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Ethical engagement, Responsibility and Strategic communication in the Digital Era: practitioners' approaches

Compromiso ético, responsabilidad y comunicación estratégica en la era digital: enfoques de los profesionales

Engajamento ético, responsabilidade e comunicação estratégica na era digital: abordagens dos profissionais

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Abstract

Digital communication channels can be subject to exploitation, resulting in harming individuals or societies by promoting fake news, disinformation, radicalization, or social polarization. It is important that communicators are well prepared in identifying, preventing, and responding to such actions, in understanding the vulnerabilities of their audience, while respecting the rights and liberties of the population. Thus, ethical, and strategic communication should be of top priority for institutional communicators, academia, journalists, or stakeholders when addressing security or sensitive issues.

The article presents the results of an empirical sociological study, part of an extensive exploratory research within the CRESCEnt project, aiming at identifying elements of enhancing critical thinking, responsible communication, and accountable behaviour. Three European states were targeted by the study: Romania, Spain, and Greece, while 28 practitioners in communication, intelligence and security and law enforcement contributed to the research with significant input on topics related to ethical, successful, and strategic communication characteristics.

Ethical communication implies acting by ethical principles, like being truthful, accurate, and well-intentioned. Responsibility is the central element of ethical engagement when informing the public. Effective messages are characterized by clearness, validity of information, novelty and presented in real time. Different types of authorities come into action for the communicators, such as the journalism code of practice, European values, or possible negative social impact.

Key Words: *Ethical engagement; Responsibility; Accountable communication; Strategic communication; Practitioners in communication; Security threat*

Resumen

Los canales de comunicación digital pueden estar sujetos a explotación, lo que resulta en daños a las personas o sociedades promoviendo noticias falsas, desinformación, radicalización o polarización social. Es importante que los comunicadores estén bien preparados para identificar, prevenir y responder a tales acciones, comprender las vulnerabilidades de su audiencia y respetar los derechos y libertades de

la población. Por lo tanto, la comunicación ética y estratégica debe ser la máxima prioridad para los comunicadores de instituciones, la academia, los periodistas o las partes interesadas al abordar temas delicados o de seguridad.

El artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio sociológico empírico, parte de una extensa investigación exploratoria dentro del proyecto CRESCEnt, con el objetivo de identificar elementos para mejorar el pensamiento crítico, la comunicación responsable y el comportamiento responsable. El estudio se centró en tres estados europeos: Rumanía, España y Grecia, mientras 28 profesionales en comunicación, inteligencia y seguridad y policial contribuyeron a la investigación con aportes significativos sobre temas relacionados con la ética, el éxito. y características de la comunicación estratégica.

La comunicación ética implica actuar de acuerdo con principios éticos, como ser veraz y bien intencionado. La responsabilidad es el elemento central del compromiso ético al informar al público. Los mensajes efectivos se caracterizan por la claridad, validez de la información, novedad y se presentan en tiempo real.

Diferentes tipos de autoridades entran en acción para los comunicadores, como el código de práctica del periodismo, los valores europeos o el posible impacto social negativo.

Palabras clave: *Compromiso ético; Responsabilidad; Comunicación responsable; Comunicación estratégica; Profesionales en comunicación; Amenaza a la seguridad*

Resumo

Os canais de comunicação digital podem estar sujeitos à exploração, resultando em danos a indivíduos ou sociedades ao promover notícias falsas, desinformação, radicalização ou polarização social. É importante que os comunicadores estejam bem preparados para identificar, prevenir e responder a tais ações, para entender as vulnerabilidades de seu público, respeitando os direitos e liberdades da população. Portanto, a comunicação ética e estratégica deve ser de alta prioridade para comunicadores institucionais, acadêmicos, jornalistas ou partes interessadas ao abordar questões de segurança ou delicadas.

O artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo sociológico empírico, parte de uma extensa pesquisa exploratória dentro do projeto CRESCEnt, com o objetivo de identificar elementos de reforço do pensamento crítico, da comunicação responsá-

vel e do comportamento responsável. Três estados europeus foram alvo do estudo: Romênia, Espanha e Grécia, enquanto 28 profissionais de comunicação, inteligência e segurança e aplicação da lei contribuíram para a pesquisa com contribuições significativas sobre tópicos relacionados à ética, sucesso e características de comunicação estratégica.

A comunicação ética implica agir por princípios éticos, como ser verdadeiro, correto e bem intencionado. A responsabilidade é o elemento central do compromisso ético ao informar o público. Mensagens eficazes são caracterizadas pela clareza, validade da informação, novidade e apresentadas em tempo real.

Diferentes tipos de autoridades entram em ação para os comunicadores, como o código de prática do jornalismo, os valores europeus ou o possível impacto social negativo.

Palavras chave: *Engajamento ético; Responsabilidade; Comunicação responsável; Comunicação estratégica; Profissionais da comunicação; Ameaça à segurança*

1. Introduction

The overall context of the research is represented by the rapid pace of changes faced by the culture of communication, driven by the power of internet and social networks. As a consequence of the emergent threats at European level, from social polarization and extremism to routinized racism, normalized xenophobia, and mainstreamed hate speech, one can observe the tendency of the media to present factual data regarding security threats in a generalizing manner, with strong impact on conveying and shaping beliefs and attitudes, on social inclusion/ exclusion, polarization, growth of panic, fear, stigmatization or unsupportive, toxic behaviours (see more on CRESCEnt[1] project official website).

Researchers agree that, within the new information environment, characterized by the everyday communication threats and risks, ethical communication should be a top priority for institutional communicators, for academia and journalists, for leaders and stakeholders when addressing security or sensitive issues. For example, Mohan J. Dutta, professor of communications and news media at the National University of Singapore considers that "communicating ethically is increasingly the

centrepieces of the global challenges we are experiencing today: the post truth and fake news era". (Dutta, 2019)

Nowadays, each profession has guidelines to outline what ethical behaviour means for a specific domain. For example, one can hear a lot about journalists' code of ethics. However, ethical communication is not addressed only to journalists, it is a critical element of any communication process which wants to be successful. That is why, in this study we have examined the relationship between ethical engagement in communication, responsibility, and strategic communication from the perspective of the practitioners in communication and security domains. To this respect several theoretical approaches on strategic communication, ethical communication, and responsibility as core principle of ethical communication were highlighted. Furthermore, we focused on the practitioners' perceived responsibility concerning ethical and strategic communication.

The article presents the results of an empirical sociological study, which is part of a more extensive exploratory research developed and implemented within the CRESCEnt project[2]. The present results within this article are focused on the qualitative method applied, based on individual interviews, aiming at identifying elements of enforcing critical thinking, responsible communication, and accountable behaviours. Three European states were targeted by the study: Romania, Spain, and Greece. At the same time, 28 practitioners in communication, intelligence and security and law enforcement (journalists, institution spokespersons, students in journalism and security studies) offered valid input to the research.

2. Material and Methods

While the exploratory research included mixed methods, the present analysis focuses on the qualitative approach, based on individual interviews.

Purpose and objectives of the study: The empirical process aimed at studying the phenomenon of fake news, ethics and responsibility in media reporting and communicating on subjects that are sensitive to the population and/ or represent security threats.

The analysis targeted to:

- understand behaviours, practices and strategies applied in accordance with a responsible communication approach,

- discuss opinions regarding means of approaching fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and new data,

- understand relevant means of resilience in order to practice accountable communication,

- register self-declared needs for further training in the field of ethical and responsible communication, when addressing the public.

Following the above objectives, the analysis targeted the identification of good practices and strategies of responsible and ethical reporting, applicable in case of institutional spokespersons and journalists who are active in the fields of law enforcement, intelligence, and security. The analysis also focused on the needs for further acquisition and training to develop competences in connection to strategic communication, critical thinking, analysing new data and information, all with the final aim of being responsible and ethical when addressing security threats or sensitive issues.

Qualitative method, technique and instrument used: The qualitative research process was part of an extensive exploratory study, focusing on opinions, attitudes, behaviours, and strategies related to ethical and responsible communication approaches practiced by institutional spokespersons and journalists in the fields of intelligence and security, strategic communication, and law enforcement. The empirical process implemented through a sociological investigation implied the direct observation of the factual data, therefore, of the reality. The qualitative approach was part of a triangulation method, including further and more detailed exploitations of the results obtained as part of a previous quantitative study.

The qualitative method was based on individual interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide. The study addressed experienced, new, and future practitioners and experts in the field of intelligence and security, strategic communication, and law enforcement, responsible with public and media communication. The approach

contributed to the quality of the information collected, including qualified opinions and proposals for further development. The qualitative approach contributed to a clearer understanding of specific concepts, of applied strategies and valid practices.

Target groups: The study was disseminated and promoted to practitioners and experts in the fields of security and law enforcement, institutional spokespersons, journalists, students or future professionals in communication, journalism, and security studies. The call also included possible indirect beneficiaries of the results, such as policy makers, academia representatives, NGOs in the field of security, stakeholders in security and law enforcement.

The identification of the target groups and the mapping of the stakeholders and their ecosystem was performed through an availability sampling process within available professional networks. The individual interviews were conducted throughout March to August 2019 in three European states: 10 interviews in Spain, 10 in Greece, and 8 in Romania. The nationality of the interviewees was not limited to the main representative one in each country.

The variables of analysis included in the interview guide: The interview guide included five operational categories, defined by dimensions related to ethical engagement and accountable behaviour when it comes to media reporting and public communication:

1. Strategic communication – defined through elements of successful versus failed message, strategies applied for obtaining the targeted response, assuming possible risks when addressing security threats or sensitive issues, reactions to untargeted responses, preventing actions for possible misunderstanding.

2. Critical thinking – strategies applied when dealing with disinformation, fake news, or misinformation, strategies for verifying the information and data, writing the communication.

3. Media literacy – understanding security threats and sensitive issues, understanding different types of messages (e.g., with the scope of radicalization, extremism, or terrorism).

4. Media ethics – factors that make a message ethical.

5. Needs for further training – elements of ethical and responsible communication in case of security threats and sensitive issues.

The structure of the instrument, the interview guide contains four parts:

1. The introduction aims to present to the interviewee the aim of the project, and to gain his/her trust regarding the confidentiality and the importance of the answers; this part also guides the interviewer regarding the documents to be presented to the participant and the estimative duration of the interview.

2. The identification data registers the necessary information for category analysis, but also other remarks of the interviewer. Having as base the target group characteristics, the main identification elements are: a) occupation – which presents options such as institutional spokesperson, journalist, student, policy maker, academia, NGO representative, security studies expert, or other; b) field of expertise – which includes relevant options for the study, such as intelligence and security, law enforcement, justice and other; c) he affiliation of the interviewee – as optional criteria; d) number of years of experience within the field of expertise; and e) demographic data – including elements such as age, gender and nationality.

3. The discussion part includes the minimum of questions to be addressed, in order to have similar categories of analysis. It also includes questions for further understanding of the answers. The questions are defined in relation to the purpose and the objectives of the study, following the established operational categories.

4. The conclusion ends the interview with other comments of the interviewee, considered as relevant and undiscussed information, in relation to the theme of the interview.

The data analysis process: The qualitative data has been analysed based on an interview frame of analysis, following the structure of the instrument, and stressing on the variables and categories of analysis. The interpretation of the results is based on the quotes indicated in the analysis and on the respondents' main ideas, mentioning identification data in accordance with the interviewees' declarations,

such as occupation, field of expertise, years of experience in the field, gender, and nationality. However, several theoretical approaches on strategic communication, ethical communication, and responsibility as core principle of ethical communication will be discussed hereafter, before presenting the results of our one analysis.

3. Theoretical framework

To achieve our objective of examining the relationship between ethical engagement in communication, responsibility, and strategic communication from the perspective of the practitioners in communication and security domains, we consider important to define the above-mentioned concepts.

What is strategic communication? Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 3) define strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission", noting that "although the term strategic communication has been used in the academic literature for many years, scholars are only now in the process of coherently exploring this in terms of a unified body of knowledge". (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 4) Thus, the multidisciplinary characteristic of the new strategic communication domain could be explained by the fact that it draws from a variety of methods and subject areas, or from diverse disciplines, such as mass communication, public relations, marketing, management, military history, or security studies etc.

At the same time, Carl H. Botan (2017) argues for „a single unified field of strategic communication based in the three large core subfields of public relations, marketing communication, and health communication, as well as strategic communicators working in many other subfields such as political communication, issues management, crisis communication, risk communication, environmental and science communication, social movements, counter terrorism communication, public diplomacy, public safety and disaster management, and others".

However, strategic communication is also recognized as a developing subfield within the communication domain. For example, for Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 4) the definition of strategic communication argues in favour of more participatory

communication practices: "further implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements". At the same time, Zerfass and Huck (2007) argues in favour of "extending the range of strategic communication to include processes of innovation and leadership". While Steyn (2003) focuses on the "what" and the "how" of the content to be communicated to stakeholders and Argenti et al. (2005) focuses on explaining to practitioners the framework of strategic communication employed by different institutions.

From a military and security studies perspective, Phillip Taylor refers to the four "pillars" of strategic communication: "information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy, and public affairs". (Taylor, 2009, p. 28) Moreover, researchers as Farwell (2012) define strategic communication in a simplistic way, as follows: "the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interest or policies, or to achieve objectives". At the same time, strategic communication can simply be considered a "whole of government approach developed by different departments and agencies". (Paul 2011)[3]

For the purpose of this research, we consider most appropriate the Hallahan et al. definition regarding the engagement of the people, respectively practitioners, in "deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements". (2007, p. 4) To this respect, the key questions from our interview guide explore the existence and effectiveness of communication strategies and the extent to which professional communicators and journalists are part of strategy formulations.

Moreover, successful strategic communication means integrated ethical actions and messages or ethical communication. That is why it is important to understand.

3.1. What is ethical communication and its principles?

There is not a single and clear definition of what is ethical communication. For example, Aaron Mandelbaum notes that ethical communication defines "a framework or set of acceptable communication principles that align with an enterprise's overarching code of conduct or code of ethics" (Mandelbaum, 2019). In other

words, ethical communication is predicated upon certain values, such as "being truthful, concise, and responsible with one's words and the resulting actions". (Mandelbaum, 2019) At the same time, Josina Makau (2009) defines ethical in communication by using three key elements: "the ends (what one hopes to achieve through the communication), the means (how one chooses to communicate), and the consequences (the outcomes of communication)".

Moreover, Ruth Mayhew (2018) focuses on responsibility as the centrepiece of the ethical communication definition, that is why we consider its definition most suitable for our research: "Ethical communication is fundamental to thoughtful decision-making and responsible thinking. Ethical communication is also accepting responsibility for the messages you convey to others and the short-term or long-term consequences of your communication". (Mayhew, 2018) The author considers that "ethical communication might extend to the medium or even the language chosen for delivering a message". (Mayhew, 2018) It means that the message should be accessible to all.

Ethical communication is discussed through some principles or fundamental elements that researchers define by using different keywords. Aaron Mandelbaum (2019) focuses on fundamental of ethical communication: a) truthfulness and honesty (presenting information in the most reliable and factual way possible and by having professional integrity); b) consistency and responsibility (presenting consistent information to different parties and accepting short-term and long-term consequences of honest communication); objectivity (being as objective as possible when communicating with others). (Mandelbaum, 2019)

At the same time, Ruth Mayhew (2018) argues in favour of "principles or foundational elements" as: "communicating fact-based messages honestly and accurately; valuing freedom of expression, diversity of perspective and tolerance of dissent; ever offending or provoke listeners; allowing access to the resources and facts that helped formulate an accessible message; being considerate of basic human needs". (Mayhew, 2018) Professor Nolan Sundrud from University of Denver argues the principles within ethical communication are autonomy (respecting others freedom), non-maleficence (not causing harm), beneficence, (communicating for good), justice (acting fair), and fidelity (being true to your word). (Sundrud, 2014)

Moreover, American National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication (NCA, November 1999) provides the following principles of ethical communication: „a) truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication; b) freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society; c) understanding and respecting other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages; d) access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfil human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society; e) communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators; f) condemnation for communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred; g) commitment to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice; h) advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality; i) accepting responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others."

Given the above theoretical approaches, we can highlight that responsibility is considered the core principle, albeit individual or institutional ethical r**esponsibility, directly or indirectly**. The judgments of responsibility draw upon complex issues at the intersection of law, philosophy, and psychology, being, in general, linked to terms such as fault and blame.

The responsibility attribution may apply to the self or to others and may include short term or long-term consequences of communication. Researchers agree that the type of attribution individuals select may be biased by whether the event happened to oneself or to another. For example, Ross states that "individuals tend to attribute positive experiences to internal factors (within themselves) and negative experiences to external factors (outside themselves)". (Ross, 1977 apud Rahimi et. al., 2016) At the same time, Weiner (2006) focuses in its attribution theory on perceived responsibility as part of the "one's cognitions surrounding the intentionality of an event", being presented "conceptually distinct from the emotions that follow (e.g., guilt, anger, sympathy)".

Furthermore, Rahimi et.al. (2016) highlight how "the moral relevance of a behaviour or outcome can bias perceptions of its intentionality and the importance of evaluating both cognitive and affective consequences of individuals' beliefs concerning intentional behaviours (e.g., responsibility versus blame)". But responsibility implies more than an attribution to a person, it is more about accepting or taking responsibility. To this respect, Mandelbaum (2019) notes that "a core tenant within any ethical communication framework is taking responsibility for the actions that result from one's words. Owning one's words reinforces the importance of being conscientious about ethical communication". (Mandelbaum, 2019)

Having in mind the theoretical framework, we tried in our analysis to identify opinions and declared practices of present and future practitioners' and experts' in the field of security and intelligence and law enforcement, to discuss the role of ethical engagement and responsibility in relation to strategic communication, when addressing the public in connection to security threats or on sensitive issues. As such, the empirical data targeted elements like fake news, ethics, and responsibility in media reporting, the accent of this analysis being on responsibility in media reporting and public communication. Institutional spokespersons as strategic communication experts and journalists represented the main target groups of the research. However, not all interviewees accepted to make public their names that is why we chose to make references to other identification data when analysing the interviews.

4. Analysis and results

An institutional spokesperson or a journalist, while conducting press releases or press conferences, or reporting to the public, **must be able to establish and increase trust, cooperation, and awareness of the public, to develop a sincere and equitable relationship with the media** (Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek). The institutional spokesperson represents "the essential communication channel" between the institution and the media, "operating as a coordinator to maintain the fine balance between the media and the communicating institution" (Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek).

The security threat or sensitive character of an information are discussed through the impact that it may have over the public. As such, it can result into panic, misunderstanding, believing truncated or false information, or adopting harmful attitudes or behaviours. Such threats could be "the lack of independency or the lack of freedom of speech" (Journalist, Politics, 35 years of experience, male, Greek).

Responsibility in communication goes hand in hand with its success of reaching the public. **An effective message** should be clear, concrete, easy to understand and short: "We reduced the size of the messages because we want them to be understood immediately by the public – short and clear" (Institutional spokesperson, Law enforcement, 6 y., male, Romanian). It also should be true and reflect the reality (Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek). The information must be offered timely and should enhance trust in the communicator (Press officer, Law enforcement, Greek), it should be correct, real, and verified (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement/ Justice, 21 y., female, Romanian).

The message should be published in a responsible way, without sensationalism: "However, the journalist should not be interested in the clicks. He should cover every important subject" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek). The success of the communication is also dependent on its "revealing character", novelty, and interest for the public (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek).

A successful message should be elaborated with accuracy and responsibility by well-intentioned professionals (Journalist, Law enforcement/ Justice, 24 y., male, Romanian). Automation has also been implied when focusing on types of issues that would have more impact to the public: "We use automatized algorithms to determine which kind problem can be viral. We have not found any 100% fake. The public is quite diverse, and a particular fraction of the public is willing to consume some kind of messages." (Academia/ NGO, Intelligence, and security, 15 y., male, Spanish)

A communicator can be sure of the success of the message when it registers "a lot of Impact in social media, engagement and conversation", when "the rest of news outlets pick up the stories and publish them in other countries", and/ or it

"creates awareness in politicians to act or comment about the issue" (Journalist, Economy, and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

A failed message presents too technical information, or already known aspects by the public (Military officer, Cyber Defence and Cybersecurity, 25 y., male, Spanish). Also, a message is failed when it "provokes great tension out of nowhere", because of presenting information without arguments (NGO representative, Racist crime, 17 y., female, Greek).

A communicator can register the failure of the message when it has no impact in social media, when the news outlet does not disseminate it, when it's not discussed by stakeholders, but also when it is presented erroneously by other actors (Journalist, Economy and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

The interviewees offered **strategies for dealing with fake news**, as part of their accountability as professionals. Such strategies include "cross-checking the information, correcting and clarifying it" (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek), "checking the background of each situation, asking for official statements, cross-checking the sources" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek), finding out the circumstances of the event (NGO representative, Racist crime, 17 y., female, Greek), or "verifying all the news" on the topic (Institutional spokesperson, Law enforcement, 6 y., male, Romanian). Every information should be seen as possible fake news, so a proactive approach is the best starting point for a communicator (Journalist, Economy and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

The role of the communicator is invoked as "an advisor to responsible authorities in order to avoid spreading news that will hamper the operational and communication development of the crisis" (Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek.)

The interviewees highlighted the fact that old fake news usually is replicated, and communicators must also pay attention to similarities in messages: "What was a fake news in the past (...) came back again" (Academia/ NGO, Intelligence and security, 15 y., male, Spanish).

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A responsible approach of the report starts with **the preparing of the message**.

The message has to "give the public a clear and objective view of the facts" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek). The message should be structured so it does not create panic, it must present correct and real information (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement/ Justice, 21 y., female, Romanian). "You can't provoke chaos in society. You need to verify and find confirmation in everything, explain what happened and calm the population. I always verify my information" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement/ Justice, 20 y., male, Romanian).

There are cases when there is no need for verifying the validity of the event, such as events witnessed by the population (e.g., terrorist attacks). The validity of information comes from valid sources (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek).

The origin of the sources is of high importance. The main **trustful sources** represent EU institutions and well-known NGOs (Community manager, Social media communications, 7 y., female, Cypriot), authorities' press offices (Press officer, Politics, 37 y., female, Greek; Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek; Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek; Journalist, Law enforcement/ Justice, 24 y., male, Romanian), documents, witnesses, (NGO representative, Racist crime, 17 y., female, Greek), or fact-checking companies (Press officer, Politics, 37 y., female, Greek). Using more than one source can also ensure the credibility of the information (Journalist, Economy, and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

Ethical engagement comprises "the pursuit of truth, in the service of public interest. It is not about personal attacks or sensationalism. (Journalist, Sociology, 22 y., male, Greek)". An ethical message is "100% true and communicated in a respectful way" (Community manager, Social media communications, 7 y., female, Cypriot). The ethics represents "the relation between message and reality" (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek). The valid and documented character of the information ensures an ethical approach: "True means ethical. What you say needs to fit in the reality, in the real situation." (Institutional spokesperson, Law enforcement, 8 y., female, Romanian).

An ethical message is "completely cross checked, it does not create tensions or deceptiveness, it has not hard words, is not turned against other journalists, or police officers, it does not put anybody on the spot, and it (…) does not cause problems to the officials' research (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek). An ethical message "doesn't include personal views and it only describes the facts: "During the coverage of an attack against a judicial, my report had the description of the attack with official data and by official sources, the official position of the victim that it was expressed by her lawyer and also the message of the terrorist organization" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek). Also, the transparency about the sources is of high importance (Journalist, Economy, and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

For the journalists, an ethical approach may be ensured by respecting journalism's rules. (Journalist, Foreign news, 26 y., female, Romanian). In case of NGO representatives, the ethical character of a message may be stated by responding to the values of the European Union and the Member States. (NGO representative, Intelligence, and security, 15 y., male, Spanish). While of authorities it is important to have solid proof of the validity of information, for academia representatives it is important to keep a balance between informing people and not endangering operations or causing disruptions. An ethical approach is discussed also through respecting dignity and the human rights (Journalist/ Academia/ Security studies expert, Intelligence, and security, 25 y., male, Spanish).

In order **to receive the targeted response** from the public, the communicator can appeal to a number of strategies within the message. As such, a communicator pays attention to the language used (Academia, Journalism, and mass-media, 20 y., male, Greek), or can publish "a firm statement, a question, or a catchy expression" (Community manager, Social media communications, 7 y., female, Cypriot).

A continuous process can be in place, in order to make sure that the messages are received as intentioned. In the cases of authorities, this can be ensuring by implementing a "direct (quick and without intermediaries) and two-way communication with citizens". Other strategies imply paying attention to the audience's characteristics (e.g., "young and middle-aged (…) are considered more 'techno-

logically educated' and 'socially interconnected'"), strengthening the presence on social networks, or enhancing a positive image (Institutional spokesperson, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 3 y., male, Greek).

Avoiding panic is highlighted as primarily action when reporting: "Even if it's breaking news, you need to act very carefully" (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement/ Justice, 20 y., male, Romanian). Also, using proper channels for communication and credible sources can have a positive impact on the way the message is being received: "If you are using the proper channels, people believe you" (Journalist/ Academia/ Security studies expert, Intelligence, and security, 25 y., male, Spanish).

A well-intentioned message should **exclude elements** that may provoke irrevocable damages. Such elements may be "clues that police or any other actor with official role has asked not to be referred to or (...) any data that may uncover his source", and also "anything that may insult the victims" (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek). Information received from unverified sources should not be used, because it may cause the validity of information, and, as such, the credibility of the communicator (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek). Also, it is recommended to avoid very technical information or expert information and just "balance using plain language and being very precise" (Journalist, Economy, and business, 18 y., female, Spanish). At the same time, one "must evaluate the risks and eliminate that information that may generate encourage xenophobic feelings" (NGO representative, Intelligence, and security, 15 y., male, Spanish).

The risks when communicating on security threats or sensitive issues are being reduced to mistakes, that could lead the communicator to transmitting fake news (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek) or that could mislead the audience (NGO representative, Racist crime, 17 y., female, Greek). It is recommended to "go for a moderated style of writing – without sensational, panic or alert marks" (Journalist, Foreign news, 26 y., female, Romanian), but also to "verify the feedback - not systemically, but get another hint", because the main purpose of the reporting is to "help people make informed decisions" (Journalist, Economy and business, 18 y., female, Spanish).

When messages are being misunderstood by the audience, the experts propose actions such as delivering a clearly set out message because "general points of view can provoke misunderstandings" (Academia, Journalism, and mass-media, 20 y., male, Greek), or just correct the previous announcement (Press officer, Politics, 37 y., female, Greek). Publishing on digital channels offers these types of possibilities in a more facile way, in comparison to the case of newspapers, where "after the printing nothing can be changed" (Journalist, Intelligence and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek).

In order to understand the discrepancies, the experts also advise to "encourage people to share their concerns passing the right message" (NGO representative, Racist crime, 17 y., female, Greek). To avoid being misunderstood, it is also recommended to "transmit as much information in one message as it can be" and not to publish comebacks (Institutional spokesperson, Law enforcement, 6 y., male, Romanian).

When reporting on hate speech, discrimination, propaganda or polarizing events, the practitioners declared that it is very important "not to fall for any racial stereotype" (Journalist, Sociology, 22 y., male, Greek), to use "specific tools that recognize hate speech elements, including all the aspects of these" (Academia, Journalism and mass-media, 20 y., male, Greek), or "to pay attention to the information coming from these events and trying to demythologize them in case" (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek). The experts consider that the reporting should try to avoid any further expansion of these phenomena (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Law enforcement, 32 y., male, Greek), and it needs to "show to the public that this message that promotes the hate speech is something wrong and bad" (Journalist, Intelligence, and security/ Diplomacy, 4 y., male, Greek).

Communicators "must have a clear understanding of the use of terror and racism in the news, in order to differentiate between reporting and manipulating" (Journalist, Sociology, 22 y., male, Greek). The literacy on such topics, like terrorism, racism, discrimination, fake news, social polarization, extremism, radicalization etc. is, therefore, essential in the process of reporting. It is considered that the "digital revolution drives to more and more shamed actions", which leads to the

necessity of "establishing a top-down monitoring system" (Academia, Journalism, and mass-media, 20 y., male, Greek). The experts consider that this system may be well-received by the public, who "has started to act suspiciously concerning the information (Academia, Journalism and mass-media, 20 y., male, Greek).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The field research targeted three European states: Romania, Spain, and Greece, discussing with spokespersons, journalists, practitioners and experts in communication, intelligence, law enforcement and security, and other relevant stakeholders in the fields. Their conclusions are well expressed: „At the end of the day, being aware of the responsibility of being a communicator, in relation to the public, is the most important aspect in reporting (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek). Being ethical, critically analyse the data and protecting the public interest should be the priority for a responsible communicator (Journalist, Politics, 35 y., male, Greek)."

As practitioners highlighted the effective message has proven to be short, concrete, true, interesting, of novelty information, and presented in real time. Our conclusion it that the most important is communicators to be well prepared in identifying, preventing, and responding to such actions, in understanding the vulnerabilities of their audience, while respecting the rights and liberties of the population.

Moreover, we stress that ethical, and strategic communication should be of top priority for institutional communicators, academia, journalists, or stakeholders when addressing security or sensitive issues. Ethical communication refers to people communicating with each other based upon their ethical principles. To practice ethical communication means to be truthful, honest, and accurate in every day professional life. Lack of ethical communication leads others to question one's professional and personal integrity, and the validity of the message. That is why in this study we discussed the role of ethical engagement in relation to strategic communication.

As a conclusion, responsible and accountable attribution is of central importance. Practitioners interviewed in our research stated that each communicator has ethical and societal responsibilities that go beyond their individual and official responsibilities. At the same time, it was highlighted the responsibility of the media or communication channel owner. Different categories of communicators report their actions to different types of authority. Therefore, journalists act accordingly to the journalism's rules, NGOs respond to the values promoted by the European Union and the Member States, national authorities prepare solid proofs, while academia representatives point out the necessity of informing people while not intervening in the social balance or official operations.

To communicate ethically it is about being committed to the overarching principle of being true, being open to diversity and sustaining the freedom of speech. Our objective of identifying factors that may contribute to empowering institutional spokespersons and journalists to critically address information and be responsible in the communication process regarding the population was achieved. We conclude that responsibility is the central element of ethical engagement and strategic communication. An institutional spokesperson, a strategic communication expert or a journalist acts as a communication channel, who must be trustworthy, and express clear and comprehensible messages.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] CRESCEnt project (Mind the gap in media CoveRagE and Strategic communication in CasE of security Threats – the development of critical thinking and responsible reaction" - CRESCEnt), co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, addresses the challenge of building awareness and developing resilience to disinformation, fake news, and hostile information influencing campaigns. The project is developed in collaboration between: "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy (MVNIA) – Romania, Ciber-

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imaginario Research Group of the University "Rey Juan Carlos" – Spain, Kentro Meleton Asfaleias (KEMEA), and Ministry of Internal Affairs, Directorate for Information and Public Relations (MAI-DIRP) – Romania. See more on CRESCEnt official website: https://crescentproject.eu/.

[2]   The CRESCEnt project consortium includes civil and military universities that offer expertise in how to create a safe communication environment and law enforcement agencies that are directly involved in preventing and countering social polarization and unrest, radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. (for more details see the project's official site: https://crescentproject.eu/).

[3]   The above definitions were used by Professor Ruben Arcos in the CRESCEnt deliverable on the topic of "Strategic Communication" available on https://multimedia.ciberimaginario.es/OERs/2020/CRESCEnt/2.1.1/