

COVID-19

AN INFORMATIVE GUIDE

Advice for journalists



PAHO



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Since coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread to most countries of the world and there is no cure or vaccine, information is a vital tool for encouraging people to take the available preventive measures to protect and save lives. In that context, the media must be ethical and responsible when reporting on COVID-19, since people will probably listen to their guidance.

This document offers tools to help journalists practice responsible coverage of the pandemic using evidence-based information. It also proposes ways to approach coverage and encourages journalists to provide advice and solutions that can help reduce health risks and save lives.

The priorities of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic are to save lives, protect health workers, flatten the epidemiological curve to slow the spread of disease, and prevent cases from overloading health systems so that lives will not be lost due to lack of access to needed care. PAHO supports the countries of the Region of the Americas in adopting the measures they deem necessary to tackle the pandemic.

Having clear, timely, and accurate information from reliable sources is vital for people in various situations during this pandemic. The information that is given must acknowledge uncertainty and help people protect themselves and prepare for different possible scenarios during the pandemic. This is essential for containing the spread of COVID-19 and the fear associated with it and mitigating its impact.

I. Important points

COVID-19 is a public health emergency of international concern and a global epidemic that has rapidly spread around the world with health, social, and economic repercussions.

The media play a key role in providing the public with clear, understandable information, while promoting behavior that allows people to protect their health and that of their loved ones.

By disseminating accurate information, the media can also minimize rumors and misinformation, helping reduce public anxiety and fears about this new threat.

The media can also help change behaviors to limit the spread of the disease and prevent an overburdening of health systems, which may have limited capacity for emergency treatment and intensive care.

Journalists have the power to tell stories and inspire people to act collectively. Solidarity among individuals, communities, and organizations will be needed to overcome this epidemic.



II. Infodemic: an information pandemic

The World Health Organization (WHO) believes that in addition to a pandemic, with COVID-19 the world faces what it calls an “infodemic.”

An infodemic is an overload of information on a problem that makes it harder to find a solution. During a health emergency, an infodemic can amplify mistakes, misinformation, and rumors. It can also hinder an effective response and create confusion and mistrust about the solutions or advice given to prevent the disease.

In that context, covering COVID-19 can be challenging for journalists. Moreover, since our understanding of the disease is evolving and because there is as yet neither a cure nor a vaccine, recommendations for prevention and control can change very rapidly. This creates additional challenges for journalists.

III. COVID-19 journalistic coverage should:

1. Be ethical and responsible.
2. Be socially responsible.
3. Refrain from being sensationalist or alarmist.
4. Communicate facts and truthful information on the disease.
5. Use reliable, scientific, truthful, and verified sources.
6. Quote scientists, researchers, public health professionals, academics, and specialists in other disciplines who can clarify public concerns about the situation.
7. Truthfully report on measures that help contain and/or mitigate the spread of the disease.
8. Report on the jobs performed by health workers and their situation, given their critical role in responding to the epidemic.
9. Report on patients recovering, communities taking measures to tackle the disease, or countries that have exemplary approaches.
10. Provide reporting that contributes to solutions.

IV. Journalists who cover COVID-19 should:

- Follow official recommendations on protecting their own health and that of interviewees.
- Practice the recommended physical distancing measures while covering the pandemic.
- Respect the work of health professionals.
- Respect the privacy of patients and avoid revealing their identities or providing detailed information on them without their consent.
- Be familiar with the basics of epidemiology.
- Take care not to amplify the voices of those who spread misinformation that adds to people's confusion, anxiety, and fears.
- Disseminate messages that counter the stigmatization of people affected by the disease.
- Refrain from spreading rumors and fake news.
- Seek innovative ways to cover the news and conduct interviews that avoid direct contact with patients, people with symptoms, or those in quarantine and their relatives.
- Avoid congregating outside health centers, homes, or residences, and stay out of restricted access areas.
- Avoid the use of background music that generates anxiety and fear.
- Avoid the use of photographs or videos that stigmatize or induce fear, such as only showing people wearing face masks, or images of health workers with personal protective equipment meant for Ebola in Africa, something that does not apply to COVID-19.



V. Journalists and their coverage of COVID-19 should:

- Encourage personal and community protection measures.
- Suggest activities to do during isolation, social or physical distancing, and lockdowns.
- Debunk myths about the disease.
- Promote stories of solidarity and goodwill.
- Explain complex public health concepts in a way the general public can understand.
- Educate the public about health.
- Avoid sensationalist language.
- Go beyond the numbers of cases and deaths to explain the context and give health advice to the population.
- Highlight the role of health workers.
- Be considerate of people who have lost a family member.
- Provide truthful information on where to find help and when to seek medical care.
- Direct people to links and reliable sources where they can get more information.
- Report on progress towards new vaccines and treatments.
- Fact-check stories from social media before publishing them.
- Provide advice for the most vulnerable and at-risk population.
- Quote national, state/provincial, and local authorities.
- Be one more partner in the collective response to the pandemic.





VI. How to cover the COVID-19 pandemic

Here are some suggestions for journalists covering COVID-19 in terms of content, style, and type of coverage.

CONTENT:

- **Avoid reporting that focuses on patient zero** (first case in the country) and that person's behavior or responsibility for spreading the disease. Such reporting encourages stigmatization.
- **Disseminate factual information.** Rumors and misinformation abound during outbreaks. Be sure to verify information and cite reliable official sources.
- **Focus on basic infection prevention measures,** the symptoms of COVID-19, and when and how to seek medical care.
- **Help people understand that social distancing** and other prevention measures may be needed for an extended period, and they should abide by them for as long as is necessary.
- **Emphasize protective measures.** As the epidemic progresses, more people will follow your coverage and may have concerns about certain protective measures. Remind them whenever you can. Be clear, though it may seem repetitive.
- **Acknowledge public fears.** It is normal for people to worry. Acknowledge their concerns and offer information on what people can do to protect themselves while caring for their own mental health and that of their loved ones.
- **Report when there is uncertainty, but only on what is known.** During an epidemic of a new disease there are many unknowns, such as whether people can transmit the virus before showing symptoms of disease. Inform the population on what it is known so far and what is still unknown. Clarify that the authorities and scientists are working to find the answers.
- **Think of the impact your reporting will have. Avoid fueling fear and stigmatization.** Facilitate an atmosphere in which people can discuss the disease and its repercussions openly, honestly, and constructively.
- **Explain the context around the facts.** Most members of the public do not know how a virus works in the body, how vaccines are produced, or how the immune system works. At times like this people are more willing to listen and learn.
- **Avoid stigmatizing individuals or populations.** Generally avoid labeling, stereotypes, and discriminatory treatment, particularly toward those who contract the disease and their loved ones. Such treatment can harm them and lead people to conceal their illness to avoid discrimination, preventing them from seeking care and practicing healthy behavior. Build trust and show

empathy towards those with the disease so that people can protect their safety and that of others.

- **Will the epidemic be controlled? What can we expect?** A pandemic does not last forever. It has a beginning, a peak, and a decline until it is controlled. When possible, end your story on an upbeat note.
- **Give advice and information that is useful** to different population groups—including persons with disabilities—to prepare for different scenarios. This includes, for example, having two weeks of food and their regular medications on hand in the event they are required to stay at home.
- **Stay well informed in order to effectively communicate real risks** and understand how your audience perceives the risk of COVID-19. Perception is highly personal. Be sure to effectively report on the level of risk for the population in order to promote the necessary changes in behavior and attitude so that people follow the recommended protection measures.
- **Report important controversies but avoid adding drama to an already stressful pandemic situation.** Become a source of information and knowledge on all aspects of the situation. Do not exaggerate the crisis; instead provide practical advice on how the audience can handle it. Do not distort the facts. Use facts and evidence. Listen to the voices that provide evidence-based information.
- **Keep yourself up-to-date.** The numbers are continuously changing and will vary at different times by region or country. The pandemic will evolve over time, meaning the methods and protocols to address it may also change. Be sure to find and report the latest numbers and measures taken, explain why they were taken, and always include public health recommendations.
- **Recognize that scenarios change quickly in these situations.** Scenarios change in emergencies and so do recommendations, but this does not mean that information is being mishandled.

STYLE:

- **Refrain from using headlines describing the disease as “fatal.”** Any disease can be fatal. In the context of a new emergency, this term could cause some people to panic and fail to react.
- **Be sure to use the correct name of the disease (COVID-19) and the virus (SARS-CoV-2),** rather than nicknames such as “the Wuhan coronavirus.” Naming a pandemic after a country leads to stigmatization and can harm trade and the economy.
- **Be realistic and non-sensationalist.** Use your skills as a storyteller. You can find examples from media coverage in other countries where the epidemic is more advanced and other kinds of measures have been implemented.
- **Be sure to always quote experts.** Quotes lend credibility and information to news reporting.
- **Translate technical jargon for your audience.** Public health experts and officials often use language that is hard for the general public to understand. Provide a glossary or clarify certain concepts for people—such as isolation, quarantine, and community transmission—to be sure they get the message.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Certain words can have a negative connotation and fuel stigmatizing attitudes. They can affect how people who may have the disease and their families and communities are perceived and treated. “Social Stigma Associated with COVID-19,” a guide prepared



by the WHO, UNICEF, and the Red Cross, recommends saying “people who have COVID-19” instead of “cases” or “victims.” It is better to refer to “people contracting the virus” rather than those “spreading the virus.” Positive language that stresses the efficacy of preventive measures and treatment is recommended.

- **Include visual material in your coverage.** Infographics and other graphic materials simplify understanding of complex subjects. If you use photographs, be careful with the images you choose and always think of the impact they may have on an audience that will not necessarily read the caption.

TRUTH, RUMORS, AND THEORIES:

- **Use reputable and official sources.** Misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories abound, making it essential to cite reliable sources such as the Ministry of Health of the country, or PAHO/WHO. Avoid non-experts expressing their personal opinions, as these may be no more than noise that minimizes or exaggerates the risks.
- **Refrain from repeating false theories not supported by science.** When erroneous information is repeated it can end up being perceived as true, which generates fear and anxiety in the population.
- **Investigate rumors and suspicious information.** For rumors, assess how serious they are, their source, and how widespread they are before denying them or repeating the erroneous information. Sometimes, denying a rumor that has not spread gives it unnecessary notoriety. If it is a minor matter, ignore it or just provide the correct information without mentioning the rumor.

- **Avoid telling the other side of the story** when it is not based on science or is ridiculous and not credible.
- **Avoid including myths or local remedies when reporting on treatments.** Use scientific, evidence-based sources in your coverage.

THE PROTAGONISTS OF YOUR STORIES:

- **Interview those on the front lines.** Government authorities, health workers, scientists, academics, virologists, infectious disease specialists, geneticists, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, people who have recovered and their relatives—these are the kinds of people who can add valuable information and perspectives to your stories.
- **Include thoughtful reflections.** Religious or community leaders, experts in various areas beyond the health sector, and famous people can provide insights into various aspects of social and economic life that may have been interrupted by the pandemic.
- **Tell stories of recovery and social achievements.** Stories about people working together for the common good rather than their own interests can give hope, raise spirits, and motivate people to carry on—e.g., preventing the spread of the virus or helping vulnerable people such as older adults buy groceries, take care of each other, or act together for mutual support and disease containment.
- **Do not focus only on high-risk groups.** People of all ages have been affected by COVID-19. Focusing on only some age groups can encourage others to let down their guard and neglect the

measures needed to protect themselves and others.

- **Give recognition to the caregivers of those who become ill and stay home.** Most people will recover and remain quarantined at home during their illness. Family members and friends will be key to their recovery.
- **Ethics. The subjects of your reporting have a right to privacy and confidentiality.** Respect their privacy. If their identity is revealed, they may be stigmatized. Some countries and institutions may require you to obtain written consent if you want to tell the stories of people who have COVID-19, particularly if you show photos or videos of them.
- **Explain to the audience why the story is important and why it should matter to them.**
- **Monitor social media for stories.** In times of social distancing and lockdown, social media can be a good place to find inspiring stories. Publicize uplifting stories and tell your own. But be sure to check their authenticity before sharing.
- **Keep your audience's interest.** Over time, coverage can feel more like a continuous update than a new story. Look for new and interesting events. If you find something inspiring, report it. Move from a pessimistic approach to an optimistic one.



VII. Protecting the health of journalists

- Seek virtual or telephone options for interviews in order to reduce the risk of exposure.
- If you are over 60 years old or have underlying conditions, consider refraining from coverage that could expose you to the virus.
- Report on your company's social distancing plans during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Consider what equipment you need to work from home.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes with unwashed hands.
- If you are sick or have symptoms, or if someone in your household has the virus, stay home.
- Tell your supervisors and colleagues about the risks and concerns when covering the pandemic.
- If you are going to cover a city or area that is on lockdown, be sure to have a contingency plan.
- Avoid congregating outside health facilities.
- If you are authorized to enter a health facility, and it is strictly necessary, protect yourself by following all the recommendations of the health workers.
- Stay at least one meter away from patients and avoid close contact.
- Be sure to wash your hands with soap and water before, during, and after being in a place where the virus is circulating.
- Clean any used equipment with antimicrobial wipes followed by disinfection, and wash your hands.
- During press conferences, follow the physical distancing recommendations established by health officials.
- Always follow the recommendations of health officials and health professionals.
- Masks are recommended for people with symptoms, caregivers, and health professionals. If you use one, be sure to put it on and remove it properly, and to wash your hands.
- Find ways to collaborate and share sources and stories with journalists and media in other regions.
- Monitor your own health. If you develop symptoms, stay home and call your country's COVID-19 number or contact your physician or healthcare provider.





VIII. Sources of health information

- National, state, or local ministries of health
- World Health Organization (WHO)
- Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)
- National authorities in other government sectors
- Governmental centers of excellence in health
- National reference laboratories
- Institutes of public health
- Universities
- Schools of public health
- National and international institutions investigating the virus and the disease
- Academic reports and papers
- Research hospitals
- Research institutions
- Academic publications
- Web sites with academic papers:
 - » OPS Coronavirus: <https://covid19-evidence.paho.org>
 - » Pubmed <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>
 - » Science direct: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/>



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- CPJ Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus outbreak
<https://cpj.org/es/2020/03/aviso-de-seguridad-del-cpj-la-cobertura-del-brote-.php>
- Tip sheet: Covering the Coronavirus Epidemic Effectively without Spreading Misinformation
<https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/03/02/tipsheet-covering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-effectively-without-spreading-misinformation/>
- Gabriel García Márquez Foundation
<https://fundaciongabo.org/es/etica-periodistica/recursos/coronavirus-10-virtudes-del-periodismo-responsable-ante-la-pandemia>
- Social stigma associated with COVID-19. A guide to preventing and addressing social stigma
<https://www.paho.org/es/documentos/estigmatizacion-social-asociada-covid-19>

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