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QUESTION; MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES ABOUT COVID 19

The mainstream media are traditional or established broadcasting or publishing outlet. The coronavirus is a fierce reminder of just how much we need credible journalism, especially in times of crisis. There’s been much to admire in the media’s coverage of the coronavirus crisis. Timely, accurate, high-profile reporting has helped people understand the danger of the virus and how to contain its spread through measures such as social distancing. To varying degrees, the coverage has also held authorities to account for their handling of the crisis, with President Trump under particular scrutiny after spending weeks dismissing the pandemic as “no big deal” and even a “hoax” before pivoting to claim that he knew it was a pandemic all along. But the media’s snapping to attention on coronavirus throws its coverage of the climate crisis into sharp relief. The press has never treated the climate story with anywhere near this level of attention or urgency.

A backlash against the media is stirring over the extensive coverage of coronavirus as the pandemic unfolds. Critics say news outlets are trading on fear for attention, and could set off a panic. They don’t think COVID-19 merits recent weeks’ wall to wall cover. The Guardian reports some psychologists are saying coronavirus coverage in the media is stoking anxiety and could “tip society into panic.” age.

Media coverage sets the agenda for public debate. While the news doesn’t necessarily tell us what to think, it tells us what to think about. In doing so, the news signals what issues merit our attention. Research has consistently shown that when issues receive extensive media coverage and are prominent in the news agenda, they also come to be seen as [more important](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/107769900408100209?casa_token=eSctI63JIFkAAAAA:7t9XLkZxcJO4KbMMBDotn3bK_yKLRTXOmkElSvtt5J4X57YrQmeyIq_qa88LJ7sL_V17Tsqp68-V2w) by members of the public. The current outbreak has been much more prominent in media coverage than recent epidemics, including Ebola. For example, a [Time Magazine study](https://time.com/5779872/coronavirus-ebola-news-coverage/) shows that there were 23 times more articles in English-language print news covering the coronavirus outbreak in its first month compared to the same time period for the Ebola epidemic in 2018.

According to Karin wahl-jorgen, she says “My own research suggests that fear has played a particularly vital role in coverage of the coronavirus outbreak. Since reports first started circulating about the new mystery illness on January 12, and up until February 13 2020, I have tracked reporting in major English-language newspapers around the world, using the LexisNexis UK database. This includes almost 100 high-circulation newspapers from around the world, which have collectively published 9,387 stories about the outbreak. Of these, 1,066 articles mention “fear” or related words, including “afraid”.

Such stories often used other frightening language – for example, 50 articles used the phrase “killer virus”. One article in [The Telegraph](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/24/coronavirus-fears-rise-chinese-cover-up-40-million-lockdown/) newspaper was typical of this fear-inducing language, in describing scenes on the ground in Wuhan shared on social media:

*Mask-wearing patients fainting in the street. Hundreds of fearful citizens lining cheek by jowl, at risk of infecting each other, in narrow hospital corridors as they wait to be treated by doctors in forbidding white hazmat suits. A fraught medic screaming in anguish.*

Many of the coronavirus stories getting shared the most on social media are packaged to drive fear rather than build understanding about the illness. Why it matters: Social media greases and amplifies dramatic headlines, while more functional or nuanced information gets squashed.

Western digital corporations and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Reddit) and their Chinese equivalents (WeChat, Weibo, Tencent and Toutiao) are at the heart of this crisis. These platforms act as facilitators and multipliers of COVID-19-related misinformation. This infodemic compromises outbreak response and increases public confusion about who and what information sources to trust; generates fear and panic due to unverified rumors and exaggerated claims; and promotes xenophobic and racist forms of digital vigilantism and scapegoating. Various unproven natural and traditional remedies were proffered as cures to both Ebola and COVID-19, such as drinks that contained mint and hot water and spices like saffron, ginger, garlic and turmeric that spread in Iran through Twitter. Same also spread in Nigeria through social media.

The question to ask today is how the COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered in the years, decades or centuries to come especially as social media has allowed us to remain so in contact even in the age of social distancing.

References

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