
Communicating COVID-19 on Twitter at supranational and national levels: The European Union and Portugal with “the ball in their court”

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Abstract: This article focuses on COVID-19 communication on Twitter at supranational and national levels, namely by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Portuguese prime minister, António Costa. A mixed-method approach, based on content, discourse, and rhetorical analysis, was employed. The results show that von der Leyen’s tweets focused on measures to combat COVID-19, while Costa’s tweets focused mainly on responsibility. In both cases, economic support and recovery was the second most frequently mentioned theme, while frames relating to solutions, causal relations, moral judgments, and problems were also emphasized. Von der Leyen tended to highlight the importance of vaccination, while Costa tended to highlight scientific expertise. Ethos was employed by the two leaders mainly through references to responsibility and fulfilment of duty. Pathos was employed to inspire mainly positive emotional responses—such as the impulse to action, feelings of support, desire for unity, and confidence, optimism, or calm—but also negative emotional responses, such as anxiety, apprehension, or concern and disappointment. Logos was employed mainly through reference to the numbers and science of COVID, use of stylistic devices, and exemplification.

Keywords: COVID-19, political communication, Ursula von der Leyen, António Costa, Twitter, government, European Union, Portugal

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