

Pernille Lie

#EUvsDisinfo

Unraveling the European Commission's
Infodemic Response Through Crisis
Communication Strategies and Communication
Practices on Social Media

Bachelor's thesis in European Studies w/ Political Science

Supervisor: Synnøve Stølen

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Department of Historical and Classical Studies



Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed not only a health crisis but also an infodemic, inundating the public sphere with misinformation and disinformation. This thesis delves into how the European Union responded to this infodemic, which posed unprecedented challenges to crisis communication. Drawing on crisis communication theories and conceptualizations, this study examines the EU's approach to managing the infodemic facilitated by the internet and social media platforms. The thesis aims to unravel the EU's response to the infodemic created by the internet and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is achieved through a document analysis of the European Commission's stated Crisis Communication Strategy in the Joint Communication "Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right" and its corresponding communication practices on the European Commission's official Instagram platform. The thesis unveils the EU's dual response to the infodemic as direct and indirect, handling both the short-term challenges and long-term implications of the issue. The findings underscore the EU's multifaceted approach to combatting disinformation, highlighting the necessity of effective crisis communication and management in navigating contemporary crises in the digital age.

Sammendrag

COVID-19 pandemien utløste ikke bare en helsekrise, men også en infodemi, som oversvømte offentligheten med feilinformasjon og desinformasjon. Denne oppgaven utforsker hvordan Den europeiske union responderte på infodemien, som skapte nye utfordringer for krisekommunikasjon. Oppgaven bygger på konseptualiseringer av krise- og kommunikasjonsteorier og utforsker EUs tilnærming til å håndtere infodemien, som var tilrettelagt av internett og sosiale medieplattformer. Målet med oppgaven er å avdekke EUs respons til infodemien skapt av internett og sosiale medier under COVID-19 pandemien. Dette oppnås gjennom en dokumentanalyse av Europakommisjonens uttalte krisekommunikasjonsstrategi i den felles kommunikasjonen 'Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right' og dens tilsvarende krisekommunikasjonspraksis på Europakommisjonens offisielle Instagram-plattform. Oppgaven avslører EUs tosidige responser på infodemien som direkte og indirekte, hvor responsen håndterte både kortsiktige utfordringer og langsiktige implikasjoner av problemet. Funnen understreker EUs flerdimensjonale tilnærming til bekjempelsen av infodemien, gjennom å begrense spredningen av falsk informasjon og ved å fremheve nødvendigheten av effektiv krisekommunikasjon og -håndtering for å navigere moderne kriser i den digitale tidsalder.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|----------|--|
| CCS | Crisis Communication Strategies |
| CGR | Coronavirus Global Response |
| DG SANTE | Directorate General for Health and Safety |
| EC | European Commission |
| ECDC | European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control |
| EEAS | European External Action Service |
| EU | European Union |
| EWRS | Early Warning and Response System |
| SCCT | Situational Crisis Communication Theory |
| SMCC | Social-mediated Crisis Communication |
| SMCM | Social-Mediated Crisis Management |
| StratCom | European Union Strategic Communication Service |
| PHSM | Public health and Social Measures |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| WHE | WHO Health Emergencies program |

1. Introduction

'Disinformation in times of the coronavirus can kill' (European Commission, 2020a). High Representative, Josep Borrell's, daunting words illuminated the infodemic dangers that accompanied the most recent global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic led the world into national lockdowns, people experienced the reality of the digital era that had been established since the early 2000s (Nelson et al., 2020; Nye & Welch, 2013). When social gatherings became restricted, the internet and social media provided platforms to stay connected with others, and a tool for officials to spread information about the crisis at hand (Guo et al., 2020). However, the unlimited access to information also became a breeding ground for new challenges to crisis communication, creating an infodemic. With a flood of false or inaccurate information about the virus that spread rapidly across social media, the infodemic undermined an effective public health response and created confusion and distrust in the crisis managers (European Commission, 2022a). Misinformation and disinformation challenged the narrative presented by the EU as the pandemic spread across Europe and demanded a response (European Commission, 2020a). What was happening? What was the EU doing to manage the crisis? Did 5G installations spread the virus? Were approved vaccines safe? Questions were swirling around online as the EU tried to establish its position as crisis manager (Borrell, 2020). Competing, misleading, and false information was spread on social media, diverting the public's understanding and concerns about the crisis (Nelson et al., 2020).

This thesis aims to explain how the EU countered the infodemic created by the internet and social media, both in official statements addressing crisis communication strategies and in its *de facto* communication on social media. This will be done with the research question 'How did the EU respond to the infodemic created by the internet and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by its official crisis communication strategies and its actual communication practices on social media platforms?'. To answer the research question, a Joint Communication statement by the European Commission titled 'Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right' published on 10 June 2020 will be analyzed together with posts from the official European Commission Instagram page (@EuropeanCommission) in the period 29.01.2020 – 01.08.2022. To answer the research question, the thesis begins with a literature review examining the concepts of crisis and crisis communication, as well as the internet and social media. The literature finds that crisis communication is challenged by the internet and social media in new ways, due to the speed and distribution of the internet, creating phenomena like the infodemic and the paradox of plenty. Further, the thesis presents a brief background of the course of the crisis, the communication, and the disinformation that characterized the crisis. Next, the methodological framework for the analysis is presented. The main objectives of the Joint Communication will be presented next. The Joint Communication finds that the Commission holds two objectives: the challenges of the infodemic and the need for a common response. The identified objectives of the Joint Communication created the coding scheme for the Instagram posts, where the emphasized topics and frequently used hashtags of the coded data are presented. The objective from the Joint Communication is analyzed together with the Instagram samples and discussed regarding the theoretical framework and presented literature. Finally, the research question is answered, and the thesis is concluded.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To examine the effect of the internet and social media on crisis communication, conceptual and theoretical understanding is required, as well as knowledge of existing literature to comprehend the actions of the EU regarding the infodemic. Rosenthal et al. (1989) defines crisis as

A serious threat to the basic structure or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions (Rosenthal et al., 1989, p. 10)

Rosenthal et al. (2001) build on the crisis definition by Rosenthal et al. (1989) and introduce crisis characteristics, with an emphasis on the uncertainty and urgency that crises induce. As both a social and political construction, a crisis needs to be explored in terms of multiple realities as it is a precondition for large-scale change in conservative systems (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Due to this, Rosenthal and his colleagues argue that crises cannot be studied in absolute terms, but rather by its two defining features. The first is uncertainty. The concept of a crisis is characterized by an inability to determine the exact nature of the threat, the dynamics of the situation, and the potential future consequences, as well as uncertainty regarding people's initial and emerging response to the crisis (Rosenthal et al., 2001). The second feature is urgency. A crisis creates a sense of emergency especially for crisis managers because it requires quick and decisive intervention to prevent a potential threat (Hay, 1996). As different actors attempt to establish their narratives and gain control over the situation, time pressure to act increases. This pressure can be intense as actors seek to gain situational and frame dominance on the issue at hand (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Both features of a crisis demand communication with the stakeholders as crisis managers attempt to win the blame game and propose themselves as a solution (Rauh, 2022).

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the EU as an asymmetric shock, each EU Member State responded to and communicated the crisis individually (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020). This created a lack of coherence in the understanding of the crisis within the Union. With the addition of external actors participating in sharing information, Vériter et al. (2020) argue that the COVID-19 crisis was not only a global health crisis, but also a disinformation crisis for the global community in general, and the EU in particular. COVID-19 created an infodemic, an intensification of disinformation in the EU in the context of the pandemic (European Commission, 2020a). Experts from the Strategic Communication Division (StratCom) in the European External Action Services (EEAS) highlighted the dangers of the infodemic as 'it has been very clear that the information and manipulation of information [have] become a security problem' (Vériter et al., 2020).

In times of crisis, actors aim to take the leading role as crisis managers. Bundy et al. (2016) explain crisis management as the organizational actions and communication that are expected to lower the likelihood of a crisis, minimize the harm from a crisis, and re-establish orders after a crisis. To acquire the role of crisis manager, Boin (2005) stresses the importance of communication in crisis management:

In order to be successful, leaders must communicate a persuasive storyline (a narrative) that explains what happened, why it had to be that way, what its repercussions are, how it can be resolved, who can be relied upon, and who is to blame (Boin, 2005, p. 70).

Marra (1998) stresses communication as a key feature of crisis management as it can bolster or harm an organization's reputation and mitigate or exacerbate adverse consequences. This feature is emphasized in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007). During a crisis, at-risk and affected communities need crisis-relevant information and instruction regarding risk-reducing behaviors (Coombs, 2015; Hagen et al., 2020). To do this, effective communication (I.e., frequent, consistent, and compassionate) of pertinent information to the affected parties is necessary to increase the likelihood of those individuals being supportive of and cooperative with response efforts (Hagen et al., 2020). What communication strategies should be implied during a crisis has been theorized by numerous researchers (Cheng, 2018; Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2011). To analyze the communication strategies during the infodemic, two theories are presented.

SCCT was introduced by Coombs (1995, 2007) with logic drawn from attribution theory. The basic assumption of SCCT argues that the threat caused by a crisis in an organization depends on the attributed level of responsibility the organization holds to the public (Coombs, 2007). The theory suggests that for organizations to adequately protect their reputation during times of crisis, the management must adjust their communication to account for possible past crises that the relevant public may be aware of. The use of communication to preserve and protect the reputation of an organization is the main focus of SCCT (Coombs, 2004). The SCCT approach provides a well-equipped situational framework for the question of when to use different crisis communication strategies (CCS). It does however not investigate the influence of media, particularly the effect of social media on crisis communication (Cheng, 2018).

Referred to as the social-mediated 'dialogue between the organization and its public(s) before, during and after the negative occurrence' (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 2), social-mediated crisis management (SMCM) occurred as the key approach within crisis response research as earlier theories and models failed to consider the impact of social media (Cheng, 2018; Fearn-Banks, 2011). Social media is transforming the field of crisis communication by creating new risks, but it also offers an interactive, dialogic, and fast way for organizations to communicate with stakeholders. As a combination of SCCT and rumor psychology theory, Social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) suggests that the origin of a crisis affects the attribution of responsibility and further influences the adoption of CCS (Cheng, 2018). In the SMCC literature, two contradictory patterns in evaluating the effects of social media on crisis communication are found. On one hand, the empowering and effective feature of social media is highlighted in the SMCC research. Utz et al. (2013) argued that the media channels, rather than the crisis type, had a direct and strong impact on the effectiveness of CSS. Schultz et al. (2011) also find that the strategy of information on social media led to fewer negative crisis reactions than in traditional newspapers. On the other hand, the speed, access, and excessive amounts of information on social media might bring new challenges rather than eliminate them. Social media might pose image management issues, challenge the dynamics of crisis communication, and create fragmented media channels (Gilpin, 2010; Liu & Fraustino, 2014; Moody, 2011).

The internet has revolutionized the way information is accessed and shared, particularly with the advent of social media in the early 2000s. Nye and Welch (2013) approached the growing importance of the internet in a global context early on. The impact of the internet is yet to be fully understood, but technology has always had an important effect on human interaction (Guo et al., 2020). Nye and Welch (2013) describe the era of the internet as an information revolution. Viola et al. (2021) build on the

description of an information revolution and argue that information systems have undergone radical changes in recent years and are still mutating day by day. They describe the evolution of information to be assisted by two phenomena: the dramatic increase in rapidity of distribution and the incredible overload of information. This evolution is continuously posing new challenges to communication, and as the EU is facing several challenges back-to-back, communicating them is becoming harder (Viola et al., 2021). As the internet becomes more widely spread, it creates a system where the power over information is more widely distributed. This distribution and the speed of the internet challenge governments and officials as they have less control over their agendas and narratives (Nye & Welch, 2013).

The emergence of the internet has transformed communication, shifting from traditional media to social media platforms. Defined as 'A group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content', social media has become a major driver of what the public understands and responds to in the last decades (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media is not only part of everyday life but appears in critical situations and has become a recent addition to organizational crisis communication tools (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018; Roshan et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2020). With the addition of social media as a crisis communication tool, Wang and Dong (2017) finds that the public holds a higher level of expectation towards an organizations' communication behavior both before, during, and after the crisis. Wang and Dong (2017) question how crisis communication can be optimized through social media and call for further research regarding the popular use of social media in crisis communication.

As social media makes the world more connected, it also poses a challenge of addressing and communicating events as it transitions from a top-down manner towards a bottom-up digital distribution of information (Ye et al., 2020). Malecki et al. (2021) illustrate how social media is both an advantage and a challenge during times of crisis. On the one hand, social media can be used by experts and officials to execute their crisis response rapidly and widely amongst the public. On the other hand, social media can just as rapidly spread misinformation across large portions of the public. Social media has accelerated the speed at which information is shared, amplified the reach of messages, and solidified the ability of disparate individuals to organize (Malecki et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2020). Social media enables agents to give real-time updates on a situation, addressing the concerns the public might have (Gruber et al., 2015). The new age of the internet challenges the traditional role of crisis managers and the blame game, as officials must share the stage with more actors (Nye & Welch, 2013). The constant stream of information about events, regardless of their size or location, creates what Nye and Welch (2013) call the 'paradox of plenty'. Nye and Welch (2013) argue that the explosion of information has produced a paradox of plenty with the description that plenty of information leads to scarcity of attention. The foundation of this paradox is that 'when people are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting them, they have difficulty discerning what to focus on' (Nye & Welch, 2013, p. 318). This leads to the emergence of disinformation due to the ineffective communication between response leaders and the public (London Jr & Matthews, 2022). Vériter et al. (2020, p. 570) define disinformation as 'the intentional and systematic manipulation of information deceiving target audience to cause public harm, generate profit and/or advance political goals'. The digitalization of information has transformed the conduct and impact of disinformation with the high speed and low cost that the internet and social media provide (Nye, 2018). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter), are effective means of spreading disinformation because of their amplification mechanisms (e.g. trolls,

algorithms, bots, echo chambers). The common forms of disinformation include (1) unsourced or false claims; (2) non-credible claims with sources; (3) claims based on unsourced or non-credible claims; and (4) conspiracy theories. Disinformation thrives in deregulated media ecosystems and under unstable environments, like a crisis, and mainly affects minority groups and the younger population (Vériter et al., 2020).

The literature highlights the importance of communication during crises. A general assumption found in most of the literature examined is the inevitable transformation of communication due to the internet and social media. This transformation creates advantages for communication such as quick and wide distribution of information, real-time updates, fewer negative crisis responses, and globalization (Cheng, 2018; Gruber et al., 2015; Malecki et al., 2021; Nye & Welch, 2013; Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013). On the other hand, the internet and social media also create several important challenges like management issues, disinformation, dynamics issues, lack of control, and the paradox of plenty, that must be taken into account (Gilpin, 2010; Gruber et al., 2015; Liu & Fraustino, 2014; London Jr & Matthews, 2022; Moody, 2011; Nye, 2018; Nye & Welch, 2013; Vériter et al., 2020).

Whereas the presence of social media in crisis communication is emphasized, much of the literature on the topics presented is becoming outdated with the rapid speed of evolution by the internet and social media. Social media has become a driving force of crisis communication and demands further research as it takes over the roles held by traditional media (Cheng, 2018). As noted by Wang and Dong (2017), there is a gap in the research when it comes to the widespread use of social media in crisis communication. The purpose of this paper is to address the lack of research on communication strategies and practices used on social media during a crisis. The thesis aims to contribute to this research by examining how the EU responds to challenges brought about by the internet and social media in crisis communication.

3. Background on the COVID-19 Crisis

The timeline of events surrounding the emergence and spread of COVID-19 provides crucial context for understanding the EU’s response to the pandemic and the infodemic. Initially, on 31 December 2019, the Chinese government notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of an emerging public health threat. By 7 January 2020, this threat was identified as a coronavirus (Boin & Rhinard, 2023). Responding swiftly, just two days later, the EU Directorate General for Health and Safety (DG SANTE) opened an alert notification on the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) and expressed a need for a coordinated response to fight the coronavirus (European Commission, 2022b). The first reported case of COVID-19 in Europe surfaced on 24 January 2020, in France, with subsequent cases quickly appearing in Germany and Finland (Post et al., 2020). As the situation rapidly escalated, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Europe soon became the global epicenter of the crisis, surpassing all other regions in caseloads and fatalities (Kwok et al., 2022; Post et al., 2020). By 17 March, the EU had closed all external borders to contain the virus. However, despite the efforts for coordination, national responses varied, with Member States enacting individual policies regarding quarantine measures and border closure (Post et al., 2020).



Figure 1: Timeline of COVID-19-related events and decisions made in 2020. Source Post et al. (2020)

The impact of the pandemic was staggering. Within three months of the first reported case in the WHO European region, 1 million cases had been recorded. Within two years, that number ballooned to over 100 million, with more than 2.2 million lives lost in Europe and Central Asia by May 2023 (WHE, 2023). During the initial phase of the pandemic, all the countries within the WHO European Region had implemented some form of Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM), including strict travel restrictions (WHE, 2023). Despite a temporary decline in cases in the summer of 2020, concerns about resurgences persisted. In the initial phase, the EU emphasized solidarity in the forms of medical equipment, investments in e.g. research for vaccines, economic support for impacted states, and information to affected Member States, as well as China, the Western Balkans, and the Eastern neighborhood (European Commission, 2022b).

The second wave of the pandemic hit in the fall/winter of 2020, prompting widespread lockdowns and restrictions. Vaccine approvals and rollouts began in late 2020, with the EU working collectively to secure supplies and distribute vaccines across the EU (European Commission). The Commission set out key actions for a unified front to beat COVID-19, with actions calling on EU countries to accelerate the roll-out of vaccines (European Commission, 2022b). Throughout the summer of 2021, vaccine efforts ramped up and more countries achieved a significant level of coverage, decreasing the number of cases and deaths. In the fall of 2021, delta variations of the coronavirus led to a surge of cases (European Commission, 2022c). Governments responded by bolstering vaccination campaigns and reintroducing some restrictions.

Booster shots were implemented to provide additional protection against waning immunity and delta variants of the virus. Throughout 2022, efforts focused on managing the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, including vaccination campaigns, surveillance of variants, and adapting PHSM as needed. By 2023 and into 2024, COVID-19 has transformed from a pandemic to an endemic disease in the EU. Continued vaccination, surveillance, and PHSM are employed to manage the virus's presence alongside other respiratory illnesses today (European Commission, 2024).

Communicating the Pandemic


Initially, the highest political levels in the EU chose not to act early, with reasons ranging from not wanting to alarm the public, to avoiding information uncertainty and avoiding agenda crowding (Boin & Rhinard, 2023). As the pandemic progressed and the pandemic's tragic impact became clear, EU institutions and Member State governments began communicating the crisis. In correspondence with the asymmetry defining the beginning of the pandemic, communication at this phase was largely individualized to the Member States, with the head of state serving as the primary communicator, representing the nation and its crisis response (Lilleker et al., 2021). As the pandemic continued, communication within the EU became more united under the leadership of the Commission president, Ursula Von der Leyen, who emerged as a central figure in the overall response to the pandemic. The coronavirus pandemic posed a major threat to the cohesion and future of the EU and was identified by some leaders, like Angela Merkel, as "the biggest test" since the EU's foundation (Russack & Ålander, 2020). Deep divisions on proper reactions and adequate measures separated Member States and re-emerged disagreements and clichés thought to be long overcome (Krotz & Schramm, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis shaped political- and crisis communication and made the changes in power structures clear. A narrative was communicated to the Member States, emphasizing the importance of recovery and economic stability. To the initial hesitation to unilaterally close borders or limit exports, the EU responded with the message "Stronger together" (Manfredi-Sánchez & Smith, 2023). Communication regarding the COVID-19 crisis was conducted on both national and supranational levels, with coordination and guidance from the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Social media played a significant role in communicating COVID-19-related information in the EU (London Jr & Matthews, 2022). Communication regarding the crisis was typically carried out on official social media accounts from national governments, the EU, and health authorities such as ECDC. The platforms were used to engage with the public through interactive content, live Q&A sessions, and real-time updates. As the crisis evolved, collaborative campaigns between the EU and the Member States were shared across multiple social media platforms. The campaigns, promoting PHSM such as mask-wearing, vaccinations, social distancing, and hand-hygiene, used hashtags such as #StrongerTogether and #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus and unified messages to foster a sense of shared responsibility and community within the Union (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c, 2024).

Disinformation during COVID-19


As the EU attempted to unify communication, the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a massive wave of misleading and false information, as well as attempts

by foreign actors to influence domestic debates in the EU that endangered public health and social cohesion (European Commission, 2020a). Building on the 2018 action plan against disinformation, the EU and its Member States countered efforts by actors who tried to exploit the crisis, or who spread propaganda or hatred. The spectrum of false or misleading information was large and required different responses depending on its nature (European Commission, 2022a). Disinformation that spread during the pandemic included false claims about the effects of drinking bleach, conspiracy theories on the global population reduction, false information about vaccine safety, and claims of the connection between the spread of the virus and 5G installations (see figure 2) (European Commission, 2022a). Particularly disinformation about vaccinations was a big problem during the pandemic. Anti-vaccination communities protested loudly as the first vaccines were approved in the EU (Rzymiski et al., 2021). As the spread of misinformation and disinformation rapidly increased, the EU identified the necessity of adapting its crisis communication to counteract the new challenges.


Examples of disinformation



False claims such as 'drinking bleach or pure alcohol can cure the coronavirus infections': on the contrary, drinking bleach or pure alcohol can be very harmful. **Belgium's Poison Control Centre has recorded an increase of 15% in the number of bleach-related incidents.**



Conspiracy theories, such as the claim that coronavirus is 'an infection caused by the world's elites for reducing population growth'. The scientific evidence is clear: the virus comes from a family of viruses originating in animals that include other viruses such as SARS and MERS.



Claims that '5G installations would be spreading the virus'. These theories had no specific substantiation and led to attacks on masts.

Figure 2: Non-exhaustive list of examples of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sourced European Commission (2022a) on April 12, 2024.

4. Methodology

The objective of the thesis is to examine crisis communication strategies and responses adjusted to false information on social media amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question is 'How did the EU respond to the infodemic created by the internet and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by its official crisis communication strategies and its actual communication practices on social media platforms'. The research question addresses the need for both a comprehensive crisis communication strategy as well as corresponding communication practices in the fight against the infodemic and to claim the role as the crisis manager. The research draws upon publicly accessible data from the European Commission, which includes both the obstacles encountered and the intended measurements, along with the actions taken on social media to address the identified challenges. Due to insufficient access to more advanced metrics from the EC Instagram platform, this paper will compare the stated communication approach outlined by the EC in their Joint Communication from June 2020 with the substance of a selection of their Instagram posts from various periods of the crisis.

Document analysis is a technique that involves analyzing pre-existing documents, created for purposes other than research, to obtain data in an unobtrusive manner (Tjora, 2021). By analyzing existing documents, the researcher can collect information and data about cases recorded at specific times and places, with different purposes (Bowen, 2009). This characteristic makes the method well-suited to examine the research question, as it facilitates a comprehensive analysis of real-time data in the context of previous research, theories and with situational awareness. Documents can be defined as 'written or audio-visual remains not produced or generated by the researcher' (Syvertsen, 2004, p. 215). Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without any intervention from the researcher and include press releases, as well as other public records. They can be of various types, including case-specific, general, media, or research documents (Bowen, 2009). The most important feature of document analysis is the relevance of context, as the document was produced at a certain time and place, and for a specific audience. When using documents as a source, the context, time of production, and target audience must be considered (Bowen, 2009; Tjora, 2021). Document analysis is mainly laid out as written material, however, audio-visual sources are of equal relevance to the method (Karppinen & Moe, 2012). Earlier studies overwhelmingly concentrate on written documents, neglecting the audio-visual aspect of the method (Figueroa, 2008). Whether mediated or unmediated, audio-visual sources (images, videos, recordings, etc.) are harder to grasp, archive, and analyze than textual sources, and the addition of audio-visual sources depends on the research question (Karppinen & Moe, 2012). Newer communication research focused on social media increasingly need to use audio-visual sources, as communication is shifting away from traditional media (Nye & Welch, 2013). In this thesis, the demand for audio-visual consideration is addressed with the implementation of social media posts in addition to the traditional press release.

Whereas there are many advantages of document analysis, including its efficiency due to the data selection, the availability of public documents on the internet, the lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity, cost-effectiveness, and the coverage the documents provide, there are several limitations inherent in the method (Bowen, 2009). Documents are produced for other purposes than research and thus can provide insufficient detail to answer the research question. Other important limitations of document analysis are the

low reliability and the biased selectivity of documents that may align with the preferred results of the researcher (Moses & Knutsen, 2019).

Data and coding

The thesis will examine two types of documents: A press release and social media content. The goal is to identify consistencies and similarities between what the European Commission has stated as its communication strategy and the *de facto* communication on social media in response to the infodemic. The goal of using two data sets is to examine the homogeneity between CCS and communication during the crisis.

Joint Communication on COVID-19 Disinformation

The first sample will consist of the European Commission press release titled: *Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right*. The document was chosen for its broad recognition of the challenges of the widespread distribution and access to information that took place during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the time it was published. The data was collected from the official webpage of the European Union in April of 2024. The press release was published on 20 June 2020, in the early stages of the pandemic in Europe. A Joint Communication is a press release by one or more EU institutions, often addressed to other institutions, to propose concrete actions for a stronger and more resilient EU. The European Commission, arguably the EU's most important executive, together with the high representatives, sets the agenda and narratives of the challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis with the Joint Communication. As the title implies, the press release focuses on informing and educating other EU institutions about the situation surrounding COVID-19 disinformation. The Joint Communication was coded to identify the main arguments, initiatives, policies, and actions presented in the main body of the press release, as well as the language choice and tone used for this communication. The document was coded inductively, and a content analysis was carried out to identify the main objectives of the Joint Communication.

Instagram Posts

The second dataset will look at the European Commission's Instagram page (@EuropeanCommission). Here, the analysis will look for themes detected from the Joint communication. Per April 2024, the European Commission has 909k followers on the social media platform, Instagram. As companies and organizations often share similar content across different social media platforms, the insights drawn from Instagram are applicable and highly relevant to crisis communication (Kwok et al., 2022). Given that young people are more impressionable and at higher risk for disinformation, it is reasonable to sample documents from this platform as it is one of the most used social media platforms for this demographic. With the metrics of the number of likes and comments, as well as the date stamps that Instagram provides, it's possible to objectively organize the content posted. Out of more than 2000 Instagram posts published in the relevant period, 74 posts were sampled based on the objectives defined in the Joint Communication, as well as on visual factors relevant to the context, such as color use, images, and date posted. The Instagram posts were mapped into seven categories: (1) Date; (2) Theme/topic; (3) Purpose/Aim; (4) Description; (5) Likes; (6) Comments; and (7) Hashtags. This allowed for systematic mapping of relevant documents amongst a large amount of data.



europeancommission #Coronavirus | We are working on all fronts to support efforts to tackle the #COVID19 outbreak.

🇪🇺 We have so far:

- ◆ helped deliver 58 tonnes of supplies to China
- ◆ coordinated repatriation of hundreds of EU citizens
- ◆ mobilised €230 million to boost preparedness, prevention and containment of the COVID-19 virus.

More updates:

- ◆ Italy has activated the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism, requesting protective facemasks
- ◆ the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre is now working 24/7
- ◆ we will coordinate an EU-wide analysis of the effects of the outbreak on European industry and businesses
- ◆ no EU country signalled their intention to introduce border controls at internal borders. People travelling from affected areas will have to go through enhanced checks
- ◆ measures taken by the Italian authorities were important to avoid further spread of the virus.

Check out our 📖 story for more.

#Health #EU #EuropeanUnion #EUaid #EUCivPro #Protection #Emergency #StrongerTogether #Solidarity

Vis alle 66 kommentarene

28. februar 2020 · Se oversettelse



europeancommission The Coronavirus is a global crisis, not limited to any continent and it requires cooperation rather than unilateral action. The European Union disapproves of the fact that the U.S. decision to impose a travel ban was taken unilaterally and without consultation.

📌 Today's joint statement by President of the European Commission @ursulavonderleyen and President of the @eucouncil, @charlesmichel on the U.S. travel ban.

The 🇪🇺 EU is taking strong action to limit the spread of the virus. We are working on all fronts 24/7 to support EU countries on #COVID19.

🗣️ President von der Leyen and President Michel during the joint press conference held on 10 March, following the conference call of EU leaders on Coronavirus © European Union, 2020 / Source: EC - Audiovisual Service / Photographer: Etienne Ansotte

#Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion

Vis alle 243 kommentarene

12. mars 2020 · Se oversettelse

Figure 3: Example of Coded documents from @Europeancommission (2024)

5. Findings

Joint Communication

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates how important it is to promote information from authoritative sources and empower citizens to critically analyze information online, as well as the challenge of dealing with a changing online environment. The press release holds two main objectives: The infodemic and the common response.

The Infodemic

The first objective that the European Commission stresses regards the infodemic as a challenge. Here, the Commission calls out examples such as misleading healthcare information, vaccination misinformation, conspiracy theories, and consumer fraud, as well as proposed actions to fight this challenge. It stresses the need for differentiation between various forms of false or misleading content revealed by infodemic and to calibrate appropriate responses. The Joint Communication states that

Misinformation can be addressed through well-targeted rebuttals and myth busting and media literacy initiatives; Disinform, on the other hand, includes actions taken by governments, as spelled out amongst others in the Action Plan against Disinformation (European Commission, 2020b, p. 5).

The Commission also emphasizes the growing importance of social media in both assessing and responding to the infodemic. Online platforms adjusted to secure the communication of accurate and authoritative information, as well as limit the spread of false information online. Online platforms, such as Instagram, should be utilized to inform users on what to do when they interact with disinformation, as well as provide the EU with data on flows of disinformation, social media manipulation and provide reports on implemented policies (European Commission, 2020b, pp. 11-12). In addition to the challenges of disinformation and misinformation that the internet and social media have implemented to crisis communication, the crisis has featured the risk of undermining fundamental rights of expression through measures designed to tackle the infodemic. In the context of their response to COVID-19, the Commission attributes the free and plural media as key to addressing disinformation.

Common Response to the Crisis

The second key objective of the press release is the demand for a coherent CCS within the EU through a common European response. Clear and accessible communication had since the beginning of the crisis been central to protecting the citizens' health. The EU aimed to take a global role in the management of the crisis, and this included one common European response, both internally and externally. Given the risks and threats from foreign influence, the Commission stressed the need for further improvement of 'The EU's capacity to deliver timely, consistent, coherent and visible messages to external audiences globally, with a particular emphasis on the EU's immediate neighborhood, Africa, Asia, and Latin America' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 7). The Commission addressed the competing narratives on EU solidarity and the lack of assistance to third countries, thus, stressed the need to communicate their narratives and debunk disinformation threatening to fuel conflict (European Commission, 2020b, p.

9). The Commission finds that to fight disinformation, misinformation, and foreign influence operations in the COVID-19 crisis, Cooperation between the EU institutions and Member States was essential to ensure consistency of messages. Actions proposed to address this demand were for Member States to cross-reference different authoritative EU webpages dedicated to COVID-19 disinformation (European Commission, 2020b, p. 8).

Instagram

Figure 4 provides an overview of the topics emphasized and the most frequently used hashtags in the samples in the Instagram feed during the period. The topics include both the coded documents (see appendix), as well as observable trends not relevant to the research question, as they can help explain the declining attention to COVID-19 in the relevant period, such as the introduction of the EU Green Deal in 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The hashtags can help to identify the hidden meaning of the individual documents, as they provide broader categories such as #solidarity.

European Commission Instagram feed 29.01.2020-01.08.2022

| Time-Period | Main topics in feed | Frequent hashtags |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Early 2020 | Solidarity, COVID-19 Updates, Coronavirus Global Response, PHSM, Disinformation | #StrongerTogether #Solidarity #COVID19 #EUsolidarity and #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus |
| Spring 2020 | Solidarity, gratitude for health workers, EU actions of fighting coronavirus, Disinformation, Coronavirus Global Response | #EUsolidarity #coronavirus #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus #StrongerTogether #StayHome #FactsMatter #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Globalresponse #COVID19 |
| Summer 2020 | Disinformation, Re-opening society, Solidarity, Mask-usage, borders and movement, vaccination, NextGenerationEU, EU common response to covid, | #EUvsDisinformation #FactsMatter #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Globalresponse #Vaccineswork #NextGenerationEU #Vaccines #COVID19 |
| Autumn - winter 2020 | Vaccines, SOTEU, EU Green Deal, COVID-19 Recap and updates, Solidarity, Common Response, Resurge of infections, European Health Union, European Vaccination Strategy | #Vaccines #SOTEU #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Globalresponse #COVID19 #StrongerTogether #Vaccinestrategy #HealthUnion #Safevaccines #VaccinesWork |
| Early 2021 | Vaccines, vaccine rollout, Covid certificates, reopening society, disinformation, Mask-usage, EU Green Deal | #StrongerTogether #Unity #EuropeansAgainstCovid19 #VaccinesWork #SafeVaccines #healthunion #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #SafeOnline #DigitalEU |
| Spring - summer 2021 | Vaccines, Vaccination updates, NextGenEU, Covid certificate, Disinformation, continued efforts, EU Green Deal | #SafeVaccines #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #VaccinesWork |
| Late 2021 – early 2022 | Vaccination updates, Disinformation, Coronavirus Global Response (COVAX), Invasion of Ukraine | #SafeVaccines #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EUvsDisinfo #VaccinesWork #StrongerTogether #COVAX #Pledge to Pause |

Figure 4: Overview of key topics and hashtags

6. Tackling the Infodemic: the EC's Two Responses

The infodemic was a result of the two crisis features combined with the internet and social media. The combination of the speed and reach of information brought about by the internet and social media amplified the features of a crisis, creating a void for false information to fill (Ye et al., 2020). The uncertainty feature manifested in the creation of the direct challenges of the infodemic (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Disinformation about the situation spread as the public was exposed to large amounts of online impressions from National governments, EU institutions, and other actors with varying messages and information about the pandemic.

New technology distributes information on events happening across the globe independently from government officials. This creates a more connected world with real-time updates on issues otherwise undetected, however, it also facilitates the spread of disinformation online, as new actors can distribute [dis]information easily (Ye et al., 2020). This possibility fuels the second feature of a crisis: urgency. As Wang and Dong (2017) emphasized, the addition of social media as a crisis communication tool adds a higher level of expectation for crisis communication. Social media allows the EU to address real-time events more quickly than traditional media, but also increases the number of events the EU is expected to respond to (Ye et al., 2020).

With the global nature of the pandemic, the EU was forced to react. In its official CCS, the Commission held two objectives. The first dealt directly with the infodemic, with a clear strategy to manage this growing challenge. The second objective focused on the demand for a common response to tackle the pandemic, and how this resulted in the need for effective and coherent crisis communication, within the EU and globally. Based on the objectives of the Joint Communication, one can argue that the EU held two types of responses to the infodemic that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first response aimed at handling the infodemic directly through concrete action. The second response handled the infodemic more indirectly, through preventative measures to limit the challenges of crisis communication brought on by the internet and social media through a common response and communication of the crisis. The two responses can be understood as a way of providing both a short-term and long-term solution to the infodemic. By addressing the infodemic directly, the Commission provided a solution to the surface issue. It created a temporary fix to the issue as it was ongoing but did not create preventative measures to avoid the continued creation and spread of the infodemic. By creating a common European response to the infodemic, the Commission aimed to solve the core of the issue. With the COVID-19 pandemic being the first of its kind in the new era of the internet and social media, the EU response set the precedent for CCS and the management of similar crises at a later time.

Direct Response to the Infodemic: Addressing the Challenges

The direct challenge of the new age of the internet and social media is the spread of disinformation. Numerous researchers have emphasized the rapid spread of false information during crises as a growing challenge in need of action (Gruber et al., 2015; London Jr & Matthews, 2022; Malecki et al., 2021; Nye, 2018; Ye et al., 2020). The EU addressed this challenge in its stated CCS, emphasizing the need for effective communication, myth-busting and providing the public with tools to interact with the

false information they may encounter on social media. As Vériter et al. (2020) stress, the European Commission makes a point of differentiating between disinformation and misinformation to create the appropriate responses in its Joint Communication. This distinction is less obvious in the communication practice on Instagram, as there seems to be no observable difference between posts addressing misinformation and disinformation. Through its Instagram platform, the Commission encourages risk-reducing behaviors in the affected communities (Coombs, 2015; Hagen et al., 2020). With simplified approaches to handling misinformation and disinformation (like the five W's: Who, What, Where, Why, and When?) the Commission instructs the audience on how to avoid the spread of misinformation and disinformation online, helping to limit the reach of the infodemic (see appendix nr.72 for example).

A concrete example of how the European Commission responded to disinformation challenges, is the video addressing the 5G deployment conspiracy theory. In a one-minute video, the Commission debunks one of the biggest conspiracy theories about the coronavirus (see appendix nr.27). The video posted on 15 April 2020, had over 220 000 views by the end of April 2024, which indicates the large support and spread both this specific conspiracy theory held, as well as disinformation in general. As the post was published before the Joint Communication, it is reasonable to assume that the vast amount of attention the video acquired helped the Commission identify the scope of the infodemic early in the pandemic.

The Commission addressed the infodemic by effectively communicating about vaccines to prevent uncertainty and false information. The challenges of the infodemic were integrated into the Joint Communication through statements like:

[...] disinformation and misinformation around a possible COVID-19 vaccine continue to flourish and are likely to make the deployment of vaccines once available more difficult (European Commission, 2020b, p. 4)

After the approval of the first vaccines, and the roll-out of vaccines began, the dreaded challenges of vaccine deployment could be observed through communication practices. Through a series of 15-second videos, the Commission addressed the most frequently asked questions about the vaccines, addressing issues where false information was circulating (appendix nr.66-67). In addition to this, hashtags like #VaccinesWork and #SafeVaccines were implemented on most posts after the summer of 2020, increasing the visibility of this information and creating the wanted narrative regarding vaccines.

The direct response to the infodemic addressed the concrete problem occurring due to the implementation of the internet and social media in everyday life. Still, it did not reach the underlying mechanisms facilitating the spread of the infodemic. Although the Commission used concrete measures to address the infodemic, the core of the problem lay deeper.

Indirect Response to the Infodemic – Preventative Measures and Goals by a Coherent Crisis Communication

To tackle the root of the infodemic, the Commission responded with a common communication strategy for the EU. In addition to taking direct action on the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the EU aimed to take a leading role in managing the crisis, both within the EU and globally. As the European Commission stated in the Joint Communication, it needed a common response (European Commission, 2020b). With the

slogan #StrongerTogether, the EU aimed to take a leading role in the communication and management of the crisis. The Commission identified a gap in the crisis communication through its Joint Communication. It lacked coherence, unity and emphasis on the common response needed to tackle the crisis as well as to prevent features necessary for the existence of the infodemic.

From the first posts on the coronavirus pandemic, until the Joint Communication was released on 10 June 2020, the crisis held an asymmetric form and the Commission responded with messages of solidarity for Member States and other states hit hard by the virus, protecting its reputation as stated in the SCCT framework (Coombs, 2007). The initial crisis communication, however, did not address the concerns of the SMCC regarding the negative effects social media have on crisis communication (Fearn-Banks, 2011). As the infection numbers continued to rise, the Commission called out for the need for a global response with the hashtags #CoronavirusGlobalResponse and #StrongerTogether, amongst others (see figure 4). To create this common response, the reviewed literature calls for the communication of a persuasive storyline and effective communication with pertinent information, attributing the EU as the crisis manager (Boin, 2005; Coombs, 1995; Fearn-Banks, 2011; Marra, 1998). The EU limited uncertainty by disseminating uniform narratives and information across various communication platforms to restrict concerns of SMCC and curb the spread of false information while safeguarding its reputation.

The common response to the COVID-19 crisis was a more indirect way of responding to the infodemic. It did not address the challenges of the infodemic directly, such as disinformation and misinformation, but rather aimed to limit the immersion of false information by providing a clear and unified front. This approach dives into the paradox of plenty, with the attempt to focus the attention of the public on one narrative and one crisis manager, avoiding the uncertainty and overwhelming volume of information that the internet and social media can create. The paradox of plenty calls for a widely spread common crisis narrative to manage the crisis. Unifying the communication across the EU institutions and Member States, the EU made authoritative information more accessible and easily identified. This helped the public to identify what information and sources were credible and discern their focus. As disinformation is a result of the lack of effective communication between the leaders and the public, the unification of communication that the EU responded with was a reasonable and effective measure to the infodemic (London Jr & Matthews, 2022). The Commission justified its call for a common response with the message:

Fighting disinformation, misinformation, and foreign influence operations in the COVID-19 crisis has proved that cooperation between the EU institutions and Member States is essential to ensure consistency of message and coherence of effort (European Commission, 2020b, p. 8).

This statement illustrates the arguments used to justify the call for a common response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a way of countering the infodemic at the core level. By ensuring the consistency and coherence of communication, the Commission provides preventative measures against the challenges brought upon the COVID-19 crisis communication by the internet and social media.

Both the direct and indirect response to the infodemic was outlined by the objectives held in the Joint Communication and carried out through communication practices on Instagram. One exception was the distinction between disinformation and misinformation. As disinformation calls for government action outside of communication platforms, it is reasonable to conclude that the distinction did not hold the same level of

importance in the communication practices as the general actions against false information, both misinformation and disinformation, held. In the direct response to the infodemic on social media, the main objective was to limit the spread of false information. The Joint Communication aimed at tackling the infodemic, thus not specifically addressing communication practices on social media, but rather a general CCS overall. On that basis, the objectives of the Joint Communication must be perceived in the context of its application. In this case, the distinction was unnecessary and would have complicated communication.

Considering the arguments above, the EU can be said to have responded to the infodemic in two ways. Firstly, in a direct way outlined in the Joint Communication as the challenges of the infodemic. This response included shutting down the specific misinformation and disinformation that spread with the infodemic and providing the public with tools to recognize and avoid the continued distribution of this 'information'. The second response focused on preventative measures of the infodemic, outlined as a common response in the Joint Communication. By creating coherent and unified communication both internally and externally, the EU sought to destroy the core of the infodemic, permanently resolving the information crisis.

7. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by an infodemic in Europe, which has highlighted the importance of crisis communication when dealing with uncertainty and urgency. This phenomenon has been fueled by the internet and social media and has presented significant challenges that require a multifaceted response from authorities. The thesis investigated the EU's stated and practiced communication strategies towards the infodemic. This was done through the research question: 'How did the EU respond to the infodemic created by the internet and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by its official crisis communication strategies and its actual communication practices on social media platforms?'.

The EU, through the European Commission, responded to the infodemic with two main objectives. The Commission responded to the infodemic mutually directly and indirectly through the stated CCS in the Joint Communication and the corresponding communication practices on Instagram. By doing that they created both short-term relief of the problem of the infodemic, as well as a long-term solution to the spread of false information and mechanisms that facilitated for the creation of the infodemic. Moreover, creating a solution for similar information and communication challenges created by the internet and social media in the future. The European Commission has taken both direct and indirect approaches to tackle the infodemic. Directly, the Commission has implemented several measures to combat misinformation and disinformation. This included myth-busting, providing tools to help people navigate false information online, and addressing conspiracy theories such as the 5G deployment theory. The Commission aimed to mitigate uncertainty and prevent the spread of false information by disseminating clear and factual information, especially regarding vaccines. Indirectly, the EU has sought to establish a unified and coherent crisis communication framework. Recognizing the need for a common response to the pandemic, the Commission has emphasized solidarity and unity across Member States and globally. By presenting a unified narrative and an authoritative voice, the EU aimed to counter the overwhelming volume of information generated on social media, thereby facilitating public trust and discernment. Ultimately, the EU response to the infodemic reflected a comprehensive approach that addressed both the immediate challenges of misinformation and the broader imperative of effective crisis management.

In the context of the EU crises, the infodemic has illustrated a new type of challenge to expect when communicating and managing. As crises continue to roam Europe, the COVID-19 crisis has pioneered as the first of its kind in this new era of the internet and social media. As a pioneer, the response to the challenges created by the internet and social media sets the precedent for future crisis communication strategies in the EU. However, the supranational nature of the EU demands a unique approach to each crisis, limiting the generalizability of its application to other EU institutions and later crises. Moving forward, research should investigate the coherence and unity across platforms, institutions, and member states to examine the success of the responses to the infodemic. With the use of more advanced metrics, the researcher should also examine the reach and effect of the response towards the public.

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Appendix

Coding Scheme for @EuropeanCommission Instagram Posts in the Research Period

Early 2020 – Beginning of the pandemic 29.01-31.03.2020.

| Nr | Group (JC) | Date | Theme/topic | Purpose/aim | Description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|----|------------|------------|---|--|--|-------|----------|---|
| 1 | 2 | 29.01.2020 | Addressing the virus in China | Solidarity | "Photo of Von der Leyen speaking in phone" | 4799 | 53 | #coronavirus #China #Wuhan #EUaid #EUCivPro #EUintheWorld #protection #emergency #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 2 | 2 | 28.02.2020 | Information about actions taken on supplies to China, Investments, and solidarity. Updates on Italy and situation in the EU | COVID-19 Update | "Illustration of a virus with green background" | 3946 | 66 | #Health #EU #EuropeanUnion #EUaid #EUCivPro #protection #emergency #strongerTogether #Solidarity |
| 3 | 1 | 02.03.2020 | Launch of the Coronavirus response team and a dedicated webpage on COVID-19 | Coronavirus update | "Von der Leyen with team of 5 commissioners designated to coordinate work on halting Coronavirus outbreak" | 1623 | | #Coronavirus #COVID19 #health #EU #EuropeanUnion #Protection #StrongerTogether #solidarity |
| 4 | 2 | 12.03.2020 | Global pandemic declaration | Coronavirus global crisis. US Travel ban. | "Von der Leyen and Council president Charles Michel Joint press conference held on 10 March, Call of EU leaders on Coronavirus" | 6229 | 243 | #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 5 | 1+2 | 13.03.2020 | Call to be determined, coordinated, and united | Addressing the need for a common response. Informing about PHSM in EU countries | "President Von der Leyen and Commissioner for Health and food safety, Stella Kyriakides during a call with scientists on 12 March" | 2894 | 76 | #COVID19 #Coronavirus #health #protection #solidarity #Strongertogether #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 6 | 2 | 16.03.2020 | New measures to address the coronavirus outbreak | Informing about PHSM in the EU Temporary restrictions on travel Green lanes/fast lanes | "Von der Leyen and Michel during the joint press conference held on 16 March, following G7 Leaders' video conference on COVID-19" | 3710 | 98 | #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EuropeanUnion |
| 7 | 2 | 17.03.2020 | Border measures, economy, public procurements | Informing about work | "Von der Leyen in videoconference call with EU leaders" | 2540 | 57 | #COVID19 #Coronavirus |

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|----|---|--------------|--|---|---|-------------|-----|--|
| | | | , and research | | | | | |
| 8 | 2 | 19.03 2020 | common EU reserve on medical equipment | Medical equipment information/ Feeling of unity / solidarity | "close-up photo of woman in full protection suit, mask and gloves" | 4322 | 104 | #COVID19 #EuropeanUnion #EU #Health #StrongerTogether #Europe #coronavirus |
| 9 | 2 | 20.03 2020 | Applause for healthcare employees | Community feeling / solidarity | "Video of illustrated yellow hands clapping on blue background" | 23214 views | 132 | #EUsolidarity #EuropeanUnion #COVID19 #coronavirus #EU |
| 10 | 2 | 22.03 2020 | Stay at home | PHSM / solidarity | "Empty Grand-Place of Brussels" | 10207 | 132 | #covid19 #coronavirus #europeanunion #staysafe #stayhome |
| 11 | 1 | 24.03 2020 | Digital tools/ disinformation | Advice on using credible sources, avoid suspicious links and avoid consumer fraud. Stay safe both offline and online | "Illustration of man sitting in a chair on computer with curtains down. Blue background with white text "Be responsible. Stay safe" highlighted in orange" | 2766 | 23 | #coronavirus #Covid19 #StayHome #BeResponsible |
| 12 | 2 | 25.03 2020 | Spain – Epicenter | Solidarity with strongly affected Member States. Promise of medical equipment. | "Spanish flag in heart on Blue background" | 13269 | 416 | #EuropeanUnion #EUsolidarity #COVID19 #Coronavirus |
| 13 | 2 | 26.03 2020 a | Stay at home – with kids | Introducing figures/illustrations of people to address challenges the public might have with the PHSM to create solidarity | "Illustrated family in apartment, mother is working online, and father is playing with child. Blue background with white text "Be responsible. Stay safe" highlighted in orange" | 4150 | 40 | #StayHome #StaySafe #Coronavirus #covid19 |
| 14 | 2 | 26.03 2020 b | Coordinated responses to the Covid-19 outbreak | Call for the need for coordinated response by advocating for the EUs role as crisis manager. Informing about actions | "Von der Leyen at an extraordinary plenary session of the European parliament" | 4399 | 85 | #COVID19 #coronavirus #EuropeanUnion #StrongerTogether #EU |
| 15 | 2 | 27.03 2020 a | Using technology to stay connected | Using technology to stay in touch with the implementation of PHSM | "Illustrated Family on facetime with grandmother. Blue background, White text with message <i>be responsible. Stay safe.</i> Highlighted in orange" | 2598 | 35 | #BeResponsible #StaySafe #coronavirus |
| 16 | 2 | 27.03 2020 b | Informing about solidarity | Informing about situation in different Member States to support solidarity | "Light blue background, circle of yellow stars, with text in middle with | 7523 | 443 | #EuropeanUnion #EUsolidarity #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EuropeagainstCoronavirus #EUCO |

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|----|---|-----------------|--------------------------|--|---|------|-----|--|
| | | | | | #EUsolidarity” – Carousel post with 6 photos | | | |
| 17 | 1 | 30.03.2020 a | Beware of disinformation | Informing about the danger of disinformation and EU actions taken against the spread of false narratives about coronavirus | “Child and adult wearing masks looking at computer with map of Europe” | 1109 | 33 | #EuropeanUnion #Coronavirus #health |
| 18 | 2 | 30.03.2020 b | Solidarity in action | Informing about solidarity between Member States on health workers and citizens | “Light blue background, with white text #EUsolidarity in protecting health workers and citizens” – Carousel with 10 photos with text about solidarity actions | 5233 | 197 | #EUsolidarity #EuropeanUnion #COVID19 #coronavirus #EuropeansAgainstCoronaviruses #EU |
| 19 | 2 | 31.03.2020 | Social distancing | Information about PHSM | “Toulouse street view – empty street with advertisement panel showing hygiene measures” | 2293 | 40 | #Stayhome #StaySafe #EUsolidarity #EuropeansAgainstCoronaviruses |

Spring 2020 – first wave 01.04.2020-30.05.2020.

| Nr. | Group | Date | Theme/topic | Aim/purpose | Description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|-----|-------|-----------------|---|--|---|--------------|----------|---|
| 20 | 2 | 01.04.2020 | Short-time work | Solidarity, informing about initiatives | “Video of Von der Leyen talking about how short-time work will help EU countries affected by coronavirus” | 22 818 views | 144 | #EUsolidarity #EuropeanUnion #Coronavirus #EU #StayHome #StaySafe |
| 21 | 2 | 02.04.2020 | Securing jobs and businesses. SURE – solidarity instrument to help workers keep their income and businesses stay afloat | Inform about actions taken to secure jobs and business in times of PHSM. | “Picture of empty Place du Capitole in Toulouse during containment measures in March 2020” | 2528 | 52 | #Stayhome #StaySafe #EUsolidarity #EuropeansAgainstCoronaviruses #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 22 | 1+2 | 03.04.2020 a | EU response main areas | Inform about the EUs five main areas for action: health, border and mobility, socio-economic measures, research, and disinformation. “Working with main social media platforms to promote authoritative content and demote or take down misleading or harmful | “Von der Leyen during her daily videoconference call with all the commissioners in charge of the EU’s coronavirus response” | 3939 | 149 | #Coronavirus #EuropeAgainstcoronavirus #StrongerTogether #coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |

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| | | | | content. 110 disinformation narratives on the coronavirus exposed on EUvsDisinfo.eu” | | | | |
| 23 | 2 | 03.04 2020 b | Activity during PHSM | Create a sense of community during lockdowns | “Rue de la Loi in Brussels during containment measures in March 2020» | 5779 | 84 | #BeActiveAtHome #StayHome #StaySafe #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion #BeActive #HealthyAtHome |
| 24 | 1+2 | 08.04 2020 | Coronavirus response | Informing on the five key areas the EU use to fight coronavirus | “Video showing information on all five areas of action on fighting coronavirus” | 10 012 views | 59 | #coronavirus #EUsolidairty #StrongerTogether #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 25 | 1 | 13.04 2020 | Disinformation | Informing the public on how to be aware of disinformation | “Video showing how to check the information accessible” | 9071 views | 18 | #FactsMatter #Coronavirus #COVID19 #Health #EuropeanUnion |
| 26 | 2 | 15.04 2020 a | Common response | Coordinated exit from the containment’s measures | “Von der Leyen and Michel at press conference on the EU’s response to the coronavirus crisis” | 2154 | 82 | #EUsolidarity #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus #COVID19 #Cornavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 27 | 1 | 15.04 2020 b | Disinformation | Information on the conspiracy theory on 5G deployment and the outbreak of Coronavirus | “1 minute video on disinformation and the conspiracy theory on 5G deployment” | 223 403 views | 423 | #FactsMatter #Coronavirus #EuropeAgainstCoronavirus #COVID19 #EuropeanUnion |
| 28 | 1+2 | 22.04 2020 | Coronavirus response | Updates on the key actions taken since the beginning- 5 key areas | “Picture of EU flags on poles with white text <i>EU response to coronavirus: Our actions highlighted in yellow</i> ” | 2097 | 104 | #StrongerTogether #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 29 | 2 | 24.04 2020 | Coronavirus Global Response | Informing about the Global response starting on May 4 th Common response, unity, cooperation, | “2-minute video of Von der Leyen talking about the Coronavirus global response” | 18175 views | 80 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavuius #StrongerTogether #Globalresponse #Coronavirus |
| 30 | 1 | 25.04 2020 | Disinformation | Share facts, not disinformation. Referral to official EU information sites addressing disinformation | “White background with black text <i>YOU SHARE!</i> ” | 1654 | 25 | #FactsMatter #Coronavirus #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus #EuropeanUnion #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus |
| 31 | 1 | 03.05 2020 | Press freedom | Showing support for press freedom in a time with much disinformation | “Newspaper frontpage with blue text <i>We support press freedom</i> ” | 2847 | 46 | #WorldPressFreedomDay #PressFreedom #Coronavirus #EuropeanUnion #Journalism |
| 32 | 2 | 04.05 2020 a | Coronavirus Global Response | Launch of the Global response | “Blue background with world map. Yellow text <i>Coronavirus Global Response</i> ” | 1459 | 11 | #GlobalResponse #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #StrongerTogether #Solidairty #Research |
| 33 | 2 | 04.05 2020 b | Coronavirus Global Response | Updates on the Global Response / pledging event | “Von der Leyen and world leaders on videoconferenc | 6061 | 165 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #GlobalResponse #covid19 #StrongerTogether #Coronavirus |

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| | | | | | e call about CGR" | | | |
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Summer 2020 – easing restrictions 01.06-31.08.2020.

| Nr. | Group | Date | Theme/ topic | Purpose/ aim | description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|-----|-------|--------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|---------------|----------|---|
| 34 | 1 | 10.06 2020 | Disinformation | Educating about disinformation and the dangers it brings | "1minute video on actions to tackle disinformation | 174 847 views | 34 | #EUvsDisinformation #FactsMatter #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 35 | 2 | 13.06 2020 | Phasing out containment measures | Informing about the reopening of countries, advice the use of masks and distancing, introduction of SURE | "Reopening the stores in Brussels" | 2583 | 32 | #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #Health #Business #Shop #Shopping #Work #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 36 | 2 | 15.06 2020 a | Travel restrictions | Information about preparations to lift travel restrictions with proposed dates | "Directional arrow to Airport terminal on concrete" | 2610 | 46 | #EUtourism #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #Travel #Summer #HolidaySeason #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 37 | 2 | 15.06 2020 b | Travel Restriction | Referral to EU websites on travelling information | "Illustrated hand holding phone, with the website opened" | 3590 | 159 | #EUtourism #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Schengen #travel #Europe #StrongerTogether |
| 38 | 2 | 17.06 2020 | Vaccination | European Vaccine Strategy | "4-minute video of Von der Leyen presenting the European Vaccine Strategy" | 17 015 views | 51 | #GlobalGoalUnite #GlobalResponse #VaccinesWork #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #StrongerTogether #Coronavirus #COVID19 #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 39 | 1 | 30.06 2020 | Disinformation | Beware of the domino effect of disinformation on social media World Social media Day | "Illustration of man standing before two buttons, left is connected to domino pieces and right is yellow with a pause symbol, connected to a box with the text <i>Pause. Take care before you share</i> " | 1931 | 61 | #Takecarebeforeyoushare #SocialMediaDay #SocialMedia #Europe #EuropeanUnion #StrongerTogether #EU |
| 40 | 2 | 17.07 2020 | Common response to covid | The need for a united front, budget and recovery plan | "Von der Leyen at a special European Council 17-18 July 2020" | 4802 | 135 | #EUBudget #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #Covid19 #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 41 | 2 | 02.08 2020 | Common response to covid – recovery | Financial recovery between the Member States | "Von der Leyen and Parliament President Sassoli touching elbows" | 3634 | 46 | #StrongerTogether #NextGenerationEU #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 42 | 2 | 14.08 2020 | Vaccinations - research | Donations to research and agreements | "Scientist looking into microscope" | 1475 | 72 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #GlobalResponse #StrongerTogether |

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| | | | | with pharmaceutical companies on buying vaccines. Solidarity for low-income countries | | | | #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 43 | 2 | 31.08.2020 | Vaccinations, CGR, COVAX | Solidarity, vaccines for everyone | "2-minute video of Von der Leyen talking about CGR and COVAX" | 13 376 views | 51 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #StrongerTogether #GlobalResponse #Coronavirus #COVID19 #vaccines #EU #EuropeanUnion |

Autumn/Winter 2020 – Second wave 01.09-31.12.2020

| Nr. | Group | Date | Theme/Topic | Purpose/aim | Description | likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|-----|-------|------------|---------------------------------|---|--|-------------|----------|---|
| 44 | 2 | 02.09.2020 | Coronavirus update/unity | Solidarity, unity, | "Picture of building with long vertical banner with the text <i>Coronavirus global response</i> " | 2186 | 28 | #SOTEU #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #GlobalResponse #vdLCommission #Coronavirus #COVID19 #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 45 | 2 | 07.09.2020 | Update | Inform about actions taken the first six months of the pandemic | "Collage of 6 photos, one for each month January – August" | 2817 | 33 | #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #vdLCommission #Coronavirus #COVID19 #EU #EuropeanUnion #2020Challenge |
| 46 | 2 | 20.09.2020 | Vaccines | Securing access to vaccines, informing about the developments of vaccines | "Two scientists with the text #StrongerTogether" | 1296 | 18 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #GlobalResponse #StrongerTogether #COVID19 #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 47 | 2 | 12.10.2020 | Common response – free movement | Coordinated measures for movement within the EU | "1minute 30-sec video of Von der Leyen speaking about coordination of measures on free movement within the EU" | 22269 views | 93 | #StrongerTogether #Coronavirus #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #COVID19 #Travel #TravelEurope #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 48 | 2 | 15.10.2020 | Vaccines | Vaccination Strategies | "Scientist sitting with bacteria-panels" | 1407 | 33 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #StrongTogether #Coronavirus #COVID19 #Vaccines #VaccinesStrategy #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 49 | 2 | 20.10.2020 | European Union in Numbers | Long-term effect of Covid on EU | "Numbers with illustrations" | 5035 | 68 | #StatsDay2020 #WorldStatisticsDay #DemographyEU #DigitalEU #EUGreenDeal #Statistics #Demography #Coronavirus #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 50 | 2 | 28.10.2020 | Resurgence of coronavirus | New measures to fight the second wave | "Von der Leyen with Peter Piot, special adviser on COVID-19" | 2344 | 51 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #StrongerTogether #Coronavirus #COVID19 #GlobalReponse #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 51 | 2 | 29.10.2020 | Common response | Call for the need for patience, discipline, and solidarity | "Von der Leyen during the informal videoconference of the Members of the European Council on COVID-19" | 3521 | 58 | #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #GlobalResponse #EU #EuropeanUnion #EUACO |
| 52 | 2 | 02.11.2020 | PHSM | Follow PHSM, Stick to the three C's: | "Short video of Von der Leyen informing about the three C's" | 3186 | 93 | #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus |

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| | | | | Crowds, close contacts and Closed spaces with poor ventilation | | | | #coronavirus #EuropeanUnion |
| 53 | 2 | 04.11.2020 | Common response /European Health Union | Informing about the first steps towards a European Health Union | "Collage with 9 photos of health-related images" | 1708 | 29 | #Health #StrongerTogether #COVID19 #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #SOTEU #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 54 | 2 | 21.11.2020 | Rapid tests | Informing about the use of rapid tests in the Member States and the need for continued PHSM | "Picture of a positive rapid test" | 1967 | 19 | #HealthUnion #StrongerTogether #Health #COVID19 #Coronavirus #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 55 | 1+2 | 08.12.2020 | Vaccines | Simplified information about how COVID-19 vaccines work, securing the standard | "Blue background with white text <i>How do COVID-19 vaccines work</i> " | 2264 | 45 | #StrongerTogether #VaccinesWork #HealthUnion #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 56 | 1+2 | 21.12.2020 a | Vaccines | Pushing narrative of safe vaccines with good standard for all Europe | "Five picture carousel with bullet points on COVID-19 vaccines approval process. Purple background with yellow text" | 2093 | 21 | #SafeVaccines #VaccinesWork #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 57 | 2 | 21.12.2020 b | Vaccines | First COVID-19 Vaccine authorized in the EU | "Blue background, white text <i>First COVID-19 vaccine authorized in the EU With Authorized</i> Highlighted in yellow" | 5980 | 80 | #EUVaccinationDays #SafeVaccines #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #VaccinesWork #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 58 | 2 | 26.12.2020 | Vaccines | First vaccines arrived | "Bottle of vaccine" | 8383 | 95 | #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EUVaccinationDays #StrongerTogether |

Early 2021 – Vaccine rollouts begin 01.01-31.03.2021.

| Nr. | Group | Date | Theme/topic | Purpose/aim | Description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|-----|-------|------------|----------------|--|--|--------------|----------|--|
| 59 | 2 | 01.01.2021 | Vaccines | Sense of development | "Vaccine bottle with yellow fireworks on purple background" | 4430 | 63 | #SafetyFirst #StrongerTogether #Unity #united #unityforce #jointhemovement #Europeansagainstcovid19 #vaccineswork #safevaccines #healthunion #EU #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EuropeanUnion #teamvaccine |
| 60 | 2 | 06.01.2021 | Vaccines | Approval of a second vaccine | "Two bottles of vaccines on green background with yellow text <i>Welcome to the team</i> " | 9909 | 168 | #TeamVaccine #StrogerTogether #SafeVaccines #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #VaccinesWork #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 61 | 1+2 | 09.02.2021 | Disinformation | Avoid disinformation on Vaccines | "Short video of illustrated hand holding phone with messages about disinformation on green background" | 1343 | 67 | #SafeInternetDay #SafeVaccines #Vaccineswork #EU #EuropeanUnion #SafeOnline #BetterInternet #DigitalEU |
| 62 | 2 | 19.02.2021 | Delta Variants | Information on what actions the EU takes on handling delta variants of coronavirus | "Short video on blue background explaining EU actions on coronavirus variants" | 7958 views | 22 | #HealthUnion #SafeVaccines #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #Coronavirus #COVID19 #StrongerTogether #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 63 | 1+2 | 01.03.2021 | Disinformation | Facing the challenge of disinformation on Vaccines | "Video of live chat with Commissioner Vera Jourova on disinformation" | 10 258 views | 32 | #VaccinesWork #SafeVaccines |

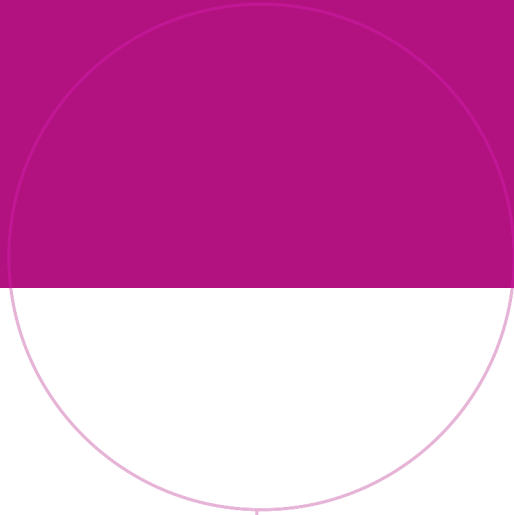
Spring/Summer 2021 – Vaccine progress 01.04-31.08.2021.

| Nr. | Group | Date | Theme/topic | Purpose/aim | Description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|-----|-------|------------|-------------|--|---|--------------|----------|---|
| 64 | 2 | 14.04.2021 | Vaccination | 100 million vaccinations | "Blue background made up by people getting vaccines with yellow text <i>100 million</i> " | 3648 | 130 | #SafeVaccines #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 65 | 2 | 15.04.2021 | Vaccination | Unity and solidarity, Von der Leyen first dose | "Von der Leyen wearing EU mask, with EU band-aid on arm after vaccination" | 9783 | 322 | #StrongerTogether #SafeVaccines #ThisIsTheEU |
| 66 | 2 | 19.05.2021 | Vaccination | 200 million vaccinations in the EU | "Video with photos of people getting their vaccines turning into text <i>200 million</i> " | 12 419 views | 37 | #SafeVaccines #VaccinesWork #StrongTogether #Coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 67 | 1+2 | 05.06.2021 | Vaccination | COVID-19 Vaccination questions answered by experts | "15-second video <i>How does the vaccine work</i> – answered by professionals (microbiologist)" | 12 000 views | 41 | #SafeVaccines #VaccinesWork #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 68 | 1+2 | 06.06.2021 | Vaccination | COVID-19 Vaccination questions answered by experts | "15-second video <i>What should I say to a person who is scared to get vaccinated</i> – | 35 869 views | 124 | #SafeVaccines #VaccinesWork #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |

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| | | | | | answered by professionals (microbiologist)" | | | |
| 69 | 2 | 22.07 2021 | Vaccination | 200 million fully vaccinated in the EU | "White background with text <i>200 million fully vaccinated</i> " | 6620 | 180 | |

Late 2021-start of 2022: Booster shots 01.09-30.05.2021.

| Nr | Group | Date | Theme/Topic | Purpose/aim | Description | Likes | Comments | #Hashtags |
|----|-------|------------|--|--|---|-------------|----------|--|
| 70 | 2 | 20.09 2021 | Vaccination | Unity | "Blue background with statistics and three peoples with vaccines, with text in yellow <i>More than 70% of EU adult population is fully vaccinated</i> " | 3248 | 104 | #EUDataCrunch #SOTEU #SafeVaccines #VaccinesWork #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EuropeanUnion #EU |
| 71 | 1+2 | 09.10 2021 | Vaccination/disinformation | Vaccination efforts, addressing disinformation on social media | "Purple background with yellow heart with a blue ribbon with EU star around it." | 1684 | 30 | #SafeVaccines #EUvsDisinfo #ThinkB4UClick #VaccinesWork #StrongerTogether #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 72 | 2 | 07.01 2022 | Vaccinations | Keeping up Vaccination efforts | "Video showing that 80% of adults in the EU are vaccinated" | 11542 views | 37 | #SafeVaccines #StrongerTogether |
| 73 | 2 | 17.01 2022 | COVAX | CGR | "Picture of parcels with EU flag with text <i>one billion COVID-19 Vaccine doses delivered through COVAX</i> " | 2460 | 70 | #TeamEurope #SafeVaccines #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus #TeamEurope #COVAX #coronavirus #EU #EuropeanUnion |
| 74 | 1+2 | 02.04 2022 | Disinformation (posted together with the UN) | Avoid spreading misinformation by informing about the 5 W's: Who, What, Where, why, when | "Hands holding phone with text highlighted in yellow <i>Before you share online, consider the five W's and listing of the five W</i> " | 11712 | 186 | #PledgeToPause |



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology