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## **MEDIA COVERAGE OF COVID-19: UNCERTAINTY AND OSCILLATION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AS A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION EXERCISE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the way in which the oscillation in knowledge of COVID-19 from the side of the scientists has been covered in the media, and the way in which this can be seen as part of strategic communication that blames the scientists, but absolves politicians and the media. It compares the media presentation of scientists in Greece and the U.S., which stressed numbers and obscured the condition of hospitals and healthcare professionals. What are the ways in which this obscuring was part of a communication strategy? What are the effects of this in creating a fake news series that feeds conspiracy theories? And, most importantly, how do conspiracy theories fit in with a strategic communication of the media, in which in spite of being told they are ‘fake news’, they appear to the audiences which like them as free from blame? As important omissions in the communication flow leave a heavy burden that has to be filled by the audience’s imagination, do conspiracy theories feed on the media presentation of facts by the countries examined? The paper also uses the psychoanalytic insights of Castoriadis, in order to address the human characteristic of refusing to learn, as well as Arendt’s identification of misanthropy in pseudo-science, to address the lack of imagination that the media require from their audiences in these instances.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Media, Strategic Communication, Science, Castoriadis, Arendt.

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### **1. Introduction**

In November 2020, the Greek government urged its citizens into a second lockdown, with decisions that seemed to contradict those that were taken only hours ago (kiosks were to close, and then they were to stay open, schools for younger children were to stay open, then it was decided that they would be closed, etc). The scientific reasons that were given by the government media briefings, were each time justifying the policy decisions. Before the opening of the schools, there were ‘scientific data’ reported by the scientists embracing this administration, which reported that the younger generations did not get ill from the virus – in spite of the international scientific and media community reporting otherwise. The recent decision for a three-week lockdown does not seem to have an effect ameliorating the degree of virus infections during the first week in Greece: as this is written, almost 3500 daily cases of COVID-19 are reported by 13 November 2020. The scientists appearing in the media briefings alongside the government officials (latest, next to the Greek Prime Minister himself), seem to be subject to oscillations of opinion during the months of the pandemic. These oscillations are evident in the U.S. example as well – notably regarding the early advice not to wear masks, which was later negated (Tufekci 2020).

To go back to the Greek case, epidemiologists who are reporting on the country's condition regarding the virus along with government officials are oscillating, depending on the policy changes, on issues such as whether the religious, Christian Orthodox congregations without a mask can be infectious – or not (as such congregations were never limited before the recent lockdown). The current one is a conservative government, and a lot of its voters are perceived as strong believers. It also seems one of the two scientists who had been appearing with the government officials in daily briefings is also a strong believer, who visits the church every Sunday, to perform psalms – something he also did during the first lockdown, and was recorded for public view (Kanellopoulos 2020). Another Greek epidemiologist is reported to be prepared to declare that there are no studies to suggest that the virus is infectious when believers have to use the same spoon in the mystery of holy communion for Orthodox Christians (Linou:... 2020) – others could not bring themselves to position themselves publicly on the matter (Sakkas 2020).

## 2. Research problem

Of the main issues that this paper attempts to unravel is to distinguish between oscillation that is necessary, as scientists don't yet know what they have to deal with when they deal with a virus as new and uncharted as COVID-19, and oscillation that is of a character that ensures political alibis to the handlers of the pandemic, whoever they are who are involved in health policy at this point in time. The paper does not aim to address scientists that may or may not decide that to abide by administrations such as that of Trump, serve private and / or public concerns; neither does it address the issue of scientists who feel they have to compromise with policies they do not condone, in order to reach the audience of millions. Rather, it aims to see *what* is taking place, and not characterise or evaluate those who aid this situation.

Whatever the sources of the problem of oscillation – when wearing masks is not advisable one day, and the next not wearing a mask in public is a punishable offense – whether the sources are that it was not possible to know, or it was a route that was chosen by the public officials to make sure there were enough masks for the healthcare professionals, as it has been suggested, the effect is taken to be the same. What reaches the public sphere is the same: advice that is taken back, measures that do not work, and handling that proves inadequate. The purpose of this essay is to attempt to see the ways in and degree to which oscillation in scientific knowledge, as witnessed by media audiences around the world even when the World Health Organisation reported on COVID-19 research (findings that those without symptoms do not infect others were at one point reported, and then taken back), and its treatment by media, can be seen as strategic communication tools that absolve possible mishandling of the pandemic, in the face of rousing COVID-cases and overwhelmed hospitals. Therefore the research questions that we attempted to answer were

RQ1: are there facets of scientists' oscillation that are more than simple uncertainty in times of a new epidemiological threat?

RQ2: is the trust that audiences afford a. Politics, b. Science, and c. Media tainted by the new conditions that arose during COVID-19 crises?

RQ3: can such oscillations, which would normally be disappointing to the audiences / citizens, and challenging the trust they give to political figures / the media / technoscience, on the contrary at the service of a form of strategic communication?

## 3. Literature Review

The study contributes to academic inquiry regarding media and politics in two significant ways: Firstly, by examining the media use of science, in the ways that they use the trust that the media enjoy (or mistrust), by virtue of their presence in the public realm, with the (sometimes blind) trust that science is afforded in modern times, sometimes called the new religion. Secondly, by

examining the media use of uncertainty, as uncertainty makes it more difficult to sustain trust – but examining the ways in which it is used as ‘normal’, as though ‘oscillation’ was a result of uncertainty, even when this can be doubtful, if one follows the worldwide reporting on the virus. As conspiracy theories have been broadly reported (both in social media, and the mainstream media which present ‘ill-informed’ members of the public who protest about the masks, for example), they can be seen as a refuge for audiences who do not know what to believe (Arendt 1976). In the chaos that is a policy that is, at best, inconsistent, citizens are looking for consistency (ibid.).

Important thinkers who address contemporary society in their work identify the oscillation of humans between subjective experience (the personal) and the structural (society) (Mumford 1970; Gitlin 1998; cf. Castoriadis 1997b). For Castoriadis, the social-historical is that which forms around the person, formed by the specific historical circumstances, but also the specific community of people, the place and the time. What is formed within this social historical is the psyche; in that, Castoriadis suggests that the one characteristic that is specifically human is not that humans learn: animals are those who easily learn. What is a specifically human characteristic is that humans refuse to learn (Castoriadis 1997a). Krugman has specified this characteristic when he talked about the Trump voters, describing a situation where it is more difficult for them to accept that they were wrong, that they voted for the wrong candidate, than to believe that they were right, and this is the right man for President (Krugman 2016). Castoriadis too suggests, addressing Aristotle’s views on the matter, that humans want to believe (Castoriadis 2010; see also Johnston and Pattie 1999; Hall 1987).

#### 4. Methods

This paper attempts a theoretical interpretation of the narratives / reasonings that are given and surround the oscillation of scientific information regarding COVID-19 afforded in the two countries, Greece and the U.S., examining news items in the interpretive light of strategic communication as it was developed in the early days of public relations, by Bernays and his colleagues.

The theoretical examination also attempts to address issues of the human psyche examining the way in which this oscillation feeds conspiracy theories.

The interpretive tools that are used are the strategies recommended by the “founder” of strategic communication, Bernays and his team, in the early book *The Engineering of Consent*, specifically the crossroads strategy, and the use of symbols and of the story.

The crossroads strategy is the strategy with which a person has two “bosses”: each boss knows that the other can benefit them, therefore the ‘servant’ gets a better treatment from both “bosses”. The person in the middle of the two bosses gets to be a beneficiary by being a middle-man.

Bernays’ colleagues also suggest that a strategic communication should be using symbols and the story; in the analysis attempted here, scientists and politicians, as well as the media, are symbols. The oscillation between advice, is seen as happening parallel to another oscillation: an oscillation between ‘opinion leaders’. Hence, in the first instance, the scientists can be the leaders, then the role can shift to include the politicians (and in the case of Greece, religious leaders as well). In this view, the middle-man, between the scientists, the people who is supposedly the leader in a democracy, and an opinion leader by virtue of public opinion, and the politicians, is the media.

#### 4. Analysis

The two cases examined, the U.S. and Greece, are relevant in a handling of the pandemic that seems to have allowed infections as necessary for the recovery of the economy. The Greek Prime

Minister asserted that during summer 2020 the borders had to open to tourists of all countries, even of countries that didn't test their citizens (Mitsotakis: tourism is not to blame... 2020), to protect the economy.

Trump kept suggesting that the virus is nothing to fear, almost inviting people to get infected (certainly by his practice of holding rallies).

Two of the strategies Samstag (1955) identifies in public relations are the appeal to emotions, and to the non-logical.

Samstag does not adequately describe the crossroads strategy – but, in the way it was described above, it is important in the Greek case because the oscillation on COVID data brings forth different 'opinion leaders' – or just leaders: at one point, when the epidemiologist that co-operates with the government media briefings 'prays' and gets emotional (Corona virus: A dramatic appeal... 2020), it is obvious that there is an appeal to the emotions, and the non-logical of the audiences. Not merely because a scientist is not expected to cry, but also because the (emotional?) leadership of the church as a helped with the pandemic is invoked.

A second way in which the media in Greece uses Samtag's "crossroads strategy" is by invoking different opinion leaders while targeting different groups as enemies in the fight against the pandemic. Thus, in a recent turn, the media target the scientists for not finding the vaccine early enough, or for saying that careful demonstrations should be allowed by the policy makers (Kyranakis... 2020).

Thus, in recent days the media have been critical of the scientists, as they had to address the fact that the second wave of the virus is devastating the Greek National Health System, while it was largely unprepared, in spite of the ways in which scientists were warning about this.

The way in which "the crossroads strategy" is present in the case of the U.S. media handling of the pandemic and the oscillations of the scientists linked with the Trump administration, can be seen rather in the case of the oscillations of Dr. Birx, the replacement of Dr. Fauci at the side of Trump in handling the information about the pandemic. Fauci demonised by President Donald Trump, Dr. Birx had to stay in line while President Trump was giving scientific advice about injecting chlorine intravenously. In that instance, the crossroads strategy seems to benefit Dr. Birx, who later assured the media that the president was joking.

In the case of Trump, "the crossroads strategy" has meant that Trump himself situated himself in between, at the crossroads of power. On the one side the power of the scientists, which he alleviated at any given point, and on the other, the power of the media. The result has been a late effort of the mainstream media to stop being his enablers, by reporting the lies in his assertions, while in the previous years they were handling the situation respecting this position of his – with him benefiting with a broad coverage. Attacking the media and attacking science, Trump has been acting as though he were a scientist, and as though he were the only great entertainer, to whom the media owe their audiences (see also his recent view on how Fox owes him – naming himself 'the golden goose'). The results of the 2020 election, with insistent votes for him, can be seen as a result of this positioning of him.

## 5. Conclusion

If the oscillation in providing information on COVID-19 handling can be seen as an effort to justify an explosion of infection, audiences are called upon to accept waves of new advice, followed by its negation, in a strange circle of negating and affirming. Defining strategic communication as "...manipulation of the motives that actuate man in a group" (Bernays 2005) Bernays put the two issues at hand, when we talk about strategic communication: motivation, and belonging to a group.

Oscillation should normally make it more likely that audiences would stop believing the scientists and the politicians that are seemingly lying to them; instead, what is happening is that the audiences lean upon a feeling that there is a certain plan behind all lies, and fall victims to conspiracy theories. The symbols, in the language of early strategic communication, that are the politicians, the media, and the scientists, do not lose their lustre, or their mystery; instead, they become more mysterious, and more powerful, as the audiences look for consistency in a chaotic world.

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