

Editorial

Communication of influenza, influence of communication

The recent events related to the spread of the influenza virus A (H1N1) have drawn again the attention of science communication experts to old issues, including a couple of issues we deem particularly important: risk communication and the role of scientific journalists in the society of knowledge.

In this case, apparently the World Health Organization has strictly implemented the outbreak communication guidelines it established in 2005 ([WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines](#)) and translated in 2008 into an “evidence-based” and “field-tested” communication planning guide ([WHO Outbreak Communication Planning Guide](#)). They are interesting documents. Rather than an inoculating and one-way information transfer, and rather than a strict control on information spreading aimed at avoiding panic, the WHO puts forward communication practices based on transparency and listening to the public. The guidelines are based on six principles: communication able to build (or to restore) the trust of the public; announcing early a potential health crisis, even with incomplete information (neither minimizing risk nor hiding data or facts which could be revealed by an outside source, thus eroding trust in health authorities); communicating with transparency the policies adopted and the guiding principles; listening to the public’s risk perceptions and concerns; planning in advance public communication in a crisis situation, training staff, making simulations, evaluating strengths and weaknesses in previous campaigns.

Alert levels with timely updates on the spreading of H1N1 and recommendations on precautionary measures mirror the principle expressed in the guidelines that a prompt political action and “proactive communication” of the “real” or even “potential” risks allow to effectively control the management of the outbreak, to guarantee the public’s trust, to change behaviour in time and to save lives. On the other hand, it is important to notice that those practices, certainly interesting ones, and an expression of many of the recent discussions on science communication and risk communication (trust, dialogue, engagement, participation, limits of one-way communication and of the deficit model), may require some pivotal adjustments once tested on the field. According to some, a very early alert and great emphasis on the potential risks have as side effects the amplification of the perceived risk and precautionary measures which are out of proportion and might cause considerable economic damage (closure of frontiers, problems to export or import, etc.). At the end of last May, for example, some WHO representatives expressed the possible need to revise the definition of health alert levels on pandemics. (The present alert levels, devised at the time of the avian flu outbreak in 2005, are based only on the virus spreading worldwide, not on mortality levels, which are quite difficult to evaluate precisely over a short time).

This sort of disputes lead us to the second interesting aspect. The growing invasion of scientists-bloggers, scientists-militants, of quality scientific information on the web 2.0, of new players in the ecosystem of science communication, occurred simultaneously with the crisis of daily newspapers and the extraordinary concentration of the TV information media in only a handful of companies, more interested in entertainment rather than in information. These processes have partially contributed, within many European and north-American editorial offices, to a certain downsizing of scientific information, cuts (at times considerable) in full-time scientific journalists, the increasing trend of resorting to free-lancers or, quite frequently, to the mere editing of press agency releases or press releases from research institutions, which are the only sources. In many countries, science communicators find more easily a job in press offices, museums, in the educational sector (or edutainment), web publishing, than in the editorial offices of newspapers and televisions.

And yet these processes, as Geoff Brumfiel recently remarked in *Nature* (vol. 458, 9 March 2009) are not harmless. In the case of technical-scientific controversies, for example, the role played by professional scientific TV or press journalists is important and is not equal to the sum of any bloggers, scientists-popularizers, educators, etc. In the case of the A (H1N1) flu, for example, the controversy on the pressure from the swine industry to leave the name “swine flu” aside provoked the indignation of some (like Debora Mackenzie, in her blog in the *NewScientist* website, 30 April 2009): it was feared that

that pressure could influence a correct and complete information to the public, or to distort facts. Others have commented on the type of health alarm, on the type of information to be provided to the public and how, on the precautionary measures to be adopted, or still, on the existence of private access databases which keep an important portion of the genetic information on the swine flu viruses. These are all issues which evidently show that the public debate can and should be promoted, spurred, fed by the communication produced by companies, research institutions, agencies, public declarations of scientists and governmental officials, scientific blogs, wikis and the likes. But another crucial contribution should come from the work by full-time scientific journalists, who should have time, spaces on mass media and the freedom and expertise needed to intersect stories, cross-check sources, interview the authorities, ask questions, even inconvenient ones, and investigate.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Yurij Castelfranchi

HOW TO CITE: Y. Castelfranchi, *Communication of influenza, influence of communication*, *Jcom* **08**(02) (2009) E.