

Media Habits And Covid-19. Using Audio-Diaries Technique To Explore “Official” Information Consumption

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To cite this article: Moretti, V., Chakraborty, A. (2020), Media Habits and Covid-19. Using Audio-Diaries Technique to Explore “Official” Information Consumption, *Fuori Luogo Rivista di Sociologia del Territorio, Turismo, Tencologia*. volume 7 – numero 1/2020. Pp 97 - 104. DOI: 10.6092/2723-9608/7043

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.6092/2723-9608/7043>



Submission date: 3/7/2020

Revised: 2/9/2020

Published: 23/09/2020

ABSTRACT

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Through this article we aimed to investigate how individuals selected, consumed, interpreted and absorbed media content during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, more specifically, the transition from phase 1 to phase 2. We assumed that being familiar with a condition, by getting information from media, might influence individuals' risk perception and predict how certain circumstances might affect their lives. Regarding the methodology, we used two complementary techniques: audio diaries and semi-structured interviews. The data collection was carried out during the first days of phase 2 (which started on May 4th 2020) and each participant – 11 female and 6 male, between 28 and 45 years old and living in the northern part of Italy – was asked to register one audio per day for a week (7-13 May). Using this technique proved to be fruitful as we received detailed descriptions of the lives of certain individuals during a period of uncertainty: their hopes, desires, fears, emotions alongside precise observations on their media diet, ro The article presents an exploratory analysis of the (im)mobilities emerged during

KEYWORDS

Media,
Audio-Diary,
Experts,
Data-Fatigue,
Risk Perception

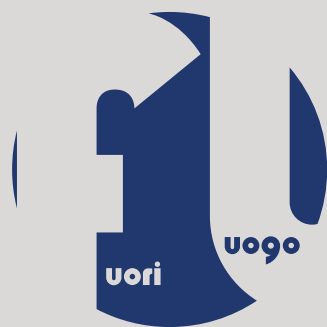
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Fuori Luogo

Rivista di Sociologia del Territorio,
Turismo, Tecnologia

Anno IV - Volume 7 - Numero 1 - Settembre 2020

FedOA - Federico II University Press

ISSN (on line) 2723-9608 - ISSN (print) 2532-750X

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tel. +39-081-2535883

English text editor: Pietro Maturi

Impaginazione a cura di Michele Brunaccini

EDITORE



FedOA - Federico II University Press
Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche "Roberto Pettorino"
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

Responsabilità editoriale

Fedoa adotta e promuove specifiche linee guida in tema di responsabilità editoriale, e segue le COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 59 del 20 dicembre 2016

Direttore responsabile: Carmine Urcioli

ISSN 2723-9608 (pubblicazione on line)

ISSN 2532-750X (pubblicazione cartacea)

Articles

In evaluating the proposed works, the journal follows a peer review procedure. The articles are proposed for evaluation by two anonymous referees, once removed any element that could identify the author.

Propose an article. The journal uses a submission system (open journal) to manage new proposals on the site.

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Media Habits and Covid-19. Using Audio-Diaries Technique to Explore “Official” Information Consumption¹

Veronica Moretti, Anwasha Chakraborty²

1. Introduction: media landscape during Covid-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the ways in which scientists are communicating data using various platforms, with a volume of information made readily available unlike in any previous health crisis (Kupferschmidt, 2020). Scholars have noted the speed at which scientific literature is being generated on this issue (Haghani *et al*, 2020). With increasing infections and deaths globally, and with unprecedented nationwide closures of economic and social activities across the globe, the media coverage on the pandemic has surged as well, as has misinformation, including: conspiracy theories such as Bill Gates had apparently created the virus (Ball and Maxmen, 2020) or that the virus had originated in a Chinese laboratory (Sharma, 2020); fake news such as Covid symptoms were caused by 5G networks (Easton, 2020); and a plethora of bogus miracle cure claims (Izugbara, Obiyan, 2020). Previous pandemics such as HIV or H1N1 saw similar conspiracy theories and proliferation of unscientific cures, which go on to show that history indeed repeats itself (Izugbara, Obiyan, 2020; Sharma, 2020).

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had already mentioned in February that “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.” (Shiloh Vidon, 2020). The WHO also released a “Situation Report” in early February 2020 highlighting this problem and underlining the urgency of proper risk and health communication during this period with evidence-based information. The report mentions: «The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.» (WHO 2020, p.2). Venturini (2019, p.2) has pointed out that «the notion of ‘fake news’ is misleading because it supposes that malicious pieces of news are manufactured, while reliable ones correspond directly to reality, denying the very essence of journalistic mediation in its efforts to select, combine, translate and present different pieces of information in a news store». A recent article in the journal *Psychological Medicine* which studied consumption of social media (mis) information during the Covid-19 outbreak has, in fact, shown that unregulated social media usage can even prove to be a health risk, as the research carried out by Allington and others (2020) found a negative relationship between health protective behaviours during the pandemic and use of social media as a source of information. This underlines the fact that not only is abundance of misinformation confusing, but it can actually undermine the fight against the spread of the virus.

Since WHO’s February report, the infodemic has only grown further; especially when we look at the Italian context where the outbreak started on February 21, 2020, and the number of infections and victims rose rapidly over the next one and a half months, while at the same time, Covid-19 occupied the news space almost entirely globally. In the same period, news from Italy, which had been the epicenter of the pandemic in March 2020, made headlines daily across the world. It is in this context, with the prevailing uncertainty and constant abundance of information that we decided to carry out this short exploratory study. We were specifically interested in this period of transition starting from May 4, 2020 (just as Italy completed phase 1 of nationwide lockdown and entered phase 2 of partial relaxation of lockdown measures); and in how Italian citizens (and residents) were experiencing a new form of uncertainty of what they might expect from the future. To trace their understanding of this period in transition, we decided to employ the method of collecting personal audio-diaries which would help us capture the experiences, emotions and nuances of selected individuals in this particular historical moment of the pandemic in Italy, which is the aim of this study. Audio-diaries also proved to be a strategic choice for the period with which we were dealing, as individuals (non-family members and non-partners) were still not allowed to meet and greet physically. Under these circumstances when the challenge on gathering ethnographic data was immense, these personal diaries sent via the messaging app WhatsApp or via email allowed the participants to communicate with us. In the next section, we explain in detail why and how we employed this method for the study and then provide a description of the process by which we recruited participants, gathered testimonies and coded the data. Subsequently, we describe the main findings obtained from the collected data.

2. Note on the audio-diary approach

Diaries are often viewed as a personal *dispositif* capable of collecting the most intimate thoughts and experiences of the narrator. As MacFarlane (1970, p. 4) suggested «Often a ‘diary’ is nothing more than some personal observations scribbled in the margins of an almanack».

Within social research, diaries have been used in different contexts. In ethnographic research, fieldnotes can pro-

¹ Paper ricevuto 03/07/2020. Data restituzione paper revisionato 02/09/2020. Data pubblicazione 23/09/2020.

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While this article is the result of several discussions between the authors, Veronica Moretti has written the sections 2, 3, 4.3 and 4.4., while Anwasha Chakraborty has written the sections 1, 4.1., 4.2. and 5.

vide important insights in reporting how individuals and communities develop relationships and live in “their” world. In clinical research, diaries can help to overcome memory problems. A research conducted by Parkin and colleagues (2004) shows the way in which diaries can help people with multiple sclerosis in tracking and reporting their symptoms. Additionally, historical researchers can use diaries as an extra source of data or as a primary source of evidence. Diaries are particularly suited to a naturalistic approach as they facilitate «the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context» (Bolger *et al.*, 2003, p. 580). Keeping a diary permits a process of constant comparison and allows intimate access to the experience being researched. Hislop and colleagues (2005, p. 72) argue that «seen through the frame of reference of the respondents, diaries provide insights into the roles and relationships, and life events and transitions which impact on everyday life».

With the development and widespread use of technology, audio can substitute pieces of paper. Audio messages form a part of everyday life today. However, audio-diary, unlike written diaries, are not commonly used in contemporary qualitative research. Among some of the main researches that have used this technique in gathering data, we mention Bernays and colleagues (2014) who analysed how hope is (re)created in people living with HIV in Serbia; Worth’s research (2009) which reported the process and path on how visually impaired young people in Britain move to adulthood ; and the research conducted by Gibson *et al* (2013) on young Canadians suffering from Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Unlike written diaries, audios allow both individuals to provide data and researchers to collect information in real time thereby reducing the effort in doing it because they are “hands-free”.

Based on these premises, for our research we decided to use the audio-diary technique during the present Coronavirus pandemic. There were several reasons which prompted us to select this approach. First, the audio-diary can be considered as a *personal testimony of suffering*. The escalation of Covid in Italy proved to be more severe and fierce than in many other European countries. A report produced jointly by the National Institute of Statistics (Italian acronym: ISTAT) and the Italian National Institute of Health (Italian acronym: ISS) provided an integrated reading of epidemiological data on the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic and on deaths. As mentioned in the report, if we consider the period from February 20 to March 31, deaths had increased from 26,218 to 49,351 (23,133 more deaths in a span of little over a month). A combined analysis of ISTAT daily mortality data with the ISS’s Integrated Surveillance data showed that the “direct” mortality attributable to Covid-19 in individuals with confirmed diagnosis, in the first quarter of 2020 was about 13,700 deaths.

Individual stories of suffering are not recorded merely through numbers. There are indelible qualitative narratives that are intertwined with the experience of individual subjects as the Italian sociologist Migliorati tells us, in what we could call his “auto-ethnography”, with the book *Un sociologo nella zona rossa* (2020). This leads to the second reason why keeping track of events and feelings can be useful. Audio-diary might sustain people in keeping alive the historical path that we are experiencing with the passage of time. In other words, an audio diary can be a powerful tool in *creating an archive for posterity* and preserving the “Covid memory”.

The third reason why the use of audio-diaries can be suitable during the pandemic is because they *represent the uncertainty of the period*. Particularly during the moment of transition (from phase 1 to phase 2) Italians were experiencing a new form of uncertainty of what they might expect from the future. Many certainties collapsed, generating a sense of bewilderment among the people. But at the same time, new resources were called upon, and people learnt to quickly assimilate the new rules of lockdown and infection management (from widespread use of masks and social distancing to the restriction of a variety of civil liberties).

Lastly, audio diaries can be understood as a way in which individuals perceive and interpret a situation. This aspect is deeply connected with the research purpose, which is to investigate how individuals interpret and absorb media content. It is important to mention that media are now viewed as a sort of Janus, popular among politicians to filter the “right” information and behaviour, but at the same time negatively used as a cesspool of “wrong” facts and fake news.

3. Methodological framework

Through this article we aimed to investigate how individuals selected, consumed, interpreted and absorbed media content during the pandemic. Our assumption was that being familiar with a condition and getting information from the media might influence individuals’ risk perception and predict how certain circumstances might affect their lives. Based on our own readings and observations, we formulated the following questions which aided the research design:

- 1) What kind of media are the research participants predominantly using to consume information: traditional mass media such as newspapers, TV and radio? Social media? A mix of both?
- 2) Are they feeling a sense of fatigue due to the abundance of information?
- 3) Who, according to them, are the experts that they are turning to for certainty in these uncertain times: Politicians? Scientists? Public administrators? International and supranational organizations such as WHO and EU?
- 4) How do (and if) people recognize fake news on the Internet? Can this process alleviate their risk perception about the impact of Covid-19?

Regarding the methodology, we used the aforementioned audio-diaries technique. In the initial phase, 18 subjects were involved in the project. Among these participants, one did not send any audio and was therefore excluded from the analysis of the material. 15 participants completed the task, sending all the audio-diaries for one week; 2 participants did not complete the 7 sessions but we decided to keep their testimonies.

The participants, 11 female and 6 male, are between 28 and 45 years old and live in the northern part of Italy. Since this is an exploratory study, a non-probabilistic sample, or grab sampling, was obtained. The data collection was carried out during the first days of phase 2 (which started on May 4, 2020) and each participant was asked to register one audio per day for a week (7-13 May). This timeline was established to evaluate the initial impacts with respect to the transformations from the first phase.

Before beginning to register the vocal messages, the participants were given instructions on our expectations on the audio-diaries by offering thematic ideas. However, all subjects involved had full freedom on the duration of the audio, in deciding the content they wanted to share and in the delivery (they were free to send their audios at the end of the day or to send all of them at the end of the period under investigation).

As the researchers were not being able to meet the subjects face-to-face in advance to provide them with formal equipment, the respondents were asked to create audio with their own devices. Most used was the "voice memo" function on the smartphone; some sent the audio directly through WhatsApp and in one case a professional microphone was used. The participants were free to register in English or in Italian, according to their preferences. The duration of the audio-diaries varied widely, ranging from a minimum of 1.34 minutes to a maximum of 34 minutes, reflecting the participants' freedom and willingness to share as much or as little as they felt fit.

To understand and interpret our data we transcribed *verbatim* the information that emerged from audio-diaries, and then translated those that were in Italian to the English language for the purposes of this article. During the transcription process, the added value of audio diaries emerged when compared to written documents, since «Pauses, silences, overlaps, laughter, applause, tone and volume are just some features that are transcribed in an attempt to capture not only the content of talk, but also the way in which it is produced» (Acton, 2003, p. 51). The categories emerged through our analysis will be discussed in the next session.

3.1 Ethics

At the beginning of the research, we explained to each participant that their audio diaries would only be handled by the research team and single entries would be anonymized (Sargeant and Gross, 2011).

We clarified that since the use of audio diaries has also provoked ethical concerns, they might cause participants some distress because the act of recording and reflecting on events could prompt an emotional crisis (Smyth, 1998).

4. Findings

As mentioned earlier, at the beginning of the data gathering process, we provided the respondents a broad set of open questions which could be grouped under the following four thematic areas: media sources; experts; data fatigue; risk perception. In this section, we present the findings of the analysis of data which was performed using these themes as the initial codes and the questions connected to each thematic area as further codes. Alongside information on these themes, many personal information and observations were produced. As it will be shown in the paragraphs relating to data analysis, the information consumed during the day was inevitably bound to and by people's daily lives. A large margin of freedom was left to the subjects in terms of how they were to maintain the diaries and to send the recordings.

4.1. Media sources

Communication studies literature considers traditional media, including newspapers, television and radio, as institutions providing framework within which political actors operate (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). Research in the field grants mass media with important roles of gatekeeping that decides which issue and which actors gain public attention (Schulz, 2017) and agenda setting which determines what objects and their attributes gain salience in the public mind (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Furthermore, the media has the power and agency to frame issues in news reports which can influence how the audience perceives such reports (Scheufele, Tewksbury, 2007). With social media and social networks, the category of audience has undergone a sea change where this group can now produce and consume such frames (Bennett, Pfetsch, 2018), thereby breaking down the paradigmatic relation between the sender and receiver, while leading to a proliferation of voices (Dahlgren, 2005) often inaudible to each other. In recent years, a trend has been observed that the public has increasingly started turning to online media environments to retrieve scientific information (Brossard, 2013; Brossard, Scheufele, 2013). However, researchers have also shown how people perceive traditional media to be more reliable for crisis information (Austin, Liu, Jin, 2012).

In the context of our present study, it is important to mention the work of "Observe Science in Society" which carried out surveys on Italian citizens' perceptions of the pandemic. These surveys also tracked the kind of media that the population was tuning in to obtain information, as well as the figures of authority they trusted for such data. These early results (from March and April) were published on the blog "Public Understanding of Science" (the official blog of the journal bearing the same name), which said that an overwhelming two-third majority of respondents mainly referred to traditional news outlets such as TV and radio news. There was also a substantial percentage of people obtaining information mainly from institutional web sources, like Health ministry, the Civil Protection Department, or local institutions (at 14,7%) (Bucchi, Saracino, 2020). Social media contacts were the preferred news source only for about 4% of the re-

spondents and had declined since the early days of the pandemic. This is not surprising as TV continues to be the main source of information among Italians (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2018). Many among our respondents received information about the pandemic during the period under study from *telegiornali* (TV news). Social media was the other major source, with Facebook being the most popular option. However, several respondents mentioned that they followed pages of traditional media outlets such as newspapers and TV channels on social media. For example, Participant 10 said:

«How do I select sources [...] My sources come purely from social media as I said yesterday. There are various social media that I follow [...] I visit national TG sites, especially TG1, TG3 and TG7. I check these daily [...] several times a day [...] but very quickly» (May 8).

There were some who said they did not have a TV at home and/or preferred to read news and detailed analysis as opposed to watching videos. As Participant 9 observed:

«I do not have a TV, and I do not enjoy very much watching videos. So, most of the news [...] well actually quite all of the news I get are in written forms [...] so from newspapers, blogs and things like that. Usually I use the website of the Italian newspaper Repubblica as kind of main source of information about generic news about what's going on and then another newspaper website which I visit often is Il Post [...] While when I want to read some more political commentary or social commentary I use another social network, which is called Mastodon. This is a decentralized social network and there I follow a lot of like, more kind of, political magazines and things like that» (May 7).

Participant 13 mentioned a return to traditional media outlets in this period to gather information:

«I would say that since the start of the emergency I have been informed much more through traditional media outlets than before [...] I listen to TV news much more often» (May 7).

Participant 14 was more critical of Italian news reporting, and especially Italian TV news, saying that:

«I know how news are narrated in Italian and I sincerely don't like my news to be dramatic. I see that there is far more pluralism in South American journalism, not here. You could find alternative news, alternative space on same matters but it would mean going down on to what your social media feed is giving you. And I have a lot of contacts who share, you know, articles from pages that are specific [...] some circles usually left-minded circles. These are interesting texts to be read, but I always keep in mind that they are political commentary rather than news» (May 8).

Because of the peculiarity of this period, which were the initial days of Phase 2, several respondents mentioned in their audio-diaries that there were a number of days when they just preferred to be out in nature, go out for walks, or meet their partners which they were finally allowed to do. On many occasions, multiple respondents said that they had not consulted any media sources and preferred to distance themselves from news on the pandemic.

Finally, yet another theme that emerged from discussion of media sources is how people tended to obtain news about their immediate surroundings: the municipality, the city or the region they live in. Only two participants, 14 and 17, discussed at length about the pandemic situation from other parts of the world and said that they were reading articles in multiple languages. The focus on the local as opposed to the global was summed up well in the testimony of Participant 1:

«In this week I realized that I am truly ignorant, I am not one who inquiries about events, especially worldwide. I look at more local things, I am a little more selfish. But at the same time, I want to justify myself because finding information on the internet is not easy» (May 13).

4.2. The "expert uncertainty"

In risk society studies, experts are accorded a crucial role. Giddens (1994, p. 32) defines expert knowledge «as those systems whose technical and professional competence influences our daily actions». Experts are therefore the professionals – of science, politics, culture – who we can rely on to guide our daily decisions and opinions. According to Giddens, the disaggregation and complexification of social systems, combined with the loss of ontological security, force citizens to place their trust in expert systems. During the early stages of the pandemic, numerous experts appeared on the scene: health professionals, politicians, journalists and various media figures. Paraphrasing Beck (1986), the poor computability of the consequences produced by the Covid-19 crisis combined with multiple experts triggered a change in the rationality of science. Various media channels also gave voice to a wide range of individuals thereby creating confusion as to whose narrative would achieve salience. It was not possible to determine an information monopoly because none of the experts was able to quantify the threat in progress and detect its danger (at least in a very early stage). For this reason, we can call the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 as a period of "expert uncertainty".

Most participants expressed trust in medical professionals who were the frontline workers during the crisis. This period witnessed a real politicization of medicine thanks to the use of numerous metaphors (Sontag, 1978) linked to the work of health professionals (hero doctors, combative nurses, survivors, the war against the virus and so on). Many of the interviewees considered the information deriving from the health system to be reliable and trustworthy. At the same

time, very few held the political class in high esteem, with the notable exception of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who was ubiquitous across media platforms.

Talking about a friend who is a statistician, participant 14 mentioned that,

«He won't accept that anyone other than a biologist, a virologist, a statistician or a mathematician talks about this curve that has to be flattened» (May 10).

Participant 7 explained further:

«I trust information that comes from friends who are doctors, nurses...who have been exactly in the frontline» (May 7).

Participant 4 had a similar tone in describing the role of medical professionals in this period:

«Maximum respect for those who work in the medical sector, they brought the country forward from a crazy mess» (May 11).

The political class cut a sorry figure at least in the opinion of most participants. Political bickering and polemics among political parties were noted by several respondents, which also led to unfavourable opinion regarding this group of people. However, not every participant was equally enthusiastic about the communication from doctors; nor were similarly dismissive about political communication. Two such responses stood out among the audio-diaries that we received. For example, Participant 11 was critical of the communication from Roberto Burioni, a virologist at the San Raffaele hospital in Milan who emerged as one of the figures of scientific expertise during the pandemic in Italy. He explained:

«In fact, there was Burioni who a while back said that the virus was a simple influenza [...] which would not cause damage to our country [...] and therefore he minimized the risk. And then with the passage of a few days, a few weeks, things changed drastically and there was an escalation of terror» (May 13).

On the other hand, Participant 13 had profuse praise reserved for the political communication during this period, especially the press conferences of Conte:

«Today there was a press conference of Conte where he presented the new measures regarding the new decree for economic support [...] I listened to all of it. I also listened to the other ministers and I think that many other people have done it too ... in this sense, in this period, institutional communication has been strong and authoritative» (May 13).

Conte who was perpetually present in media coverage in the early period of the pandemic through his public addresses and interviews emerged as one of the trusted figures during the emergency, an attribute shared by many of our respondents. Participant 8 stated that:

«I am happy that we don't have the previous government managing this pandemic» (May 9).

Participant 9 further explained why Conte is probably a more trustworthy figure than other politicians:

«Everything considered, I am quite happy that we have Conte as the Prime Minister and not someone who has a deeper kind of political career. I think in a way Conte was good in trusting science, trusting scientists and doctors in a kind of humble way, maybe» (May 11).

Finally, with respect to the discussion on expertise, it was interesting to note a general sense of apathy towards the World Health Organization and its communication during the emergency, a feeling that was shared by almost all the participants of the study. Participant 10 went on to say that:

«I think that the WHO does not have sufficient power, to be able to weigh in the phase before and now in phase 2. Because of this, it is not taken into consideration by the various national political bodies. Even at the European level» (May 10).

It would of course be interesting to study how much international organizations with expert knowledge such as WHO have been crucial in formulating national policies, but at least according to our respondents, they had little to no role in shaping their understanding of the pandemic. The participants' testimonies about authority figures corresponded well with Bucci and Saracino's survey (2020), which showed that Italians were more supportive of national actors at the helm of handling the pandemic such as the Civil Protection Department and the national government (along with the Prime Minister). The same survey noted that two-thirds of Italians judged the European Union's role during the pandemic negatively. Support for WHO's role in communication of the pandemic was not rated highly either. Some of these results were also reflected in a poll conducted by market researcher Emg Acqua, which showed that Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's approval ratings grew by over ten percentage points to 43% in April from the start of the pandemic, while trust in the EU reduced significantly across the political spectrum (Piantoni, 2020).

4.3. Data fatigue: the “covid-exhaustion”

It is comprehensive information about a situation that enables individuals to have expectations and to predict what certain circumstances might bring in their lives (Goffman, 1959). Being familiar with a condition contributes to reinforce our “ontological security”: a sense of continuity and order in events (Laing, 1960). During the first months of the pandemic, individuals were exposed to an enormous amount of information, often contradictory to one another, which resulted in general confusion and overall data fatigue.

This third thematic axis refers to the impact of data in terms of being overawed and hyper-interested at the same time. In this context, the use of audio-diary showed its potential in tracking the different feelings of our participants. If at the beginning we witnessed a bulimic search for information (from the number of infections to that of deaths), with the passage of time the energies were “rationalized” due to a real “covid-exhaustion”. These aspects were summed up eloquently by Participant 16:

«Initially when this surreal situation started, I paid close attention to all the news and looked at all the news. I was curious and interested in understanding what was happening in Italy and in the world. Above all I kept in mind the numbers (the healed, the infected, the deceased). Then slowly I loosened my grip precisely because the more I went on and the more I realized that this information could be misleading since we are bombarded with all this information day and night and it is difficult to establish where the truth is» (May 7).

The aspect of data fatigue also occurred due to the complex and varied formulation of the information provided to citizens. In fact, there has often been a lack of coordination between the various sources due to the profound uncertainty of the phenomenon, as reported by Participant 3

«The few things I saw were very confusing because we are talking about this restart of the decree that still has to come out in theory and therefore we do not know very well what we will face on May 18 because there are conflicting opinions. We have not understood so much [...] restaurants and bars also reopening also as regards hairdressers it is not clear, I did not understand if it is something that pertains to the region or not. There were several news items and several articles, however, since the actual decree has not yet been published, we are all a bit [...] everyone talks a little about everything in general but there is certainly nothing. So, there is little to say in short» (May 13).

Also Participant 15 stated that:

«In fact, starting from February there was an overexposure of this issue at the media level. So how to say [...] TV, the press, have immediately emphasized this theme by overshadowing all the others [...] consequently also in social media. So this, let's say, information tsunami has not done anything but often confuse citizens» (May 12).

A central aspect in considering the growing data fatigue regards fake news and the various theories spread by some media. Byford in his *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (2011) explains how some social and psychological factors might contribute to the persistence of some conspiracy theories in modern society. A recent study of Freeman and colleagues (2020) shows that in England there has been a substantial endorsement of conspiracy beliefs about the novel coronavirus. During the pandemic, we have been exposed to different assumptions regarding such as “the virus was made in a laboratory”, “that death and infection figures were being manipulated by the authorities” and “that symptoms were linked to 5G radiation”.

We had asked our respondents for their strategies to recognize fake news about the novel coronavirus. These were some of their responses:

«70,000 articles different from each other and fake news can be recognized very well because in part it is always in controversy [...] when a news starts in controversy in my opinion it is a fake news and in fact I let it go, I don't even read it all. There is a lot of confusion in my opinion» (Participant 1, May 9).

«I recognize fake news with my sensations, I say it without modesty. With intelligence and common sense. And I try to learn more about the topic» (Participant 15, May 7).

«I don't feel confused because I try to follow the evolution of the virus. It would be necessary to clean up these fake news [...] the information is there anyway. However, the information is not virgin but is piloted [...] the fake news I recognize from who writes it, shares it, how it is presented» (Participant 5, May 12).

4.4. Risk perception

The fourth and final thematic axis refers to the perception of risk and uncertainty linked to the future that the pandemic has introduced in our lives. The concept of risk has a long tradition within sociological writings (Luhmann, 1996; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Zinn, 2004). As Jasanoff (2003) pointed out, risk is part of the modern human condition, woven into the very fabric of progress. The problem we urgently face is how to live democratically and at peace with the knowledge

that our societies are inevitably “at risk”. As Zinn (2008) noted, those using rational strategies to manage risk and uncertainty seek to identify the best course of action by weighing in pros and cons and by calculation. The recent outbreak of coronavirus has put into spotlight a large part of our certainties by radically changing our daily life and affecting what Sartre would define as our own nature of free choices and actions:

«The only certainty is what we have experienced in this period, without knowing it we have faced trauma. Our days have changed, our fears and the sense of precariousness of life have emerged. We looked inside, we changed the way we work and communicate» (Participant 16, May 13).

If Covid-19 has managed to put many of our activities on standby, the same cannot be said for other existing diseases:

«The problem with Covid is that the pandemic has destroyed the daily routine but life goes on, and with life I also mean problems and diseases. The idiot who fails to go for an aperitif outside does not understand that cancer patients cannot go for chemo. And this is something that hammers in my head. The disease continues, it has not stopped with the pandemic. We should pause for a moment and think that despite this situation we are very lucky» (Participant 4, May 9).

The risk perception during this period was worsened due to media reports about reopening. During our research, as showed by the diaries kept over the week, several respondents mentioned the reporting of the crowding at Milan’s Navigli area during aperitif hours on May 8, which was widely criticised as terrible behaviour. Participant 9 summarised the need for proper information as a crucial aspect of going forward:

«And yes in this moment I would really like to have more precise, more detailed information on how these things actually working. I think at this point in Italy after two months we should have much more news, much more reliable news on what has happened in the past months and how to face the next months [...] I feel like I don’t have that kind of information and I don’t even know where to retrieve it» (May 11).

As Lyotard noted in 1984, de-traditionalization and crisis of narratives increase the sense of uncertainty of people. Traditions, religion and politics are not able to direct people’s choices as they did in the past. Giddens suggests that this sense of continuous narrative – what he calls biographical continuity – entails the stability of «self’s existence and confidence of its social interaction» (Chernobrov, 2016, p. 583), keeping a particular narrative going. The present pandemic has altered the way of maintaining a stable *biographical continuity* among individuals and societies reinforcing perception of loneliness and impotence.

5. Conclusion

The article aimed to provide snapshots of daily lives of a set of respondents, identified through grab sampling, living in northern Italy, during the Covid-19 outbreak of 2020. More specifically, the focus was to track the participants’ attitude in a period of transition between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the nationwide lockdown, with respect to four aspects: media sources to gather information; the understanding of expert; the feeling of data fatigue; and the perception of risk in the present and the future. Although not a representative sample, some interesting trends could be observed from the audio-diaries which are not in contrast with what emerged from the aforementioned survey of Bucchi and Saracino, especially regarding the role of experts, namely, the Prime Minister’s crisis management and less trust in WHO and EU. Traditional media outlets, especially TV and newspapers continued to play an important role in the lives of our respondents, with many following these channels online using their social media pages. Several respondents were generally positive towards the news that they gathered from their friends (who they said they trusted to not share fake news). At the same time, the abundance of information led to Covid-related news fatigue. However, the seeming lack of reliable information also persisted leading to elevated risk perception. The continued disruption of daily life only made matters worse.

Using this technique proved to be fruitful as we received detailed descriptions of the lives of certain individuals during a period of uncertainty: their hopes, desires, fears, emotions alongside precise observations on the four larger themes addressed in the research. This study intends to bear testimony to a period which disrupted, as Giddens called it, the *biographical continuity* of people. As it tried to show, the media-diet in this period was also responsible for such a disruption.

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