Media Empowerment for
a Democratic Sri Lanka (MEND)
Program

COVERING
COVID-19:
HANDBOOK
FOR JOURNALISTS

COLLECTION OF TOOLS, TECHNIQUES,
RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES FOR
JOURNALISTS COVERING THE
CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK. INCLUDES
TOOLS FOR FACT-CHECKING
MISINFORMATION AND HOAXES

March 2020

With an explosion of news about COVID-19
virus everywhere around us, it becomes imperative for
reporters and editors – who bring this news to the
end consumers – to be able to sift through the clutter, recognize
the fact from the fake, and convey news in a manner that
is appropriate, accurate, sensitive and palatable. The news
around the virus, the health implications, the cures, have taken
misinformation and fake news to unimaginable levels.
People wanting to save themselves from this virus are resorting
to any measure – fuelled by rumours and half baked fake news on
preventive measures and cures. A case in point: more than
40 people consumed toxic alcohol in Iran, believing in
misinformation that alcohol will help prevent the coronavirus
infection. Clearly, covering COVID-19 has become
a huge challenge already since the journalists are faced
with a pandemic that is still unravelling, and a
universe that is responding – sometimes
illogically — to the viral crisis.

GETTING STORY IDEAS RIGHT

In times like these, one of the significant challenges you will face as a journalist is finding good story ideas. There are millions of story ideas, but which idea will make your story stand apart? Here are some guidelines you can follow:

Talk to primary sources: hospitals, doctors, medical centres, people who have been treated successfully. They will be able to provide valuableinsights on what is happening.

Look for leads in a viral story: There are always enough leads in a story that is trending on social media that you could follow up and make your own.

Listen intently to conversations: Sometimes great story ideas come unintended – from a simple conversation with a caregiver, health professional, or even an administrator.

GETTING YOUR SOURCES RIGHT

With a surfeit of information all around us, it is important for journalists and reporters to keep their head above the sea of misinformation and fake news – which, in times like these, are flooding social media. The safest, most accurate information is available in the authorized websites listed below. Whichever country you are in, make sure you refer to the most authoritative website and the data therein.

World Health Organization

Centers For Disease Control and Prevention

Coronavirus Resource Centre at John Hopkins University and Medicine

Centers For Disease Control and Prevention

Apart from this, The Society of Professional Journalists (https://www.spj.org/) has listed a few more resources. Some of them are:

Global Health Security Index, assessment of health security capabilities in 195 countries

US Department of Health and Human Services with a section dedicated to Coronavirus

US Government website on country-specific travel risks

The NewsMarket, Inc. (https://www.thenewsmarket.com/) for videos, and supporting visuals.

MPassport.com, a database of English-speaking doctors in 180 countries

*An alert: There are many graphics and so-called maps that are In circulation on the web – that has the official logo of one, or many of the above organizations. Remember they can still be fake – with the official logos of these organizations put there on purpose – just to mislead, and lend credibility to fake news. Thorough investigation advised.

GETTING YOUR FACTS RIGHT

A humungous volume of news makes it way into social media, and even the mainstream media – that talks of remedies to combat the virus – all of which are untrue, or misleading. Another substantial part of this news is also about the spread of the virus, the nature of the illness and data on mortality – many of which are false, misrepresented and designed to created panic. Here is what you can do:

Make sure your facts are watertight. The virus is still unknown and unpredictable. So make sure you have authorities backing up what you include in the story

The number of doctors and researchers specializing on COVID-19 is not many. Make sure the experts you pick up have an impeccable knowledge of the virus and the condition.

Be wary of rumours, unsubstantiated theories, and half-truths. Here are a few that are doing rounds – gives you an idea on fake news that you should be aware of:

■ There is a buzz that tobacco can cure coronavirus. This is not true. Health Analytics Asia has established that the claim is false and misleading. Read more about it here: https://www.ha-asia.com/no-findings-show-tobacco-can-cure-coronavirus/

■ There are rumours in China that garlic can prevent coronavirus infection. WHO has already debunked this. Although garlic may have some antimicrobial properties and is generally considered good for health, it does not protect people from COVID-19.

■ There were unspecific reports that having a hot shower can prevent the coronavirus infection. WHO website has clearly debunked this report saying " Taking a hot bath will not prevent you from catching COVID-19. Your normal body temperature remains around 36.5°C to 37°C, regardless of the temperature of your bath or shower"

■ There were also reports that extreme hot temperatures or cold temperatures can kill the virus, and prevent infection. The WHO website has denied this claim also. It says "From the evidence so far, the COVID-19 virus can be transmitted in ALL AREAS, including areas with hot and humid weather."

■ There were also unsubstantiated reports that mosquito bites can transmit the virus, The WHO website denies this. It says "To date there has been no information nor evidence to suggest that the new coronavirus could be transmitted by mosquitoes. The new coronavirus is a respiratory virus which spreads primarily through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose."

■ There were false claims that aspirin can treat COVID-19.

■ There is a section of people in India who are propagating that cow dung and cow urine can ward off coronavirus. This is completely false and baseless.

■ There are number of misleading photos circulating on social media with a claim that poultry in Sri Lanka was infected by the COVID-19. The claim is false; Sri Lankan authorities said the coronavirus has not been discovered in poultry.

■ Some viral social media posts claim that colloidal silver — silver particles in liquid — can prevent or treat the novel coronavirus. This is false; US regulators say it is not safe for use against any disease.

■ Some viral posts on social media claim that holding your breath for more than 10 seconds is an effective test for the novel coronavirus, and that drinking water regularly can prevent the disease. The claims are false; the WHO has said there was no evidence to support these claims.

■ Multiple posts on social media claim ash produced by a volcano eruption in the Philippines can prevent the COVID-19. The claim is misleading. The WHO has said that there is no evidence that volcanic ash can destroy COVID-19.

■ Read more about the myths around on the WHO website https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters

GETTING YOUR REPORTING RIGHT

The International Journalists' Network – IJNet, a project of ICFJ, has put together a list of guidelines for journalists who are covering the COVID-19 stories. Here are some of them:

Understand the mood on the ground — then translate it into your work: Before you begin writing your report, or even capturing the images, make sure you get the story right on the ground. You can get a sense of this by taking to a cross-section of people on the ground. Research, re-check and then report.

Watch your headlines: Choose headlines that are accurate and not that scream for attention, or misleading. Remember, as journalists, we have to convey what we have to -precisely without frills.

Remember - not all figures are accurate: In a developing story like COVID-19, data can be inaccurate, and sometimes misleading. When conveying data, make sure you convey this uncertainty of the data to your reader. As data changes continue updating the story. Clearly mention the date and when was the data collected for the story.

Don't neglect stories that aren't exciting: Not all stories that you write will be the biggest stories that you will ever write. You will need to look at stories that are not exciting, but are very important nevertheless. For example, in this case of COVID-19, you could do a story on the right way to wash hands, and how to do it effectively. In an evolving story like this, it is important not to take your eyes off the smaller, seemingly insignificant stories.

Set your limits: Your stories will come out great if you have had the time to do a great story. Don't take too many stories on your plate. You need to step away, and approach stories with a fresh perspective. Don't rush and don't do too many stories. It is ok to say no – for your sake.

GETTING IMAGES AND VIDEOS VERIFIED ACCURATELY

When covering a pandemic like COVID-19, you will come across many images and videos that would seemingly look authentic, and accurate. Do a thorough check. There are tools and techniques available to do the same. Here are some of them:

VERIFYING IMAGES
Google Images Search: Use Google Image Search to search by image. You will get earlier instances of the image that have appeared on the web before. You need to have a Chrome Extension called "Search by image" (by Google).
RevEye (A Google Chrome Extension) – Reverse Image Search: Install this Google Chrome Extension on your Chrome Browser. This one extension allows you to do a reverse image search across different image search engines with one click.
TinEye - Reverse Image Search: Another image search engine that replicates Google Reverse Image Search. Available at tineye.com
BING - Reverse Image Search: One of the reverse image search sites available at bing.com
Yandex - Reverse Image Search: One more reverse image search engine that gives you instances where the same image has been used in some other context, or the same.

VERIFYING IMAGES – EXIF / METADATA
Jeffrey Friedl's Image Metadata Viewer: EXIF or Exchangeable Image File is the footprint or record left behind by a digital camera. It can use the camera model, lens, aperture, shutter speed, ISO, date, time, and even GPS if it is turned on in the camera. Available at http://exif.regex.info/exif.cgi

VERIFYING VIDEOS
Fake Video News Debunker by InVID: InVID is a Google Chrome Extension. It helps you breakdown a video into keyframes – each of which can be used to do a reverse image search, to investigate the context of the video.
Watch Frame by Frame: This handy tool allows you to watch a video frame by frame. This helps you investigate if a video has been compromised or digitally altered. Available at www.watchframebyframe.com
YouTube Data Viewer: A tool that gives you 4 thumbnails from a video. It shows you the upload date and the upload. Works only with YouTube videos.

GETTING MAPS RIGHT

Though maps are visual representations of any event, this can go wrong if the context of the map is different, or if the highlights of the map has been mispresented. For example, An image of air traffic and flight routes around the world was misrepresented as the movement of Wuhan residents from China to most parts of the world. The map not only went viral on social media but also picked up by some international newspapers.

First Draft have published a checklist for journalists that would help them decode a map when they see it first time. These are the questions that the journalist should have when reading a map and the information around it to determine its trustworthiness and reliability.

Have you **read the headline**, description, legend, source, and any other labels?	Who made the map and why? Have you tried to **reverse image searching** to see if it appeared online before?	If the map shows data, what **kind of data** is the map representing? Where did the data come from and is it reliable?	Check the sizes of countries, counties or anything else. Are they of **wrong size or distorted?**	How was the map designed? Does it use **symbols or areas?** Are there problems with how the design communicates the story?

You can read more at this link:
https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/from-coronavirus-to-bushfires-misleading-maps-are-distorting-reality/

GETTING YOUR LANGUAGE RIGHT

Don't add to the state of panic that is already there: Avoid using terms that would exacerbate panic. Remember you are addressing a huge group that is already panic-stricken. Adding to that panic should be avoided, Use less adjectives and focus more on the details.	**Use data that accurately describe the situation:** Saying "about half of the people in the building were affected" is less palatable than "312 people of the thousand in the building were affected"	**Right choice of words:** Refrain from using subjective descriptors like "deadly" "scary" "killer" etc. While the current pandemic is, by some logic, all of these, it is a good idea to avoid using them explicitly.	**Be sensitive to those affected:** As WHO advised, don't refer to those affected as "COVID-19 cases" or "Victims" or "COVID-19 families". They are "people who are being treated for COVID-19" or "people who are recovering from the infection". Avoid making them mere statistics.	**Do a hygiene check for your stories:** Run a thorough check for partisan spin-offs, unintended extrapolations and needless biases. Check if you are inadvertently carrying popular, yet unsubstantiated theories, unproven or unscientific claims.

THE LAST WORD

Stay safe. There's no story worth your life. As a journalist, while your responsibility is to bring the latest and most authentic news to your readers and viewers, remember personal safety is paramount. While interviewing people and visiting sites where you can run the risk of infection, stay safe.

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