of information of public utility, as well as the maintenance of social links, and for which public institutions are responsible. The purposes of public communication are, therefore, the same as those of public entities, namely to inform, to listen, to contribute to ensuring social relations and to accompany both behavioural and social organization changes (Bessières, 2009). Public communication takes on a particular format when it is done on digital media.

MSHPCMU-CI's digital communication policy around the Covid-19 crisis

Creation of the MSHPCMU-CI digital communication framework

Unlike "traditional media", digital media, born of information and communication technologies, integrate the reactivity of targets on social networks. The information is differentiated and becomes more and more targeted and tailored to the targeted audience segment. Thus, with these digital tools, we enter the era of two-way communication (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). In this configuration, the public is no longer just a receiver of information, but also a sender. Each group has the ability to influence the next. This specific context consecrates the particularity of digital crisis communication. It is specifically communication actions undertaken on the web, social media and mobile terminals with the aim of avoiding or fighting the effects of an event that could have negative consequences on the image of an organization as well as on the achievement of its objectives. In the midst of the Covid-19 epidemic, the MSHPCMU-CI also turned to digital platforms in order to inform the public of the evolution of the crisis, the decisions of the Ivorian government and to accompany the public in the observance of prevention measures. During this crisis, digital communication has been a valuable tool for dialogue in order to maintain the social link with the affected populations.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were able to see that digital crisis communication stood out as a practice in its own right, the codes of which must be understood. Moreover, crisis communication in times of public health emergencies has a special character. In Côte d'Ivoire, it is the MSHPCMU that is in the front line of the fight against Covid-19. The lack of knowledge of the codes and potential of digital communication in times of crisis has been noted in this ministerial department. With regard to the structure and organization of the MSHPCMU and its DCRP, it should be noted that it is the Directorate of Communication that is responsible for managing social networks, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. It is the Digital Communication, Monitoring and Influence Department

that designs and disseminates digital crisis communication messages on the MSHPCMU's digital social networks to inform the Ivorian population.

Digital media offer stakeholders the opportunity to share information with a large audience almost live. The use of digital platforms requires very little technical or logistical resources. A single terminal is enough: Smartphone, tablet or computer. From this terminal, the Covid-19 crisis managers can send information to millions of Ivorians at once. This ease of use of the digital allows any user to be a source of information. During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital technology, the Internet and social networks quickly became the preferred media for rumours, misinformation, and fake news. So much so that the World Health Organization spoke of an *"infodemic"* (WHO, 2020) to describe the information situation created by this health crisis. Infodemic is an overabundance of information, proven or not, in digital environments such as social media but also in physical environments during an epidemic. MSHPCMU was quick to see the usefulness of digital technology (its advantages) but also the disadvantages associated with its misuse. Thus, the crisis communication strategy deployed was done concomitantly on several media in order to inform the general public and to counter rumours and fake news.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, the MSHPCMU-CI has developed different crisis communication actions on different digital platforms in order to fight against the negative effects of this health crisis. The objective of the health authorities was to quickly bring the right information to Ivorians. To do this, the MSHPCMU-CI undertook communication actions on the web, social media and mobile devices in order to mitigate the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Digital media used by the MSHPCMU-CI in the Covid-19 crisis

The mobile phone sector is booming in West Africa and in Côte d'Ivoire with a number of mobile phone subscribers of 40,919,555, for a population of about 26.9 million inhabitants (IMF, 2021). This represents a mobile phone penetration rate of over 150%. (ARTCI, 2021). Some Ivorians even have access to several mobile phones. In such a context, the use of SMS by the MSHPCMU allows for a wide dissemination of awareness messages in a very short time. The high coverage of the mobile phone network (GSM) of more than 97.55% makes it possible to reach almost all populations wherever they are (ARTCI, 2021). Thus, information SMS messages on the Covid-19 epidemic in Côte d'Ivoire were regularly sent to the public through the platforms of mobile phone operators. These awareness messages were sent by the Government of Côte d'Ivoire "Gouv.ci".

In addition to the SMS sent regularly by the MSHPCMU to inform and sensitize the Ivorian public, it is worth noting that telephone communication channels have been established to enable the population to obtain information on the Coronavirus 2019. Hotlines have been opened and operate 24/7.

These numbers are 119, 143, 101 and 125. The MSHPCMU call centre that was somewhat dormant before the Covid-19 crisis was reactivated for the occasion. The number of call centre staff increased from 14 to 64 at the peak of the crisis. The teleoperators are now down to 43 since we entered the chronic phase of the Covid-19 crisis. At times, the MSHPCMU call centre would receive up to 50,000 calls per day (MSHPCMU Communications Directorate, 2022). This illustrates the idea that the crisis leads to a saturation of communication capacities in the face of the influx of requests (Libaert, 2020). By calling these numbers, people can learn about the disease and its symptoms and what to do if they fear they have been infected by the new coronavirus. The toll-free numbers allow the MSHPCMU to reflect the image of a Ministry that is concerned about the public's fears and wants to hear about them in order to better address them.

The MSHPCMU website was also mobilized for the response against Covid-19. Beyond this technical perception, the website of a public organization is an excellent tool to maintain the social link with citizens. Indeed, unlike the physical site (the administration's headquarters), the latter does not close its doors and allows users to access it at any time to satisfy their need for information. Côte d'Ivoire has about 12 million Internet users (Datareportal, 2021).

To this end, the MSHPCMU website was created to provide detailed information to the public on all issues related to Public Health, Hygiene and Universal Health Coverage in Côte d'Ivoire. At the onset of the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, MSHPCMU began sharing regular information on its website <http://www.sante.gouv.ci> and its social networks about the evolution of the 2019 coronavirus disease cases in the country and the measures taken by the Ivorian Government to resolve the crisis. In addition, awareness messages are regularly shared there. They invite the population to respect the official recommendations to reduce contamination and deaths attributable to this Coronavirus disease.

However, despite the efforts made by MSHPCMU-CI to keep its website up to date, it is clear that the MSHPCMU website is plagued by outdated information. This slows down the search for up-to-date and relevant information. The risk communication and public information

campaign conducted to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by the MSHPCMU was carried out on government websites as well as on social networks.

Particular attention is paid to digital crisis communication actions carried out on MSHPCMU's social networks, notably Twitter and Facebook. Figures published in the Twitter advertising resources indicate that this social network has over 180,000 users in Côte d'Ivoire (datareportal, 2022). In other words, if all the inhabitants using Twitter (180,000) were reached by a post from MSHPCMU, this would only represent 7 people out of 1000. Despite this observation, at the start of the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in March 2020, in a fit of panic, all of MSHPCMU's communication channels were mobilized to bring information to the general public.

Thus, the MSHPCMU created a Twitter profile in March 2020 in order to send information to the public and to maintain dialogue with the population via this channel. The MSHPCMU's Twitter profile was created in order to conduct a real integrated digital crisis communication via all available digital platforms to reach a large number of Ivorians on a daily basis. During the first days of the crisis, the MSHPCMU shared information on the evolution of the number of Covid-19 cases in Côte d'Ivoire.

Over time and as the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire evolved, MSHPCMU had time to hone its digital crisis communication strategy and focus its efforts on the most effective means. Thus, at the height of the crisis, from March to June 2020, most of the crisis information transmitted by MSHPCMU on social networks was on Facebook. This was at the expense of other social networks. The relatively low number of subscribers on its Twitter page (3022 subscribers on Twitter compared to 493,000 subscribers on Facebook on 19/05/2022 and 679 Subscribers on Twitter in March 2020) is also an element that pushed MSHPCMU to refocus its efforts on Facebook. This channel has become MSHPCMU's primary digital crisis communication weapon in the fight against Covid-19.

In fact, Facebook is the most used social networking platform in Côte d'Ivoire with more than 5 million regular users (Abidjan.net, 2021). It is also the social network on which MSHPCMU has the most subscribers with more than 493,000 subscribers (MSHPCMU Facebook page, May 2022). This is 160 times more followers than on Twitter for example. In view of the above, it is on Facebook that the MSHPCMU is focusing most of its digital crisis communication efforts on the Covid-19 pandemic. This electronic portal allows MSHPCMU

to reach a relatively large audience of hundreds of thousands of people. These thousands of people can in turn share this official information with members of their own private networks. This increases the reach of MSHPCMU communications. Consequently, with social amplification and sharing, each MSHPCMU post on its Facebook page can potentially reach millions of Ivorians at once. All of MSHPCMU's communications on its <https://www.facebook.com/mshpcmu> page in the period from March to July 2020, showed several phases in MSHPCMU's digital crisis communication strategy in the response to Covid-19 in Côte d'Ivoire. From a period of zero communication and in communication (Goa, 2020), MSHPCMU-CI's crisis communication has moved to a stage of professionalization.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, more than in any other time, people need information to guide them. They need to know and understand what is going on so that they can act accordingly. Hence the need to provide the public with reliable and rational information on which to base their actions in times of crisis. This is even more true in times of health crisis, when people's health and lives are directly threatened. To avoid panic, health authorities must provide the population with regular and reliable information. During the preparation and initial phases of the Covid-19 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, the MSHPCMU essentially provided crisis information. The strategy adopted is that of transparency with the general public. We make a distinction between crisis information and crisis communication. Indeed, crisis information consists of a unilateral transmission of news. Crisis communication, on the other hand, integrates the feedback loop and takes into account the expectations and needs of the target population during the crisis period.

Before the outbreak of the 2019 Coronavirus crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, it must be noted that the MSHPCMU Facebook page is used intermittently with some sporadic posts. It is only with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that the said ministry decided to use it as a real information and communication tool. Therefore, the MSHPCMU Facebook page was mainly used to inform the public about the evolution of the crisis and to manage rumours. To maximize the reach of its messages, the MSHPCMU used Influence Marketing and sponsorship of the content posted.

According to Lasswell (1952), any message can reach its recipient, provided there is no interference. This theory presents three levels of conductance. The first level is *total*

conductance, when the message passes completely without interruption (communication). The second is *modified conductance*, when the message passes, but with less clarity (Incommunication). The third level is *no conductance*, when the message does not get through at all (zero communication). There is a need to professionalize communication in the management of organizations in Côte d'Ivoire.

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