

Research Project

Public debates and citizens' motives facing restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic: a mixed-methods study

Third-party funded project

Project title Public debates and citizens' motives facing restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic: a mixed-methods study

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Organisation / Research unit

Ethik / Bio- und Medizinethik (Elger)

Department

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected societies and people's lives in profound ways. Governments have implemented mandatory and recommended containment measures, balancing the consequences for public health, economy and personal liberty. Especially in Western democracies, the majority of people must support and understand these measures and adhere to them for successful containment. An effective public communication that enforces trust and understanding is crucial in that context.

This project, which was initiated by Prof Barbara Prainsack and Dr Katharina Kieslich at the University of Vienna (who lead the consortium), aims to investigate the role of public debates in the motivations and behaviours of citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and compare it to other European countries, especially Germany and Austria. The study will analyse this issue from two different angles and combine them later. On the one hand, the content and development of the public debate concerning public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic will be assessed using quantitative, comparative newspaper content analysis. On the other hand, a qualitative interview study aims to analyse citizens' narratives on how they perceived these public debates and their effects on their motivations and behaviours. Both parts will first be analysed separately and then inform each other for more directed and hypothesis-driven analysis. The project's analytical framework combines media effect theories with bioethical considerations, including aspects of solidarity and public health ethics.

The project intends to extend existing and ongoing quantitative population surveys and polls by providing causal arguments on citizens' behaviour and motivations. It attempts to inform policy-relevant conclusions on how to improve public communication related to containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health crises. Moreover, the project can be connected to the already ongoing SolPan study, which includes an international investigation of citizens' motivations to (not) follow governmental advice. The SolPan consortium also uses interviews with citizens and includes nine European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom). Even though the applicant is currently responsible for the Swiss cohort (coordinated and financed by Prof. Alena Buyx, TU Munich), the proposed project is independent of the SolPan project to the extent that it focuses on the role of public debates and includes newspaper content analysis. However, it gains further reach through collaboration with the SolPan consortium.

Keywords COVID-19, public debates, solidarity, qualitative research

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Published results

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