In liberal democracies, there is the expectation that the role of mass media is to provide swift and accurate information to the public – especially in times of crisis such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Risk communication is particularly challenging for journalists as they have to balance the circulation of precise information on dangers and the avoidance of fear-mongering. This presentation addresses the question of how the Covid-19 crisis has been covered in the Japanese media, primarily focusing on television news coverage of the public broadcaster NHK. This research project is based on the theoretical concept of ‘agenda-cutting’, which is rather novel in the field of communication studies. Agenda-cutting describes the phenomenon when a relevant societal issue is deliberately de-emphasized, entirely omitted or removed from a news agenda.

The presentation draws on a case study of the news coverage about the Covid-19 risks in Japan to examine tendencies and patterns for agenda-cutting. Thereby, the results of a content analysis are contrasted with epidemiological data. Overall, the preliminary findings suggest that the risks of a spread in Tokyo had been diminished in the news coverage ahead of the official postponement of the Olympic Games, which provides empirical evidence for the agenda-cutting hypothesis. Furthermore, this case study hints at general challenges of journalism in times of crisis, and it reveals the peculiar predicament of a semi-independent media organization divided between serving the public's demand for accurate information, on the one hand, and following a political agenda on the other hand.

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