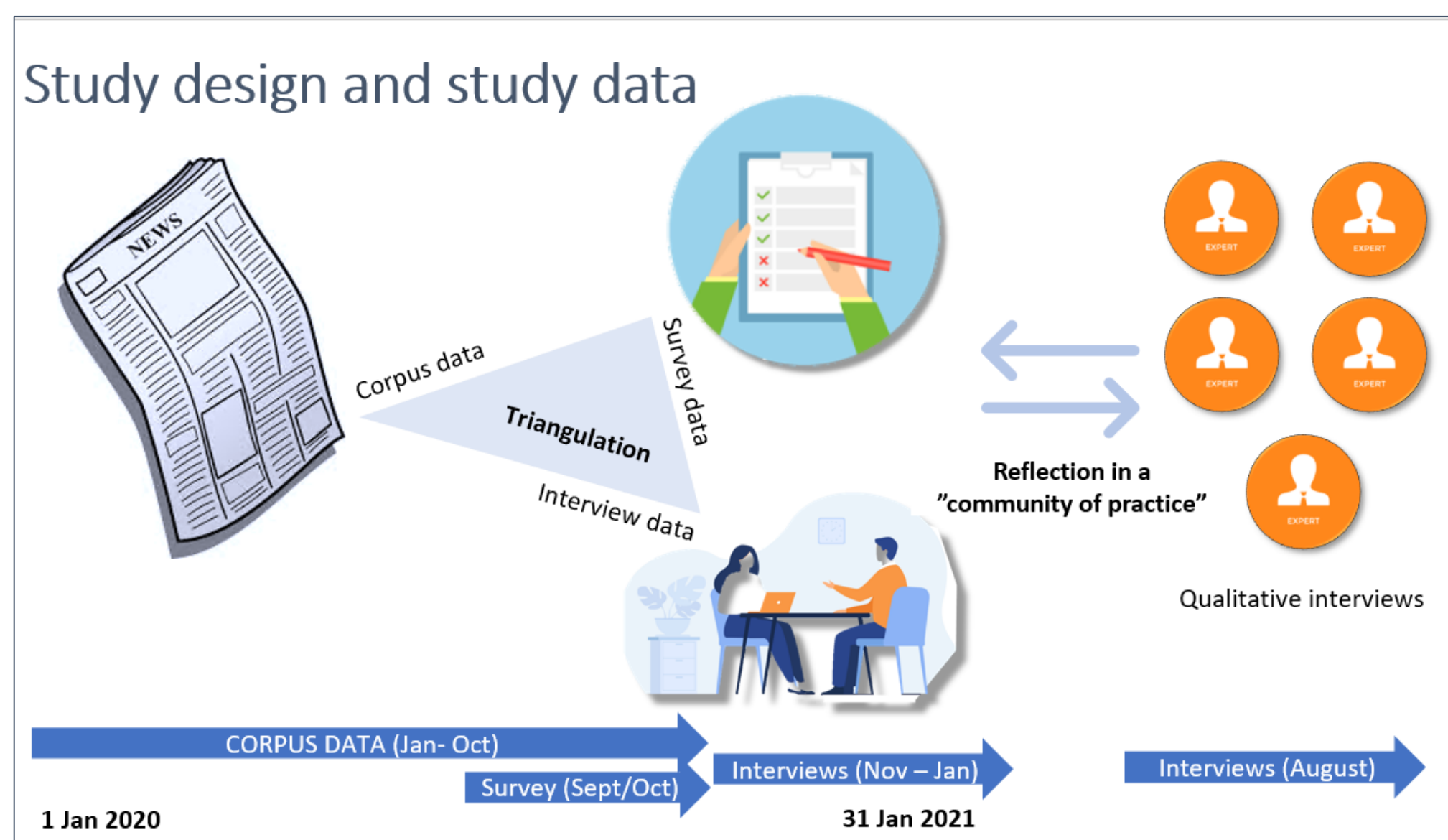


COVIDisc

COVID-19 pandemic discourses in Switzerland – a focus on 15-34 year olds

Objectives

- 1) Production of discourse: Simulation of the patchwork and dynamics of public discourses on COVID-19 based on patterns of language, especially construction of the vector population
- 2) Reception of discourse: Investigation of the representation of the vector population in public discourses and the perception of these discourses by members of these audiences
- 3) Reflection on discourse: Development of recommendations to strengthen and improve strategic crisis communication of public health organizations by managerial practices of audience and message design to impact on sense-making and early adoption of public health measures



Main Findings

1. **Notice of COVID-19:** Focus changes from China to Switzerland within 8 weeks.
 - VP → The first wave and the measures were perceived as the most important key moments
2. **Common ground on COVID-19** emerges during the first 3 months.
 - VP → not very worried about their own health.
 - Experts → the impossibility of objectively justifying measures is one of the greatest challenges
3. **Dangerousness & Communication:** The discourse quantifies the dangerousness and potential lethality of the virus. In *DE-speaking Switzerland*, this particularly marks the beginning of the pandemic; in *Ticino*, it marks the entire period and is characterized by a higher emotionality.
 - VP → reported negative considerations about emotional style and images in the media, especially Ticino.
 - Experts → avoiding scaremongering was one of the more important strategic principles of actors in public communication.
4. **Construction of VP** works especially against an economic background.
 - VP mostly do not remember communication about them; however, they remember media criticizing and blaming them for their behavior.
5. **Solidarity:** discourse topic during the lockdown.
 - VP → pandemic evoked a division among the population, among family/partner or among friends.
 - Experts → To emphasize the need for an overall solidarity and simultaneously the need for audience specific strategies of messaging was one of the most challenging tasks for actors of public communication.
6. **Discourse Positions & Audience:** FOPH acts non-dialogical on Twitter
 - VP → from Ticino suggest interactive communication format or more generally they wished to be listened by authorities.
 - Experts → see need in adapting key messages for their specific target audiences, also together with NGOs.
7. **VP uses a variety of media** and social media, including official health websites.
 - Importance of channel specific communication strategies and styles is one of the most important learnings for public communication strategies.

1. Production of discourse

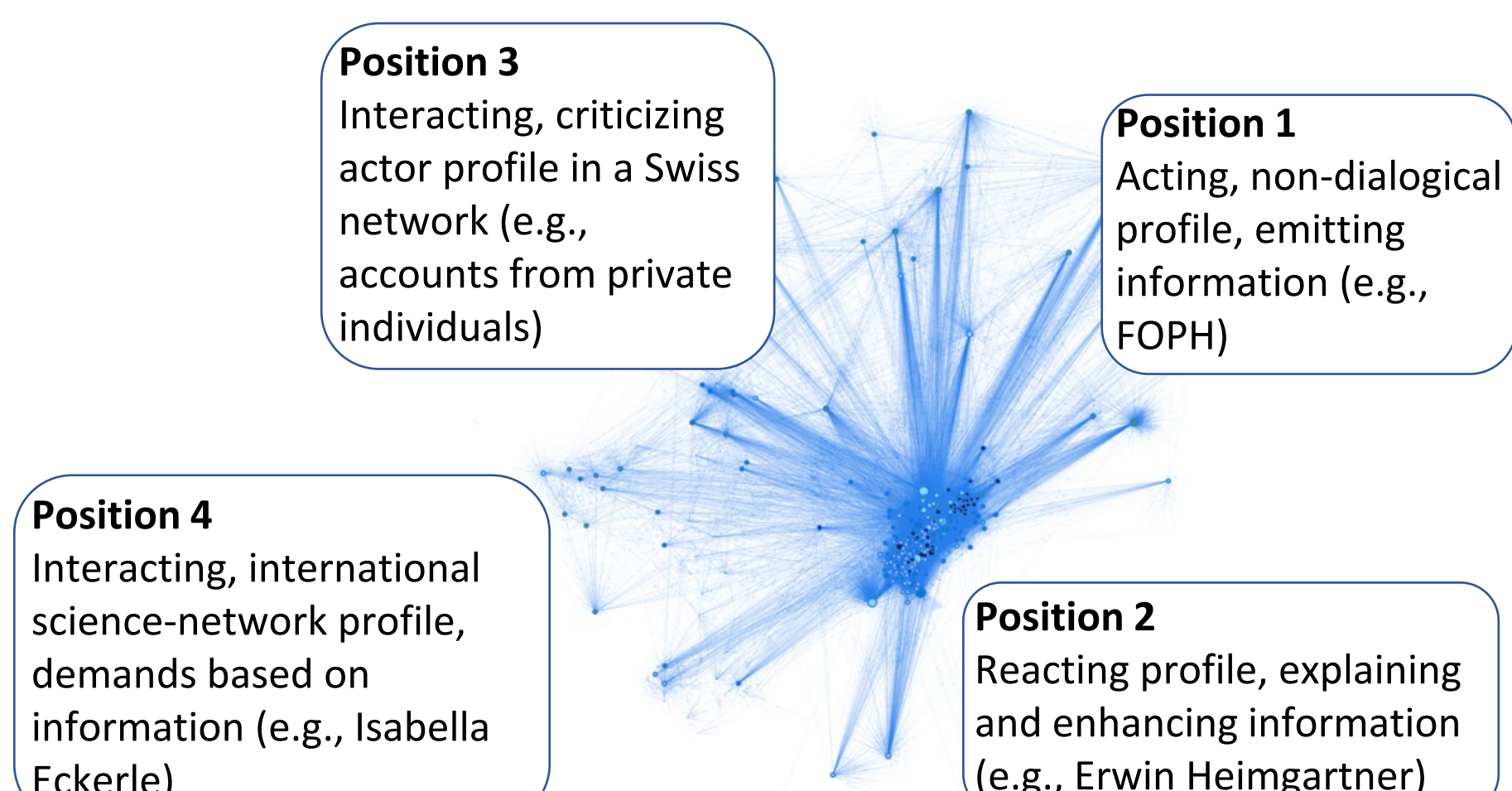
- **Study period:** 12/2019 – 10/2020
- **Actors:** journalistic media, politics/authorities (e.g., Federal Offices, Cantons), industry (e.g., hospitals), science (e.g., universities), civil society (e.g., patient representatives)
- **Language Data:**
 - **German:** 55k texts/29 Mio. words
 - **Italian:** 16k texts/6.7 Mio. words
 - **Twitter:** 1.1 billion tweets (ger/eng/fr/it)
- **Methods:**
 - Applied Discourse Analysis (Dreesen & Stücheli-Herlach, 2019)
 - quantitative, data-driven approach to the identification of patterns of language use (incl. machine learning)
 - Corpus Swiss-AL

Construction of the vector population

- At the beginning of the pandemic, vector population is mentioned in the **context of lower health risks**.
- The youth is constructed on the background of **economic consequences**. Other, less frequently mentioned secondary measures concern social life, physical a. psychological health.
- In summer 2020, the discourse is characterized by **blaming of the vector population**, triggered by superspreading events in clubs.
- **Peripheral mentioning:**
 - In the discourse from March–April, it is stated that health risks also (“auch”) exist for the vector population, but the focus is on the vulnerable population
- **Emphasizing:**
 - Starting in the summer, the discourse emphasizes that social behavior related to the health measures is expected especially (“vor allem”) from the younger population

Emergence of discourse positions on Twitter

On Twitter, at least four types of discursive positioning emerge through the use of language and social media practices (tweet, retweet, reply, comment)



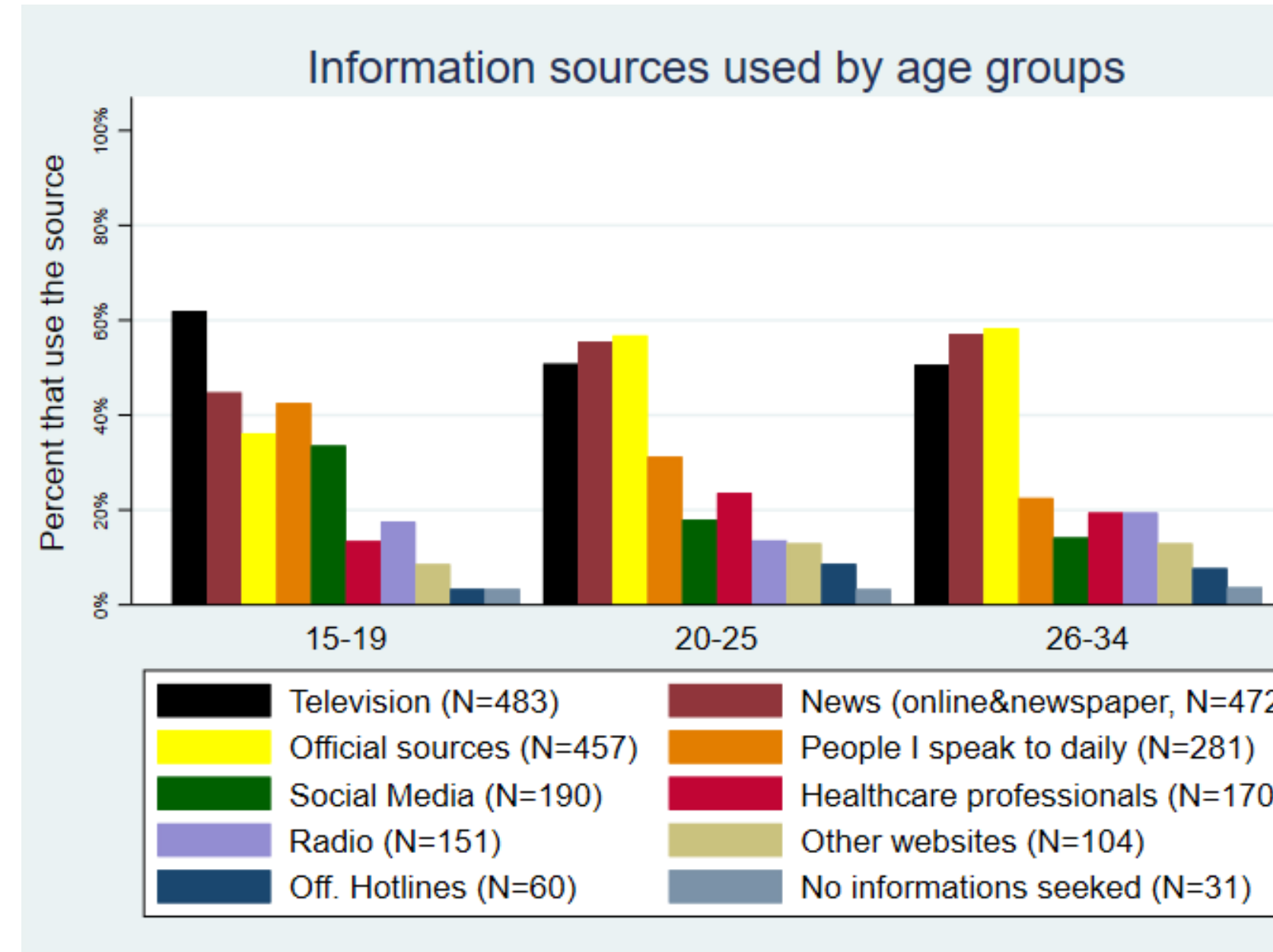
2. Reception of discourse

Methods: quantitative survey and qualitative interviews

Survey: N=915

- FSO provided a representative random sample of people aged 15-34
- N = 3597 (1812 DE & 1785 TI) 3489 contacted (response rate of 26%)

Interviews: N=60 (30 per language region)



Perception of official communication

- Clarity
- Transparency

- Confusing
- Lack of the “why” of measures
- Lack of explanations

- Conflicting communication

- Vague Information

“Aber ich glaube sie haben schon recht klar gesagt von wegen, schau, bleiben sie zu Hause, gehen sie nur noch ähm einkaufen, sehen sie möglichst keine Leute, ja. Das ist eigentlich schon recht klar gewesen, würde ich sagen”

“certe volte dicevano “eh si si, devi farlo, devi farlo così”, però non erano sempre chiari sul perché bisognava fare qualcosa così. Dovevi leggere tra le righe tante volte”

Perception of public communication

Media communications

- Disinformation / fake news
- Mediatic war / apocalyptic style

Other issues neglected

No recall of communications toward youth, besides:

- School communication
- Specific communication re: (e.g., closure of discos, or sport centers...)
- Media blaming the youth

“...cioè proprio hanno seminato gran panico, secondo me, cosa che potevano gestire un po’ meglio, ecco. Da una parte va bene far capire alla gente che è una cosa seria, ma dall’altra parte secondo me hanno anche un po’ esagerato”

3. Reflection on discourse

- 12 guided qualitative interviews with experts in the field
- members of a “community of practice” with the common objective to protect and enhance public health by means of public communication
- **Affiliations:** federal administration, Public Health Schweiz, Gesundheitsdirektorenkonferenz, Pro Juventute, Pädiatrie Schweiz, EDK, 1 cantonal office of public health, 2 editorial offices, 1 freelance journalist

Field of practice: Expert’s views

Estimation of the main results of the study

- *affirmation of the results:* focus on elder people and economical questions, not on vector population
- *Emphasis* on the lack of scientific knowledge and objective justifications of measures

Assessment of preconditions and successful strategies

- *Sufficient* availability of financial means (public funds, donations, investments, with exceptions)
- *Need for improvisation*
- Building *small expert groups* to ensure the capacity to act

Learnings

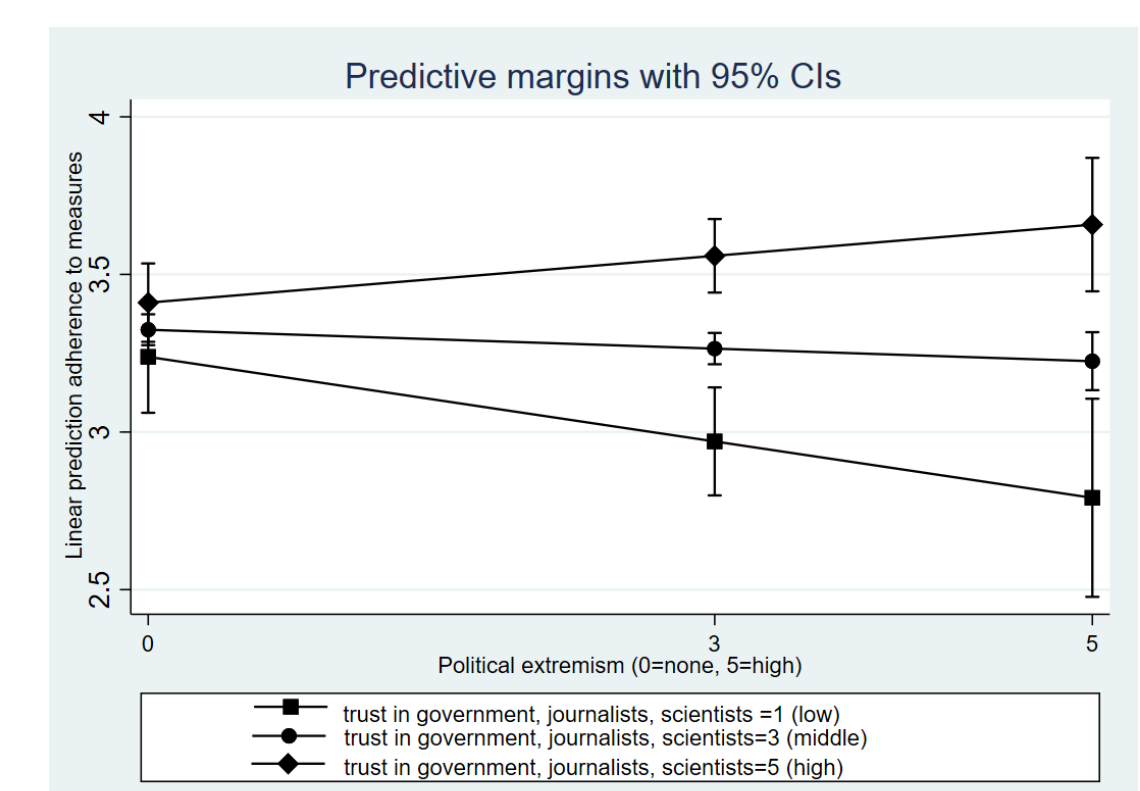
- Need for **honest and fact-based information** even in cases of uncertainty and faults (e.g., the “mask-case”)
- Consideration of the high effort to **evaluate, refine and translate measures and messages for ngo and corporations** (and together with them)
- Need of the development and reinforcement of **group and channel specific strategies and communication styles for vector population** (social media, messengers, influencers)

Papers

Young people’s media use and adherence to preventive measures in the “infodemic”: Is it masked by political ideology?

Abstract: Political ideology was associated with the use of information sources: health-based sources, broadcasting sources, news sources, and other websites. Direction of association varied by left or right ideology. Political extremism was only negatively associated with social media use: the higher the extremism, the less use of social media.

Full article available here:



Political extremism was related with lower adherence to preventive measures in young people with low trust in the government, scientists, and journalists.

Forthcoming Papers

- Let’s talk about COVID-19 vaccination: relevance of conversations about COVID-19 vaccination and information sources on vaccination intention in Switzerland [under review]
- Information during a health emergency: What channels and sources do young people use and trust? [in progress]
- The Emergence of COVID-19 in the Public Discourses of Switzerland. A data-driven approach [in progress]

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