

Manifestation of Panic in Mass Media: COVID-19 Case in Lithuania

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Abstract Mass media has a huge influence on masses. It shapes people's mindset, attitudes, and often their actions in certain situations. Mass media has massive control over the mindset especially during the crises and emergencies. Mass media provides most important source of information in our society about: politics, economics, health care, entertainment, crime, and so on. Existing modern larger television broadcast networks and news portal news components known from the global COVID-19 pandemic. The key research question- whether the use of mass media power was used just for the COVID-19 news spread or it was used to the intimidation of public in order to increase the media ratings overall? This topic is very sensitive, and then various recommendations are made to the media: economic recessions, health care courses, political rankings, and so on. Having manipulative power, media channels, their editors and journalists, headlines, reports, videos that could easily raise fear and moral panic among all members. The purpose of the research is to analyze panic manifestation case of COVID-19 in Lithuanian and global mass media channels. Research method, used in the article The results of the study revealed that manifestation of panic was observed in all selected channels, but news of a global media organizations were more constructive and accurate and local media channels were more focused on intimidation and to the amount of news.

Keywords: panic manifestation, intimidation of public, manipulative power, mass media, covid-19 pandemic.

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0. Introduction

The media is described as the "fourth government" because it is not only in its power to inform the public, but probably, most importantly, to influence the human masses, whether or not a person is a media user. Mass media shape people's mindset, attitude, and often their actions in certain situations. In the event of crises and special situations, the media have mass control in their power; the key issue is: whether the presence of informal government will be used to provide useful information to people or to increase ratings of news channels/portals through the principle of negative content (as the most performing society).

Mass media provide the most relevant information from all areas of public life: politics, the economy, health, the world of entertainment, crime, etc. The most important topic in the current time, which accounts for the largest share of news from television air and

news portals, is the world's COVID-19 pandemic. This topic is sensitive to all sections of society, so the media look at it from different points of view: economic recession, health care courses, political ratings, etc. With manipulative power, media channels, their editors and journalists with the help of banners, reports and videos can often cause fear and moral panic among members of society.

The aim of the research is to analyze panic manifestation case of COVID-19 in Lithuanian and global mass media channels. 1) to examine what aspects of mass panic have been analysed in scientific literature; 2) to analyse how panic manifests itself in Lithuanian Mass Media; 3) to identify the uniting features of the practical part with the theoretical.

Research Methods used in this article: Qualitative content analysis research method was selected because it was suitable for long-term observation of the sample in 2020 March 21 to 2021 April 21, four Lithuanian channels were examined: headlines, visual and textual content, comments, reports, characteristic baskets, pulling, provocative and panic-causing elements, traits. Quantitative research (survey of 770 respondents from Lithuania) with 24 questions to respondents.

1. Literature review

Definition, provided by Barker and Petley (2013), says that panic- is the extreme feeling of fear or anxiety due to a particular event (attack, diseases, natural phenomena) that can affect the individual or groups of people, animals. It manifests itself in irrational behavior and loss of common sense. The origin of panic is catastrophic, negative thoughts that violate biological, social, psychological or financial balance (Barker, Petley 2013).

The extreme feeling of fear and anxiety associated with the relevant interpretation of the situation, the sudden massive fear of foreseeable events and associated anxiety ("vaccine fear", "fear of fatal illness", "fear of financial crisis", etc.), extreme distress, and a state of strong emotional agitation can lead to panic in a particular situation. Mass panic can be chaotic, dangerous and manifested in various forms: as moral scare, social psychosis, economic panic, etc. are spreading, people often no longer trust their values, beliefs and sober minds. A panic man usually relies on the thinking prevailing in the mass of people.

Panic scientific theories argue that panic is a catastrophic interpretation of various pieces of information (Cohen 2011). It can be broken down by number of people: mass scare – when several people at the same time experience panic, one fear. Individual panic – only one person survives because of his inner feelings and beliefs. Panic is also divided into 4 types: fear-induced, tempered by despair, anger and wrath, scare of excitement. In the face of global fear, people's rational thinking and ability to remain calm is overshadowed by the feeling of social anxiety (Nicholas, O'Malley 2013). Thoughts about a potential security risk pose intense emotions of anxiety and fear, as survival (life) is one of the basic human instincts, and security is the second most important among the basic human needs (Maslow 2011). So reality is interpreted as unsafe, dangerous. Panic, according to psychologists, is "contagious": it is very easy to pass from an animal to an animal or from a human to another person. It makes the crowd "infected" self-destructive: does not control behavior, acts irrationally. But in the case of panic, people, unlike animals, can control their behavior by some means. These include constructive thoughts (Suslavicius 2006).

All mass panic manifestations easily spread through modern means of mass communication. Fake news and misleading rumors are constantly written on social media and in the media to stimulate and fuel negative perceptions and state of danger.

Raising fear can be beneficial to many. In totalitarian states, this is an excellent way of coercion. In the media, panic can be manipulated by mass behavior. The phenomenon – economic panic – is observed in certain areas, such as stock exchanges, banks, when people are massively starting to take concrete actions because they are aware of certain information and fears. All types and manifestations of people’s panic are a spontaneous phenomenon associated with groups of people associated with increased emotional arousal or gathered as a result of uncontrolled fear, dissatisfaction and a feeling of horror.

The term “moral panic” in social sciences refers to the sudden increase in public concern about certain issues or social groups that are thought to be turbulent in social order (Cohen 2011). The essence of moral panic is the exaggerated reaction of society to very real and specific societal problems. (Goode, Ben-Yehuda 2009)

Moral panic arises when problems of a criminal nature first attract the attention of the media, intimidate people. Then the public begins to press politics, politicians – law enforcement, law enforcement begins to get deeper into problems, new circumstances and facts are emerging, which are again richly illuminated by the media, and the public is even more concerned, creating a closed circle of irritants and irritants. The theory of amplification of deviation states that the problems that are hyperbolised in the media scare the public. Frightened people initiate social control actions that further enhance deviation. The public’s reaction to intensified deviation again draws the media’s attention to the problem discussed in society. This process periodically repeats, creating a deviation amplification spiral (Cohen 2011). Moral scare causes confusion, because the immersed society is hard to control. People themselves are lost – it is difficult for everyone, starting with law enforcement, politicians, journalists, to understand what is happening. Public security, of course, suffers from this because of the loss of trust in law enforcement and democratic values, the inefficient use of law enforcement resources and thus weakening social control. The creation of moral panic of the state can lead to the adoption of laws that would be illegal, without the perceived threat of moral panic in the center.

As a rule, the latter type of fear spreads through all channels of mass communication. According Stanley Cohen (2011), he states that “mass communication tools play a key role in strengthening moral panic”. The author distinguishes 5 stages of moral panic dissemination: a global phenomenon or a specific human being considered to be a threat to the general interest; threats are spread through popular channels of mass communication; there is a sudden increase in public interest in a particular person or problem; the authorities in power respond to the dangerous situation that has arisen; moral scare brings about changes in social life. The main criteria for moral panic are reflected in these stages: reaction disproportion, measured problem, hostility to panic objects,

During the period of prosperity of social networks, moral panic is constantly fuelled by a stream of fake news. The most dangerous aspect of fake news is direct aggression to an easy-to-recognizable target, where in reality real problems are characterised by complex, deeper origins (Mueller 2019). An expert Ronald J. Deibert (2020) describes the negative impact of social networks on the public information environment:

Always real-time information tsunami creates an excellent environment for fake news, conspiracy theories, rumors, inaccurate hearings. Fictional stories, with the help of the people who share them, spread much faster than they are supposed to be checked and refuted. Until false rumors are refuted by professional experts, fake news is already in deep collective subconsciousness. Meanwhile, people are constantly overwhelmed by new scandals, fake headlines, unsubstantiated claims

that have blurred the boundary between truth and fantasy (Ronald J. Deibert in Mueller 2019: 29).

Thus, on the one hand, responding to morally sensitive problems in society and, on the other, pursuing commercial goals and focusing on sensational presentation of criminal events, the media dramatises various problems. The role of mass media in constructing moral panic in relation to a particular problem is obvious. The media are quite focused on deviation, more specifically sensational crimes, scandals, 'changed' events.

A huge part of what we call news is devoted to reporting deviant behavior and its consequences (Cohen 2011). Moral panic is a disproportionate and hostile reaction to a particular condition, an individual or a group of individuals, which are defined as threatening the values of society, associated with the stereotypical presentation of information by the media and leading to the requirement of greater social control and creating a spiral of reaction. The term 'moral' indicates that the observed threat is not every day but endangers the social order or its idealised perception. The dangers of moral panic are constantly "inflated" and distorted by various channels of mass communication, which in turn increases public concern.

2. Panic dissemination through mass communication

The media and society are closely linked to each other. Today, the huge impact of the media on society can be observed. The recent worldwide scare of COVID-19, which, in particular, is caused by social media and spreading faster than the virus itself. According to Depoux *et al.* (2020), a few weeks after the new COVID-19 appearance in China, misleading rumors and conspiracy theories of its origin have spread throughout the world, with fears, manifestations of racism, and the mass purchase of protective face masks. The aim of the media is to influence society and achieve its goal perfectly. It is characterized by hyperbolicism of information, thus causing fear among people.

Panic is a very strong feeling of fear and anxiety, creating a situation that we perceive as a huge threat to the health and life of our or our close people. Panic manifests itself in a strong fear, which prevents intelligent thinking and action. And the media contribute significantly to the spread of panic. To understand this, producers and distributors of information often use people's credentials or ignorance.

Every day people learn about certain situations from various media channels. There are numerous articles on the Internet describing the current situation. However, not only is it published on websites, but it is also made available through television news, radio, press, etc. The more intensive and diverse it is about the current problem, the more people are panic. This also affects interpersonal communication: the present intercommunication is no longer the same as it was before. As a result of panic, people keep their distance from each other, use various social networks like Facebook, Instagram, etc. or simply speak more on the phone.

In addition to media channels, interpersonal communication, opinion makers, so-called "influencers", play a significant role in shaping public opinion not only about certain products but also about current phenomena. Opinion makers are another channel to reach people. So they must act responsibly so that they do not cause panic to people by advertising one or another product or by helping 'hotlines' to mobilize volunteers free of charge.

To sum up, it can be said that in the event of an unpleasant accident or a major disaster that has developed even to, for example, the level of the pandemic, the message is quickly spreading. The media are taking steps to engage and intimidate the public. As a result of the high flow of information, people are more concerned about the current

situation. When the situation affects society, communication with each other is also changing. People communicate less, take a greater distance, all communication takes place on social networks. Opinion makers also have a strong influence on public opinion on one or another. Their followers compare to them and believe in what they say. All this shapes people's opinion, and at the same time causes panic in the human subconscious. So the media, opinion makers and people themselves must publish and receive information responsibly.

3. Social psychosis

According to A. Juodytė (2012), "the media is a source of manipulation that affects the attitudes and behaviour of the actors involved in this field". The meaning of manipulation is to anticipate how a person or a group of people will be inclined to react, what cognitive structures will be activated, what stereotypes are created about a particular situation in a particular cultural context. Media often report on the following principle: the message is important at first, then its context" (Juodytė, 2012). For the other reasons, the media is considered the "fourth government", which can influence public life and routines.

Mass psychosis – one of the possible consequences of moral panic. Since there is a creation of reality in the power of the media (according to Mr Fiske, when constructing news reports, realism does not portray reality, but creates a dominant sense of reality), often appealed to feelings such as primitive instincts (fear, frightening). Ulfkotte (2001) in his book *Yes Lying Journalists* said that German daily newspaper contains a set of examples of how publicised news becomes a weapon in the hands of mass communication. One of the cases occurred in the city of Surat in India in 1994 was the alleged muller and pulmonary plague, which was heavily escalated and feared by the media, although the most important and objective information was not made public (e.g. the absence of studies in India to detect plague, deaths from other diseases or the fact that this serious communicable disease is being treated with antibiotics). Half a million inhabitants of the town of Surat left their homes, while newspaper headlines declared that Maras had returned to Europe. As a result, 70 % of all flights from the Old Continent to India have been cancelled, with constant fears that plague agents can quickly spread over the world. The number of victims in the media was doubled, but according to official figures, there were only 1 undoubted cases among 693 alleged infected. This is one of the ways of manipulative construction: reality deformation, i.e., depending on the information provided, different interpretative contexts are formed, and default creates prerequisites for manipulation.

The relevance of cases in India and Lithuania has also shifted to the 21st century when a similar social psychosis emerges in the face of the new COVID-19 virus (Götzsche 2020). It is manifested in food shops' stalls, headlines and statistics published by news portals, reports and other sources that may not always be noticeable to the media consumer. Mass psychosis can unexpectedly spread internationally, causing a range of other complications, such as disrupting the work of government bodies. By comparing the opinions of journalists and audiences on quality journalism, Israeli scientists found that journalist neutrality and fact-checking are seen as one of the most important values for the audience.

4. Research results

A qualitative study of content analysis showed: negative news has the greatest demand and impact on media consumers. A shocking/intimidating/curious headline was often

provided, thus encouraging viewers to “hang on to the hook”. This was followed by informational content – given the importance and scale of the media channels, some news were more objective, based on available official information, others (mostly) on unofficial statistics, conjectures and unconfirmed information

Some other findings :

1. Nowadays, web portals compete with each other for an audience, so the headlines of published articles are often expressive,
2. Extensive daily content from Lithuanian media about coronavirus has shown that panic is spread in all spheres of human life, which include: education, entertainment, tourism, health, finance, economics and politics.
3. Sowing people’s global panic is uncertain about their safety, future and health. The problem of uncertainty is evident in the news: due to the scale and relevance of the global crisis caused by COVID-19, people have shared more, read/watched the news/headlines that had associations with their safety and health.
4. The media often presented hypotheses/opinions of scientists and political leaders as real facts, thus manipulating the credibility of readers – media users believed unspecified, unconfirmed information and accepted it as content, covering: social life, economics, health care, controversial knowledge from around the world).

A quantitative study of 770 respondents, with 24 questions to respondents, showed the other results. The majority of participants were aged from 26 to 40 years (40%) and only 5% of survey participant identified themselves as being 61 years old or older. Participants were predominantly women (80%), had college or some university degree (61%), were living in a city (79%)

and were employed (71%). Participants were predominantly women (80%), had college or some university degree (61%), were living in a city (79%) and were employed (71%). Vast majority of the respondents were well informed about the COVID-19 virus with the exception about the importance of face-mask wearing and the impact on young children’s health. 97% knew the new coronavirus is easily transmittable viral disease, especially dangerous to elderly and people with chronic diseases. 89% said that... Good hand washing habits and avoidance of big public gatherings can help to prevent the spread of the virus. 97% agreed that you can contract get the coronavirus COVID-19 after a contact with a contaminated person. But 31% did not know if. Face masks help to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. 30% could not tell if Novel coronavirus is especially dangerous to children. Only 34% agree... Vaccination help to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Then respondents were asked: : What are the main sources you get coronavirus related information from? Please evaluate each listed source of information according to how often you use it to get the information about COVID-19.

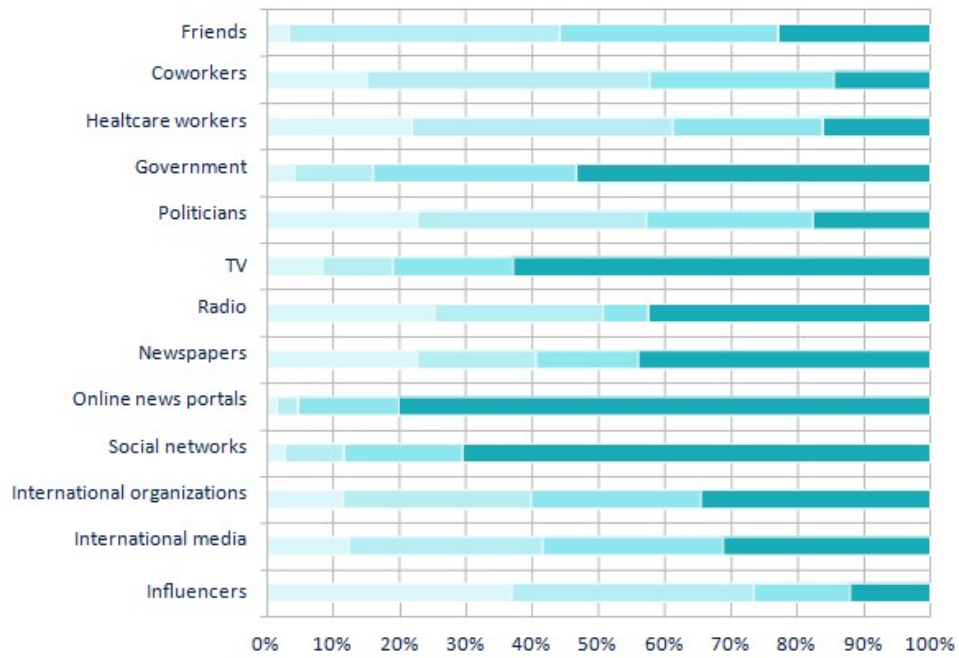


Fig. 1. COVID-19 Information sources

The most commonly (often or very often) used COVID-19 information sources among our respondents were online news portals (94%), social networks (87%), government (82%) and TV (80%). The least used sources: 35% of respondents said that they never turn to influencers for COVID-19 information. Newspapers (22%), radio (21%), healthcare workers (21%) and politicians (22%) were among those sources respondents reported to use least frequently.

Then in questionnaire respondents were asked: based on your opinion, what are the most reliable sources of the information about the coronavirus (COVID-19)? Please, evaluate each source and select one answer for each source. (See Fig. 2)

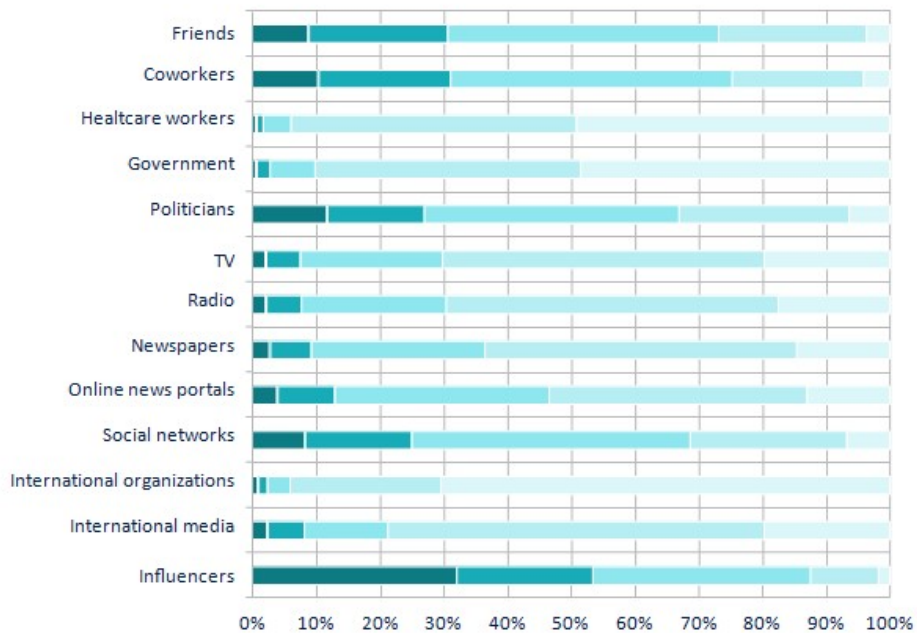


Fig. 2. Respondents' expressed trust in COVID-19 information sources

5. Self perceived level of threat and fear

Later respondents were asked about self perceived level of threat and fear. Half of the respondents perceive COVID-19 risk as real, while 28% report that the threat is of lower level and 22% share understanding that the COVID-19 threat is high or very high. And majority of the respondents reported moderate level of fear related to COVID-19, while only 4% said they were totally calm and 17% reported high level of fear. (See Fig. 3)

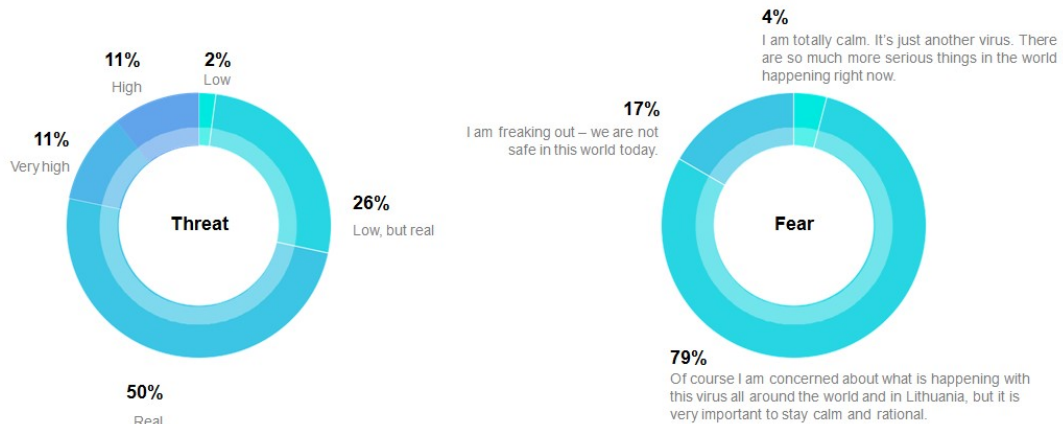


Fig. 3. Self perceived level of threat and fear

Then respondents were asked to share their personal reactions to provided statements related to COVID-19 situation, respondents were mostly concerned with the statements below. Highest level of fear was demonstrated towards the statement 8 “Coronavirus spread across the Europe” – 78% of respondents said they are very scared or scared. Respondents also demonstrated higher level of fear about following: global outbreak of the virus (Statement 13 – 72%); COVID-19 impact on Lithuania’s and world’s economy (Statement 4 – 70%); uncertainty related to this virus (Statement 1 – 64%); there is now a vaccine for this disease (Statement 12 – 61%); Lithuanian health-care institutions are ill-prepared to fight the virus (Statement 7 – 60%); and unpreparedness of Lithuanian institutions to manage this situation (Statement 6 – 55%). See Fig. 4.

Respondents reported lowest levels of fear about the closure of Lithuanian borders (Statement 16 – 32%); the closure of schools and universities, ban of public events and restrains of international traveling (Statement 14 – 32%); empty shelves in local grocery stores (Statement 9 – 33%); lack of information (Statement 2 – 31%); uncertainty about personal behavior: I don’t know how to protect my loved ones and myself (Statement 3 – 32%); first officially confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) case in Lithuania (Statement 10 – 23%); and the nationwide quarantine (Statement 15 – 28%).

6. Conclusions

People in Lithuania are well informed about the COVID-19 pandemics: vast majority of our respondents knew main facts about the COVID-19 with the exception of face-mask wearing, where respondents demonstrated confusion and lack of understanding. Governmental organizations are frequently used and trusted source for COVID-19 information: the most commonly used COVID-19 information sources among our respondents were online news portals, social networks, governmental organizations and TV. While respondents reported lower level of trust in media channels, governmental organizations were seen as trustworthy source of information for COVID-19.

Health-workers and governmental organizations were equally trusted by public: however, data indicated that health-workers was one of the least used source among our respondents

Threat of COVID-19 was seen as real and people were concerned about it: vast majority of respondents reported moderate level of fear related to COVID-19 and only small group were not concerned at all or reported very high level of fear.

People were more concerned about global issues related to the virus (spreading globally and in Europe, impact on economy, vaccination, etc.) and less about personal, local and national issues (closure of Lithuanian borders, closure of schools and universities, uncertainty about how to protect themselves, lack of information, etc.)

The results of the study revealed that manifestation of panic was observed in all selected channels, but news of a global media organizations were more constructive and accurate and local media channels were more focused on intimidation and to the amount of news.

The results of the study reflect that the expression of panic in mass communication channels was evident. This manifested itself through the reports shown, the articles written and their abundance, manipulative and provocative headlines, incitement to conflict, and accentuated dramatic issues. Rarely is the publication of positive news and the highlighting of negative ones, and the content discussed in the media relating exclusively to COVID-19 demonstrates the relevance and importance of this topic to the media as a means of informing the public.

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