

Let the TV on! Audience Behaviour Patterns during ‘First Wave’ of Covid-19 in the Czech Republic

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Abstract. While most media research on the Covid-19 pandemic focuses on misinformation or polarisation of society, we find a niche in what strategies mass audiences chose to adopt when receiving the news. We addressed this very question immediately at the beginning of the pandemic in the Czech Republic in 2020, choosing a quantitative method and apply it on a representative sample of the Czech population according to standard quota sampling parameters. The specificities of the Czech Republic, as one of the most affected countries and holding the primacy with the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 per population in the world, played an important role in the selection of news. Our research identified four basic groups of recipients: Concerned, Careful, Sceptical, and Detached. Research in Germany (Wolling, Schumann & Arlt, 2020), for example, has found similar classifications. Another important finding was the audience’s preferences in terms of the use of different types of media, with our respondents being completely dominated by television as the primary source of information. Other key finding is that audiences felt overwhelmed by news of the pandemic, which implies challenges for further research but especially for journalistic practice.

Keywords: coronavirus; audience; news; public; survey.

Paleiskite televizorių! Auditorijos elgesio modeliai pirmosios Covid-19 bangos Čekijoje metu

Santrauka. Daugumai žiniasklaidos tyrimų apie Covid-19 pandemiją analizuojant visuomenės dezinformaciją ar poliarizaciją, nutarėme tirti masinės auditorijos pasitelkiamas strategijas naujiems priimti. Šio klausimo ėmėmės iš karto, pačioje pandemijos Čekijoje pradžioje 2020 m., pasirinkdami kiekybinį metodą ir taikydami

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ji reprezentatyviai Čekijos gyventojų imčiai pagal standartinės kvotinės atrankos parametrus. Parenkant naujienas svarbų vaidmenį atliko Čekijos kaip vienos iš labiausiai paveiktų šalių, pasaulyje pirmaujančių pagal gyventojų mirčių nuo Covid-19 skaičių, specifika. Mūsų tyrime nustatytos keturios pagrindinės gavėjų grupės: Susirūpinę, Atsargūs, Skeptiški ir Atsiriboję. Pavyzdžiui, Vokietijoje atliktame tyrime (Wolling, Schumann & Arlt, 2020) pateiktas panašus suskirstymas. Dar viena svarbi išvada yra susijusi su labiausiai auditorijos naudojamomis žiniasklaidos priemonėmis: televizija buvo daugumos mūsų respondentų pirminis informacijos šaltinis. Taip pat nustatyta, kad auditorija manė, jog naujienų apie pandemiją buvo per daug, o tai kelia sunkumų tolesniems tyrimams, ypač žurnalistikai.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: korona virusas; auditorija; naujienos; visuomenė; apklausa.

Introduction

When news about a new type of coronavirus, causing the disease referred to as Covid-19 and manifesting itself similarly to SARS or MERS, began to spread around the world at the beginning of 2020, media (not only) in the Czech Republic naturally also began addressing this matter. Questions arose regarding the attitudes of the media but primarily of politicians toward the disease as an imminent threat. A potential crisis of an extent similar to that dominating China at that time would in all probability cause considerable difficulties for the Czech government, based primarily on a populist approach to politics (Havlík, 2019 or Bobba and Hubé, 2021). It was therefore essential to see what role the media would play in a crisis of an extent unprecedented in the Czech Republic.

The situation began to take shape on 1 March when the authorities announced the first three infections in the Czech Republic (CR). On 12 March, the government declared a state of emergency and it became clear that the Czechs were beginning to actually experience something their country had not gone through since its formation in 1993 – an unprecedented public health emergency.

The country during the state of emergency declared on 12 March was also paralysed by a complete lack of protective medical supplies. The wave of solidarity that ensued was as unprecedented as the closure of the country. The Czechs had no choice but to sew the compulsory face masks themselves, not just for their families and friends but also for medical personnel and other ‘frontline’ workers. The lack of standardised face masks and respirators began to improve after establishing an airlift with China and the arrival of several tonnes of medical supplies.

Thus, the motivation for the research was to find out how audiences evaluate news coverage of the situation described above and whether, or how, this coverage affects them. We have observed that the sheer shock and severity of the situation initially grew slowly from the new year onwards, escalating with the beginning of March 2020 and the first infections in the Czech Republic. Subsequently, we observed a sort of crisis period, but this gradually began to dissipate as information grew, news coverage of the topic was virtually ubiquitous, and a sort of fatigue with the topic rather than fear of coronavirus began to spread through society.

The premises of our interest in this situation were based on the constructionist approach to media research (Schulz, 1989 or Yan, 2019) and the discourse of Uses and Gratification approach. Within this framework, we constructed both the research design in general and

the specific questions of the questionnaire. In doing so, our interest crystallised in the research question: How did the audience perceive coronavirus news during the so-called first wave regarding the nature of the crisis and the novelty of the situation? To answer this question, a quantitative questionnaire survey was performed, in which Czech audiences were asked questions about the coronavirus news coverage, on their routines in media consumption, as well as their attitude toward the government measures and opinions on the individual government leaders.

The study showed that during the first wave of the coronavirus epidemic in the Czech Republic, the public indeed was overwhelmed with news about the virus and the disease it causes. State restrictions also influenced the audience's choice of the type of media through which they received news about coronavirus. Dominant medium was television. However, the data showed that radio was the most trusted source of information. Based on the analysis, we found 4 clusters of recipients: Concerned, Careful, Sceptical, and Detached. These clusters varied in age, gender but also, figuratively, in the degree to which audience members rated the usefulness of the news discussed. Another characteristic of each group was how the pandemic changed their daily routines and how people approached this change. For example, the Concerned were much more likely to follow government regulations, take care of their hygiene, try to reduce social contact, etc.

Literature Review

In order to interpret the data appropriately, we also need to look at other research related to the topic. Thus, the following sub-section presents the findings of other studies to better understand the results of the present study.

One of the aspects of media use observed was the choice of media type, or information channel, that Czech news consumers used as dominant during the pandemic. A major factor shaping the assumption that people turned to television in particular was the long-standing high credibility of public service media (Newman et al. 2019) and the general preference for television news over other media types (Macek et al. 2015). The key role of television news in times of crisis is confirmed by research by Petrun Sayers, Parker, Seelam and Finucane (2021), who conclude that television served as the main information channel for Texans during the crisis caused by the 2017 strike of Hurricane Harvey. In addition, the aforementioned research verified that most people remained resistant to changing the information channel used during the crisis. Our research reflects these findings through the identification of the main information source among different sociodemographic groups and by looking for possible changes in media type preferences or specific information channel during the first wave of the pandemic.

In terms of comparing the assumptions and results of the research presented here, the framework is largely consistent with other studies. The high popularity of television as the primary source of information during pandemic of Covid-19 is the same in the Czech Republic as for example Kosovo (as Qerimi and Gërguri, 2022, show). On the other hand, among Finnish people, TV viewing has also grown, although they generally

prefer online sources of information (Newman et al., 2020; Screenforce, 2020). On the contrary, Macková et al.¹ (2021) based on a similarly constructed data base of the Czech audience, concludes that the dominant media type was online media, although only just ahead of television.

As analysis of news content during the ‘first wave’ (MediaTenor, 2020) have shown, at least in Central Europe (Czechia, Slovakia, Germany, Austria, and Poland), audiences in major television news programs have been exposed to an unprecedented and probably disproportionate amount of coronanews. The percentage of coronavirus reports in the studied programs did not fall below 82%.

The research by Mihelj et al. (2021) follows a similar line to this paper but chooses a qualitative method of interviewing. However, the researchers found that the communication strategies chosen by governments in the countries studied, but also the approach of the media as such and the form of their messages, have helped to divide and polarise society rather than unite audiences under the pressure of an unprecedented threat. Furthermore, Wolling, Schumann and Arlt (2020) also found four groups in the German public (n = 1458) as this paper but with different characteristics, based on attitudes towards government coronavirus policy and perceived health, social, and economic risks. These are Critics, Concerned Supporters, Optimistic Supporters, and Reckless Supporters. In all groups, the dominance of television as a source of information in the time of the coronavirus crisis was also confirmed. However, it seems that Germans were not oversaturated with coronanews. On the contrary, they lacked information on the consequences of the crisis for socially disadvantaged citizens.

Data from both commercial research agencies and official bodies tracking media reach show that with the onset of the crisis there has indeed been a rise in television viewing, which was especially applicable for public television (ATO²; Median, 2020a; Median, 2020b for Czechia, Van Aelst et al., 2021 for other European countries).

Theoretical framework

Here we present the theoretical framework underlying the research presented here. These are concepts that are consistent with the research assumptions and motivations outlined in the Introduction above.

As a starting theoretical framework for our research, we used the concept of Need for Orientation (NFO), based mainly on the roots of agenda-setting theory. The concept of NFO clarifies the relationship between agenda-setting effects and individual need for information seeking and explains why agenda-setting is more effective for some individu-

¹ The authors appropriately captured the audience’s attitudes very closely before the outbreak of the pandemic, in late 2019. In terms of media type selection, the conclusions of Macková et al. are in fact consistent with those of this study. We assess the differences (between this study’s findings and the ones of Macková et al.) in units of percentages between the popularity of television and online media as negligible given the different targeting of the surveys. The findings of Macková et al. can serve in part as an identification of the pre-pandemic state of the Czech audience and the change it underwent during March–May 2020.

² ATO – Association of Television Organizations, <https://www.ato.cz/vysledky/>

als than others. The original form of the NFO is based on early research on agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Weaver 1973), and a separate and complete conceptualisation was introduced by David H. Weaver (1977, 1980). The concept is based on the assumption that in specific situations, individuals have a need to resolve their own information deficit caused by uncertainty toward the specific situation at hand, which leads individuals to make more intensive use of information sources, predominantly mass media. The level of NFO is then directly correlated with the level of information seeking and increases the agenda-setting effect for specific individuals. The original concept of NFO considers relevance and uncertainty as its core components (Weaver, 1980), whereby an individual who considers a social topic highly relevant and feels a significant degree of uncertainty about his or her position on that topic is significantly more prone to be influenced by media content. The two main components were described as equivalent by the original conceptualisation of NFO, and the degree of each was then thought by the theory's developers to signify a significant change in NFO (McCombs, 2004). However, the reconceptualisation of this theory has produced a slight shift in the perception of relevance and uncertainty (Matthes, 2005). Rather, a fundamental indicator of the potential agenda-setting effect is relevance, which determines how interested an individual is in seeking out new information. In addition to the suppressed role of uncertainty, the critics of the original concept also highlight a new element entering the NFO process: the need for cognition (*ibid*). Relevance and uncertainty are seen by critics of the original model as predictors of the degree of NFO and not as elements from which the concept emerges. Our present research accounts for the division of society according to the susceptibility of individuals to adopt a media agenda and be influenced by news content during the Covid-19 disease pandemic. The pandemic situation can be perceived as highly relevant to the vast majority of society, leading us to consider the possible significant effects of NFO on a certain segment of the population. The study is an attempt to identify the basic characteristics of groups more prone to be exposed to/be influenced by media content and to highlight in which ways (in relation to which topics) the interest in news content was most pronounced. Indeed, the level of NFO may vary among individuals according to specific topics or sub-aspects of topics.

As previous studies have shown, in the case of crisis situations (natural disasters, terrorist attacks, pandemics, etc.) there is generally a growing demand for more information in society (Westlund & Ghersetti, 2014), our research tracks which part of society has been more strongly affected by the need to follow the media. As the duration of the crisis situation lengthened (in the case of the first wave of the pandemic, this was a number of weeks), there was a predictable tendency for some social groups to perceive news content more negatively or not to be exposed to such content at all. An explanation for this phenomenon may be the concept of Information Overload (IO), occurring in individuals who receive too much information in a limited period of time and therefore lack the capacity to process it further (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). This phenomenon has also been shown to occur in consumers of news media, which, particularly due to its monothematic nature, could induce feelings of fatigue in individuals due to excessive information saturation (Ji, Ha & Snyder, 2014). Other reasons for the loss of interest in pandemic news include the

induction of uncomfortable feelings due to the reception of news perceived negatively (Woodstock 2014, Schröder & Ørsten, 2016, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2020), which can reasonably be expected from news coverage of the Covid-19 disease crisis. Thus, one of the anticipated outcomes of the research was the identification of people declaring a gradual or abrupt decline in interest in news coverage due to feelings of information overload.

In summary, based on assumptions drawn from the theoretical concepts of Need for Orientation, Information Overload and the constructivist paradigm, as well as the Uses and Gratification approach, we assume that audiences will be divided into specific groups according to the impact that both the pandemic itself and the measures to counter the spread of Covid-19 will have on their lives. Based on these characteristics, audience members could either be dismissive of coronavirus news and perceive it as something that threatens the status quo of society (they will perceive news about the pandemic as scaremongering, a ‘media virus’) or, on the contrary, they will seek out such information in order to protect themselves, for example.

Methods

The research is based on a quantitative analysis of a standardised questionnaire. In cooperation with STEM/MARK, a well-established provider of qualitative and quantitative opinion polls and market research, the data were collected using the CAWI (computer-assisted web interviewing) method from a representative sample of the Czech population ($n = 1020$). The representativeness was ensured through standard quotas of gender, age, education, place of residence, and size of municipality³. The data were collected between 18 and 25 June 2020.

The main research question is: How did the audience perceive coronavirus news during the so-called first wave regarding the nature of the crisis and the novelty of the situation?

Since the respondents were completing the questionnaire in June, i.e., a relatively long time after the Czech Republic had introduced the strict limitations to public life in the spring, there was a need to adjust the questionnaire to the respondents. Therefore, five milestones, important moments during the first coronavirus wave in Czechia, were specified based on a presumption that they almost certainly left a profound memory trace on the respondents, and to which the questions in the survey referred:

1. Official confirmation of the first three cases of SARS-CoV-2 infections on the Czech territory (1 March 2020);
2. Declaration of the state of emergency on the whole territory and effective date of

³ Specifically, the sample consists of 47.7 % of women, 52.3 % of men which means that in our sample men are slightly overrepresented. There is 16.3 % between 18 and 29 years old, 27.1 % between 30 and 44 years old, 23.2 % 45–59 years old, and 33.4 % of older than 60 years in the sample. Such composition is skewed towards the younger generations and people of working age. 17.5 % of respondents reached university level of education, 38.0 % high school level, and 44.4 % of lower education level. Such composition is almost identical with the real structure of population. This data could be compared with statistics from Czech Statistical Office here: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/yearbooks> or <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021>.

restrictive measures (12 March 2020). The total number of infected at this time was 95, none died yet⁴;

3. Arrival of the first cargo aircraft from China, carrying medical supplies (21 March 2020). The number of infected was 891, the first person died a day after, 22 March;
4. Commencement of the validity of the 'Antivirus' government program, providing economic assistance to employers whose ability to conduct business was restricted on the basis of government measures (31 March 2020). At this time, the authorities registered a total of 3,010 infected and 28 deceased people;
5. Easement of a significant number of restrictive measures (25 May 2020). At the end of the examined period, there were 8,983 infected and 314 deceased people in the Czech Republic.

However, we are also aware that although respondents were provided with assistance in the form of these milestones, some of them failed to recall the facts that the questionnaire asked about, often more than two months apart, or that these facts were distorted by naturally imperfect memory. The situation in June, when the number of infected people did not increase rapidly and the mood in society was relaxed, could also have influenced the respondents' answers. On the other hand, the uniqueness, unprecedentedness, and seriousness of the situation probably left a strong influence on a number of respondents, which was undoubtedly associated with the media representation of the pandemic's arrival in the Czech Republic. The questionnaire structure facilitated capturing the changes in media behaviour of the respondents in relative detail, but in a manner for the respondents to be able to relive the individual milestones and remember how they used the media. The introductory questions were pointed especially at the consumption of news before the outbreak of the pandemic, interest in public affairs and politics, the preferred media type, etc. The extent in which the respondents recollected the events of the individual selected milestones was also examined.

It should be pointed out that all the questions emphasised the role of the media, especially news reporting, as the primary source of information about the spread and management of the disease, the (in)appropriateness of the measures, etc. Although all the questions were designed with regard to the research goal, i.e., media conduct, it is possible that in some imperfectly articulated questions, certain respondents assessed the realities of the news coverage, not the news itself. This is one of the limitations of this research in terms of the methodology.

A combination of approaches was used to analyse the data itself. The main support was a combination of cluster and factor analysis. For each factor, the signs selected were 1. 'Caution', 2. 'Denial', 3. 'Work impact', and 4. 'Residual'. The components of each sign were questions of the survey related to assessment of changes in working life, willingness to comply with anti-epidemic measures, assessment of political representation or news coverage in general.

⁴ Obtained from WorldOMeters statistics (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/czech-republic/>).

Table 1. Variance of factor analysis.

Total Variance Explained							
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.951	32.923	32.923	3.951	32.923	32.923	3.088
2	1.841	15.343	48.266	1.841	15.343	48.266	2.360
3	1.258	10.486	58.752	1.258	10.486	58.752	2.907
4	1.072	8.937	67.688	1.072	8.937	67.688	2.302
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.							
a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.							

Table 2. Structure of clusters.

Number of Cases in each Cluster		
Cluster	1	175.000
	2	368.000
	3	264.000
	4	213.000
Valid		1020,000
Missing		0,000

Factor analysis was carried out by STEM/MARK and was chosen as ideal due to its ability

to summarise data so that relationships and patterns can be easily interpreted and understood. It is normally used to regroup variables into a limited set of clusters based on shared variance. Hence, it helps to isolate constructs and concepts. (Yong, Pearce, 2013, p. 79)

Using factor analysis, the key finding of the research was achieved – four archetypal types of coronavirus news audiences. Further sub-findings dealing with the use of each media type or their trustworthiness etc., were achieved by analysing proportional statistically significant relationships.

Results

Media types proportionality

Following the declaration of the state of emergency, border closures, and resolute restrictions to social and cultural life, citizens abruptly began to spend more time at home. This

understandably influenced the amount of time spent with the media. ČT24, the news channel of the public service Czech Television, registered, for example, a 130% increase in audience share in March 2020 (Median, 2020a). The dominant position of the only continuous news TV channel in the CR (at the time) was also confirmed by the research. Each milestone also included a significant number of respondents who did not remember which source (media type or specific medium) was the first they used to obtain the news about the given event (see Table 3). The respondents were asked about the primary news source for the event that defined the specific milestone.

Table 3. Percentage structure of the individual media types as primary sources in relation to the individual milestones [M1-5]. The total count of columns did not equal 100% because of rounding to one decimal. The table serves illustrative purposes.

[%]	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
TV	41.4	42.4	48.8	36.8	35.2
Web	19.2	12.7	9.2	9.9	12.7
Radio	4.9	5	2.5	3.6	3.8
Press	0.1	0.2	0	0.1	0.2
Social Network	2	1.5	2.4	1.1	2.2
Personal Contact	1.2	1.6	0.4	0.4	0.6
App	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1
Other/ Unidentified	6.9	3.4	1.8	2.9	4.5
Do not remember	23.6	31.9	34.5	44.7	40.2

With reference to long-term media market research by ATO, it can be assumed that part of the respondents who declared watching television in general were watching public service newscasts although they did not specify this explicitly. As mentioned by Saurwein, Eberwein, and Karmasin (2019) also in other countries like UK or Austria public broadcasters are the preferred sources.

Government press conferences gained a strong position on the air. Only 6.5% of the respondents (n = 66) stated that they had never watched the government's press conferences and had no idea how they looked or what was their content. In contrast, almost 45% of the respondents (n = 458) watched at least half of one of such briefings on a live or delayed basis. Press conferences have a very specific position within crisis reporting. On the one hand, they provide an opportunity for the media to present completely current events, especially in this case when (not only) the Czech government used the briefings to inform the citizens about the current situation and announce the restrictive measures which occasionally came into force immediately upon their publication. On the other hand, the large number of these briefings turned media reporting into a superficial, continuous flow of government 'PR'.

“[T]he media form a space where not only images of politicians and politics take shape, but also forms of citizen relations with government and politics that define the possibilities of interaction.” (Van Wessel, 2014, p. 96)

Given the high proportion of ‘don’t remember’ responses to the question asking for the primary source of information about a given milestone, it is appropriate to problematise this phenomenon a bit more. It is clearly a limitation of the research, as it is assumed that the ability to recall specific sources of information declines rapidly with time. Some respondents may be influenced by time lapse or the simple fact that they are not interested in the source of information at all. The key issue here is people’s sensitivity to using certain types of media in general (some don’t care and some use only one media title/TV/radio station, etc.). It is probably safe to assume that people who recall a particular source have a more stable pattern of media use than those who combine multiple sources or have an irregular rhythm of media use. They then lose the ability to identify the source of information after a longer period of time. On the other hand, as the data in Table 3 show, the specific topic of the event is also an important variable in the recall process. The critical situation of the first (and partly of the second milestone) became normalised over time and also the events of the selected milestones could only affect a certain part of the respondents. For example, economic measures (M4) to help companies and entrepreneurs practically did not directly affect employees, who were not that interested in the topic/milestone and thus did not recall their primary source of information about the event.

Four Groups, Four Kinds of Attitude toward Corona News

Based on the cluster analysis and factor analysis of the data gathered, it was possible to split the Czech audiences into four groups differentiated primarily on the basis of gender, secondarily by age or education attainment. All the groups are almost of the same size and their characteristics chiefly reflect the different attitudes of their members to the news coverage of the coronavirus, the health risk of Covid-19, and the assessment of the Czech political representation. Their overall attitude toward the possible impacts of the crisis was then translated into the names attached to each group. These four groups we named: Concerned, Careful, Sceptical, and Detached.

Concerned. The greatest amount of concerns, associated with the health and economic risks posed by the impact of the pandemic, was shown by a group mainly consisting of women (66%) and young and middle-aged people (44.6%). Individuals in this group displayed increased interest in the news reporting during the early months of the pandemic, especially in information concerning the health risks of the disease or spread of the epidemic in the Czech Republic and elsewhere. The high level of interest in current news translated into a sharp increase in efforts aimed at stricter personal hygiene, as is evident in 96.4% of the individuals in this group.

In addition to an increased interest in personal hygiene, stronger tendencies toward avoiding places with a higher concentration of people, such as cinemas, theatres, sports areas, restaurants, and even mass transport, can be observed in the Concerned individuals. The absolute majority of the respondents in this group (93.8%) also declared that based

on information from the news media, they also tried to avoid personal contacts with other people in general in this period, and almost the same number of people (94.3%) admitted they had to make protective devices at home. In this context, the declared actions of this group's members correspond to the recommendations in the media, urging people to practise personal isolation and the use of protective devices, which, however, were in acute shortage at the time. This group also did not support the easing of the restrictive measures.

Individuals in the Concerned group are people of working age and the adverse health and economic situation apparently made them worry about the economic repercussions on the employment market, which most of them were part of during the pandemic. This argument is also documented by the fact that more than half of the respondents included in this group (51.1%) experienced fear of losing their job during the crisis.

Concerned used television as their primary source of information. However, they were less able to identify a specific medium. This is certainly related to the fact that, unlike Careful, they are of working age and have a lower education. They can't pay as much time and attention to news. This is also confirmed by their evaluation of the news, as they considered them less understandable than Careful did.

Careful. News about the coronavirus pandemic was rated the best by the group of Careful individuals, with more women (66%) than men, the core of which comprised elderly people, mainly aged 60 years and more (48.5%). The interest in information from the media increased somewhat during the period under consideration in the members of this group, most noticeably during the first few weeks of the pandemic. Increased consumption of news content corresponds to the higher average age of the group members, who at the same time fell within the definition framework of a so-called vulnerable group, i.e., people with potentially more serious progression of the disease. These people therefore used the media to seek out information about potential health risks associated with Covid-19, while manifesting much less interest in tracking information about the economic repercussions or effects of the crisis on the country's political life.

In addition to the increased interest in the news content, this group also displayed a positive approach to the news in terms of its assessment. Individuals classified as Careful were more inclined to the notion that news reporting was comprehensible, interesting, professional, while being intended for 'ordinary people' as well, i.e., non-elitist. It is interesting to mention here that despite the higher level of interest in information from the media confirmed in this group, its members did not feel overloaded, as they actively sought access to information. In terms of the news consumption, the Concerned and Careful groups are fairly similar, however, a major difference can be seen in the concerns sparked in them by the news. In contrast to the first group, Careful displayed far less fear of losing their jobs, worries about health risks in pursuit of an occupation or sending children to kindergartens or primary schools. The absence of these concerns is related to the higher age of the Careful individuals, bordering on retirement age. They displayed, in contrast, significant concerns regarding the potential health risks caused by Covid-19, direct contact with other people, or visits to places with higher concentrations of people.

In all of the milestones (except the 4th – economic measures), Careful relied on television as the primary source of information most of all groups. Personal contact played a more important role in obtaining information for this group than for others. This media behaviour corresponds to the socio-demographic characteristics of the group, which is composed mainly of women of retirement age. It can, therefore, be assumed that they are not technically literate enough to use online news. They are, however, active members of real social networks and have a higher social capital.

Sceptical. Both groups described above rank among rather intensive consumers of news reporting with a positive attitude towards the relatively harsh nationwide measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus. In contrast, the research identified a group on the opposite side of the spectrum of opinion, for which the Sceptical label was chosen by the authors. The majority of this group is comprised of men (63%) and people with higher education (secondary schools and universities). This group comprises the least number of people aged 60 and more in all the identified groups (25.8%), as younger and middle-aged individuals prevail there.

The members of this group admitted that their interest in news topics on Covid-19 decreased dramatically over time. Of least interest for them was information about the epidemiological situation in the Czech Republic and worldwide as well as news reporting about health aspects and risks associated with the disease. An increasing tendency of interest in the news only became evident in a single topic, specifically in the economic impacts of the crisis. More than other groups, the Sceptical group expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the coronavirus news, a fact that in all probability caused the decreasing interest in information as such. In addition to low interest in news content, this group is also distinguished by neutral or even negative news ratings.

The most visible difference from the previous groups is the specification of concerns, almost absent in the members of the Sceptical group. Only a very low percentage of them admitted a certain level of fear of losing their jobs (10.4%), which was, for instance, one of the greatest concerns in the Concerned group, one with a very similar age structure. This significant difference apparently depends on the educational attainment and the nature of the work performed.

This group largely did not agree with the professional recommendations and government orders, even expressing disagreement with them. This was manifested, for instance, when more than two thirds (66.8%) of the Sceptical individuals admitted they felt no concerns in their work, and did not consider it a risk to travel by public transport (58.3%), participate in events with an increased concentration of people (71.7%) and go to restaurants and pubs (84.3%). The sceptical, even negative, attitude to the news reporting, on the one hand, and to the actual measures and risks, on the other hand, suggests that it was this group of people who considerably underestimated the risks associated with the crisis, regarding the coronavirus pandemic situation as an event that only existed in the media and political sphere. It is for these reasons that the Sceptical individuals in the majority (75.2%) expressed their consent with the easing of the restrictive measures the

consequences of which were dramatically felt by the whole of society, in contrast to the health complications which only affected a small percentage of the Czech population.⁵

From the point of view of the preferred medium, the Sceptical group is interesting for its higher use of radio broadcast as a source of coronanews. These may be job-related preferences, as radio was generally used by respondents who work as drivers or self-employed. They also use online news (websites, applications, and social networks) more than others.

Detached. A relatively large group of respondents were downright critical of the media content, and their interest in following the news remained very low throughout the period in question. The group was indicated as Detached and its gender composition is relatively balanced with a slight predominance of men (55%). People in this group were mostly less educated or attained only a secondary education. The age structure of the Detached is balanced.

Compared to other groups, the Detached individuals displayed a lack of interest in information from the news in all the topics associated with the coronavirus pandemic, the economic repercussions as well as the restrictive measures of the Czech government. Overall, this group tended to have negative opinions about the news reporting, gravitating toward the belief that it was chaotic, monotonous, and superficial. The group is characterised by a low interest in the news, taking a negative view of the news as a whole.

In case of surveyed concerns news reporting could cause in the audiences, the Detached individuals did not underestimate the prospective risks of the pandemic impacts but also did not share the concerns significantly. They generally lacked distinct attitudes, a fact that in all probability relates to the overall lack of interest in the events surrounding them and the feeling that the crisis had anything to do with them.

The indefiniteness and laxity of this group was also reflected in the approach to the news. Of all the groups, they remembered the situations associated with individual milestones the least, and they perceived television as their primary source of information anomalously little.

Conclusions

As stated in the Introduction, the motivation for the research was to capture the attitudes of Czech audiences at a time of unprecedented health crisis, how they perceive the news coverage of this crisis and how this coverage has affected them. The aim, formulated in the form of a research question: how did the audience perceive coronavirus news during the so-called first wave regarding the nature of the crisis and the novelty of the situation? and supported by the theoretical background of the concepts of Need for Orientation and Information Overload, was to find out whether certain groups of coronanews recipients were formed in the Czech environment and what characteristics these groups have.

⁵ The low number of infections in the CR is especially mentioned in relation to the so-called first (spring) wave of the disease, delimited by the time frame of our survey. Over the following months, the situation in the country deteriorated considerably, and as a result, the Czech Republic ranked among the most affected European Union countries during the autumn.

The results of the analysis of the news content consumption during the so-called first wave of Covid-19 make it clear that Czech society held fundamentally divergent attitudes toward the crisis based on the news reporting. Using the cluster analysis and factor analysis, the authors divided the population into four groups of a similar size, well illustrating the positions of the news consumers. The deepest difference was found between the Concerned and Sceptical groups, radically divided in their attitude towards the disease as well as the political representation and the news content. Members of the Concerned group were characterised by strong concerns about the health risks associated with the disease and strict compliance with the recommendations given by the government and broadcast by the media. The Sceptical group represents the exact opposite, as they voiced a mistrust of the political representation and media, while downplaying and underestimating the danger posed by the coronavirus. The two remaining groups, Careful and Detached, did not manifest a strong inclination to extreme views, constituting a sort of middle between Concerned and Sceptical.

Based on the concepts of NFO and Information Overload, we can conclude that the assumptions of these approaches have indeed been reflected in the structuring of the Czech coronanews audience. While the Concerned and Careful clusters show high levels of coronanews relevance and uncertainty about the situation, we observed low levels of relevance for Sceptical and Detached in particular. Moreover, especially for Sceptical, the level of uncertainty can be described as negative. Not only did they not feel threatened by the situation, their attitude was even against the proposed security measures. In terms of information overload according to the Information Overload theory, then, by negative definition, it is especially the Careful group that certainly did not feel overwhelmed by information – on the contrary. It was the Sceptical in particular whose interest in the news was not high, and it was this group that most often rated the amount of coronanews most negatively. If we follow the reconceptualisation of the NFO approach (thus focusing mainly on the relevance element), then we can say that the Czech coronanews audience was divided into 4 clusters according to the degree with which they perceived the relevance of the given information as follows (in descending order): Careful -> Concerned -> Sceptical -> Detached (with the order of Sceptical and Detached being determined by the absolute level of relevance – whether it is positive or negative, rather than the simple (non-)presence of this element). Another, equally important layer, but lying at a different level of analysis, is the demographic and economic characteristics of these groups. However, these two layers are complementarily linked and influence each other. In other words, whether a given audience member is working, and whether their work or personal life has been substantially affected by the pandemic and the restrictions or other parameter described in results section above is present, also largely determines the level of relevance of coronanews.

Our study thus builds on research by, for example, Petrun Sayers, Parker, Seelam and Finucane (2021), Qerimi and Gërguri (2022), and Macková et al. (2021), which highlight the dominant or at least very strong role of television as the prime medium in times of crisis. This paper is also largely in line with the findings of Mihelj et al. (2021) in that the

way information is distributed in moments of crisis (e.g., unprocessed government press conferences) can lead to a polarisation of society when public opinion around the topic (pandemic) is still developing. In its method and approach, the presented research has most in common with the study by Wolling, Schumann and Arlt (2020), who also identified four coronanews audience groups. These groups are divided according to perceptions of government policy towards the pandemic, health and social risks, and economic impacts. However, the authors focused on more general issues of grasping media reality through Niklas Luhman's tenets. 'The results of the study show [...] there are no or relatively small differences between groups: people experience four different "corona worlds" but use the same media sources of information with similar intensity. The assumption that our image of the pandemic world is decisively shaped by exposure to media-mediated information cannot be confirmed on the basis of these results.' (Wolling, Schumann & Arlt, 2020: 589) While the present study can confirm this last general conclusion, the aim was primarily different. Namely, to identify and learn about the groups in question, either in terms of media consumption or socio-economic composition.

The necessity to follow the immediate outcomes of a nationwide crisis created pressure both on the information processors, i.e., media professionals, and on the audience itself. As we have already stated, journalists (at least in the Czech Republic) should critically rethink their approach to the coronavirus pandemic. As shown, for example, by Finneman and Thomas (2021), even weekly newspaper journalists were forced to follow the pandemic's progress constantly and their routines were disrupted. Based on the findings of this paper, as well as other studies, it is suggested to focus further research on, for example, the media routines of journalists covering a pandemic crisis – to what extent did journalists reflect on their role in handling the situation. Our research showed that the amount of news was overwhelming for the audience. It would be interesting to research how this finding can be explained in terms of the political economy of media or editorial routines. These are other areas where further research can build on. This study should also be a guide for public institutions to adapt their communication strategies. It is clear that in times of greatest crisis, over-intensive uncoordinated communication not only becomes ineffective, but as this paper has shown, it can lead to the population becoming divided in opinion, which can have consequences for the (dis)acceptance of security measures.

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