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ZHAW School of Applied Linguistics

How young people perceived discourse on the pandemic

In a joint research project, the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) and the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) in Lugano investigated public discourse during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland. The project focussed on the question of how those aged 15 to 34 were presented in the discourse and how they perceived this.

Too emotional or overly dramatic: this was how some of the younger population perceived the discourse during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey conducted as part of the joint ZHAW-USI study revealed that 15-to-34-year-olds were largely unable to remember any kind of communication about their age group. And when they could, what came to mind were critical media reports about young people. “We see that the younger generation absolutely do care about the health of older people. Instead of pointing the finger, communication relating to the pandemic should promote certain ways of behaving,” says Suzanne Suggs from the USI, who believes that this approach can prove particularly successful if it is explained in clear terms why certain behaviour is so important. This is something that is greatly needed, as revealed by the fact that many of the young people surveyed would have liked to have seen better justification for imposed measures.

Different communication requirements

During the first three months of the pandemic, a common yet wide-ranging knowledge base was established among the public. Solidarity was a dominant theme in March 2020. “We can describe and understand just how polyphonic the public discourse was and how it consequently shaped different needs in terms of information and communication,” says Philipp Dreesen (ZHAW). “In a national crisis, everybody basically finds themselves at risk and needs to be addressed accordingly so that a common understanding and a sense of solidarity can be ensured,” adds Julia Dratva (ZHAW).

For the authorities and healthcare organisations, it proved challenging to underscore the importance of supporting each other while at the same time putting out communication focused on specific target groups. “While the complexity, uncertainty and rapid speed at which the situation developed led to a significant amount of pressure, it also gave rise to some memorable achievements in terms of communication,” says Peter Stücheli-Herlach (ZHAW)



with reference to the interviews conducted with decision-makers as part of the project.

The project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The team of researchers investigated the public discourse (media, politics, healthcare organisations, etc.) during the first six months of the pandemic. It also conducted a quantitative survey as well as qualitative interviews with 15-to-34-year-olds in both German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. The results are presented in academic publications. Further information can be found under <https://www.zhaw.ch/en/linguistics/research/covidisc/>

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