

Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri



Abstract

**INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE PANDEMIC:
BIOETHIC ASPECTS**

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The opinion focuses on *institutional communication*, examining, albeit briefly, *scientific communication* by experts and *mass media communication*, which inevitably interfaces with institutional communication.

In general, the opinion highlights that this is communication during emergency situations, in which the interaction between those who inform and those who receive the information has the fundamental role of promoting conscious risk management.

With regard to communication by scientific experts, the opinion, highlighting the difficulties encountered especially in the early stages of the epidemic, emphasises the need for good communication practices, based on evidence, in which the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of scientific knowledge is clearly explained. The importance of "proximity communication" with general practitioners is also highlighted.

Various aspects in mass media communication have been focused on: the profound changes generated by the process of digitisation, its acceleration during the pandemic, the associated process of disintermediation, and lastly the strong drive towards the phenomenon of the *infodemic*, i.e., towards the information chaos produced by an irrepressible and uncontrollable proliferation of news, comparable to the spread of a virus. A phenomenon that risks undermining trust in scientific and institutional communication, hindering the proper management of the pandemic.

In this scenario, institutional communication plays an essential role, understood as being the communication whereby institutions provide an account of their activities, in order to guarantee citizens' right to information, promoting dialogue and two-way discussion. The ICB emphasises that the exclusive purpose of institutional communication is the protection and promotion of the interests of society as a whole, according to a non-partial approach, and that in order to be effective and promote citizens' trust in institutions, it must be guided by the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and *stakeholder* engagement.

Interaction with mass media communication, must therefore be able to overcome critical issues and risks, such as the infodemic, as well as being able to keep communications on the scientific aspects of the pandemic separate from those of the measures taken at institutional level to counteract its effects, taking into consideration not only the health aspects, but also economic and social aspects. Institutions must speak with one consistent voice and provide where necessary justification for differences in communications on the various measures, to avoid confusion and misunderstanding. The opinion focuses in particular on how institutional communication should try to foster citizens' trust, while, at the same time, trusting them: all this requires clarity, transparency of information, not hiding the complexity of the pandemic phenomenon behind forced simplifications but, conversely, illustrating the complexity as such, and adequately communicating also the uncertainty relating to scientific data and their interpretation, as well as the reasons for the choices made by institutions.

Institutional communication of this kind cannot be improvised. Similarly, it is not possible to improvise the scientific communication of the pandemic or mass media communication that acts as a link between one and the other. To combat the possible crisis of trust, that is transversal to all three areas, it is necessary to reconstruct the mediation process between those who inform and those who are informed, clarifying the competencies of those who provide information, their responsibilities, their complying with ethical principles and deontological rules. The concluding reflections of the opinion also move in this direction, highlighting some points for preparing optimal institutional communication in pandemic emergency situations.