

HOW JOURNALISTS AROUND THE WORLD ARE COVERING THE CORONAVIRUS

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THE CORONAVIRUS IS SHAPING UP TO BE A MULTIFACETED CRISIS for US journalism. Mixed messages coming from President Trump and other administration officials—and boosted by Trump sycophants in the right-wing mediasphere—have muddied the picture we've tried to present to readers and viewers. Public-health restrictions, including newsroom closures, have imposed limitations on the practice of reporting, and—along with the worsening economic picture—cast fresh doubt on some news organizations' financial viability. The US media is not alone in facing such problems; as with the virus itself, these challenges are global, but subject to important local variation. This morning, I looked into the media response in four other countries: the UK, Italy, France, and South Korea.

Last week, reports circulated that the UK was taking a radically different approach to the virus than many other countries; it would seek to suppress it, we were told, but not entirely, in the hope that less-vulnerable segments of the population might build up collective, or “herd,” immunity. As Ed Yong, a science writer at *The Atlantic* (who suspended his book leave to boost the magazine's coronavirus coverage), wrote yesterday, British government experts “certainly made it sound,” when talking to the press, “like the government was deliberately aiming for 60 percent of the populace to fall ill. Keep calm and carry on... and get COVID-19.” Yet this was not the case; the UK wasn't offering the world a novel approach to the virus as much as a case study, as one expert told Yong, in “how not to communicate during an outbreak.” On Sunday, Matt Hancock, Britain's health minister, clarified in the *Sunday Telegraph*—a conservative paper whose sister title used to count Hancock's boss, Boris Johnson, as an employee—that herd immunity is not part of Britain's plan, but rather a potential scientific outcome associated with it.

Hancock's article initially was locked behind a paywall, adding grist to broader complaints, including among journalists, that Johnson's government has communicated vital public-health information in a selective way to journalists and publications that it likes. (In other grist, Robert Peston, a prominent journalist with ITV, reported over the weekend that Britain was planning to quarantine older residents for months in a “wartime-style” mobilization, before we heard any official word to that effect.) Johnson's office denied the charges of favoritism; still, yesterday, it changed course, making Johnson (or a senior surrogate) available for daily briefings on the crisis going forward. Not that everyone is happy about that. Simon Jenkins, a columnist for *The Guardian*, wrote yesterday that, given Johnson's fraught history with the truth, “If ever an accident was waiting to happen, this is it.”

ICYMI: Panic Time

In his first daily briefing yesterday, Johnson recommended that Brits avoid non-essential contact, but stopped short of implementing the more severe, compulsory measures we've seen in other countries. In Europe, Italy led the way on that front when it entered lockdown last week. As with that of its British counterpart, however, the communications strategy of the Italian government has been called into question. Last week, Mattia Ferraresi, of the Italian newspaper *Il Foglio*, wrote for *Foreign Policy* that recent political instability in the country has created “a climate in which politicians weaponize every bit of information for political gain,” and that the coronavirus crisis hasn't been immune to that trend. Unofficial updates—including a draft lockdown order—have leaked to the press in a haphazard way, heightening public panic. (At one point, Giuseppe Conte, Italy's prime minister, inadvertently spoke of the importance of sending “equivocal messages,” when he meant to say “unequivocal.”) Politicians aren't the only problem; according to Ferraresi, “media-savvy—and sometimes publicity-hungry—medical experts” have also undermined trust by quarreling about the virus in public. Lately, Ferraresi writes, “Italians have been more divided about their preferred virologists than they are about soccer teams.”

Through the noise—and despite the forced closure of major newsrooms—journalists in Italy have kept plugging away; as Nick Squires, Rome correspondent for the *Telegraph*, told *Press Gazette* recently, “The only people who seem to be working more than before are journalists and doctors.” Last week, officials ruled that newsstands are an essential service, and so can stay open through the lockdown. Still, restrictions on nonessential movement have made reporting harder than it is normally; as Alessio Perrone, a freelancer based in Milan, told me last week, “Some go-to places are not options anymore because they're empty now.” Increasingly, some newspapers—*L'Eco di Bergamo*, for instance—are filling their pages with obituaries.

Late last week, more than 30 French journalists based in Italy wrote an open letter home, warning that the French public hadn't yet grasped the severity of the situation. Since then, the French government has moved to shutter schools and some businesses. Last night, President Emmanuel Macron declared a lockdown; going forward, citizens, including journalists, will face similar checks on their movement as in Italy. Already, French media have taken steps to curb the spread of the virus—TV shows have been canceled, or filmed without a live audience; panels have fewer guests, in order to respect social-distancing guidelines; nonessential staff are working from home; and sound technicians have made changes so as to avoid having to use lapel mics. As in America, meanwhile, major outlets, including *Le Monde*, have made their virus coverage free. Other outlets are offering educational resources for kids who can't go to school.

National and regional differences aside, there are clear similarities in the ways news organizations in different democracies are responding to the virus threat. As human beings, we stand before it as equals; as journalists, we all rely on our governments to share clear, accurate information as often as possible. On the latter score, one country in particular—South Korea—has won praise in recent weeks for the transparency of its approach; the efficacy and thoroughness of its response has won plaudits, too. Clearly, these virtues are linked; combating a pandemic isn't just a matter of medical technology, but of informational hygiene. As Ishaan Tharoor of the *Washington Post* writes this morning in a piece on South Korea, “In many democracies farther west, such civic awareness and public trust is far less assured.”

Below, more on the coronavirus:

- **The view from a non-democracy:** For the *New York Times*, Javier C. Hernández reports that “in a rare challenge to the ruling Communist Party,” Chinese journalists are fighting back against censorship of their work, and have been “buoyed by an outpouring of support from the public and widespread calls for free speech.” To circumvent the censors, journalists have resorted to such measures as sharing tips with their rivals, and have been aided by Chinese internet users’ preservation efforts.
- **The latest:** Yesterday was another mind-bending news day in the US: markets plummeted, with the S&P 500 recording its worst day since 1987; the Supreme Court postponed oral arguments, the first time it has done so since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918; states continued to impose restrictions on residents, including calls for a curfew in New Jersey; and Trump advised people nationwide to avoid groups of more than 10 people. Amid the chaos, the Democratic primaries in Arizona, Florida, and Illinois seem set to go ahead as planned—but today’s fourth scheduled contest, in Ohio, is off after the state’s governor, Mike DeWine, postponed it at the last minute. A judge rejected DeWine’s request to delay the primary, but DeWine opted to overrule his verdict.
- **Changing tunes:** Last week, I wrote that numerous personalities on Fox News were downplaying the threat of the coronavirus, but that that might start to change as Trump changed his own tune on the same. Since then, the *Washington Post*’s Paul Farhi and Sarah Ellison report, the tone on the network “has quickly shifted” to a more urgent posture (for the most part). Tucker Carlson—who acknowledged the threat earlier than many of his colleagues (though not necessarily for good reasons)—reportedly urged Trump in person to take the virus seriously.
- **DC distancing:** Starting yesterday, the White House Correspondents’ Association is asking its members to work remotely where possible, and reducing the capacity of the White House briefing room to accommodate social-distancing measures. (CNN’s Betsy Klein shared photos of the new arrangement.) And the Radio and Television Correspondents’ Association issued similar guidance to members covering Congress, where social distancing will affect gaggles with senators, among other things.
- **In it together:** Stefanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media, writes for *Nieman Lab* that newsrooms across the US have been working together to boost their coverage of the coronavirus; at least 16 news organizations in Oregon, for example, are sharing and cross-promoting their virus stories at the suggestion of Les Zaitz, editor of the *Malheur Enterprise* and the *Salem Reporter*. (For a fun distraction, CJR’s Alexandria Neason interviewed Zaitz, in 2018, about his role in the Netflix series *Wild Wild Country*.)
- **The digital divide:** Tony Romm reports, for the *Post*, that school closures are exacerbating a recurrent problem—that some kids have much better access to the internet than others. The coronavirus, Romm writes, is “raising the question of whether the US government and the telecom industry should have done more to cure the country’s digital divide—well before a pandemic gripped the nation.”

- **In brief:** The London edition of *Time Out* is changing its name to *Time In* as it pledges to continue bringing residents “the best of London, even if you’re at home.” Facilities staff at *BuzzFeed* are looking after office plants while everyone else works from home. And contestants on the German edition of *Big Brother* still have no idea that a pandemic is sweeping the world—but will find out live on air tonight.

Other notable stories:

- For CJR, Mary Cuddehe reports that the expansion of 5G wireless may interfere with aspects of the weather forecast, since they exist in adjacent frequencies. 5G “could, according to federal agencies and meteorologists worldwide, obstruct the collection of atmospheric data,” Cuddehe writes. As Jordan Gerth, a research meteorologist, tells Cuddehe, “You can’t put a nightclub next to a retirement community or a nursery, right?”
- In Illinois, Steve Stadelman, a former TV news anchor who is now a Democratic state senator, introduced legislation that would mandate a local-news task force to propose fixes for the state’s journalism crisis. The task force would include lawmakers, industry representatives, and educators. Northwestern’s Local News Initiative has more.
- Yesterday, the guild representing staffers at *The Columbian*, a newspaper in Washington state, said on Twitter that management at the paper laid off three employees while negotiations over a union contract were ongoing. The guild pledged to fight the decision.
- Earlier this month, police in Algeria arrested Khaled Drareni, a journalist who has been active in the country’s long-running pro-democracy protest movement, on charges including “undermining national unity.” Drareni told Human Rights Watch that he believes that his email and a Facebook page that he runs were hacked while he was in detention.
- And the gaming-news site *Kotaku* formalized a policy giving staffers who play games after work in order to review them an equivalent amount of time off. “Work is work,” Stephen Totilo, the site’s editor in chief, writes, “and we should always recognize it as such, even if the work involves playing *Animal Crossing* before it’s out.”

ICYMI: Why did Matt Drudge turn on Donald Trump?

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