

Tips for Reporting on Pandemics

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Stay safe. Be prepared. Check facts. Breathe.

Health pandemics are fast-moving news events that concern mass populations. Unlike disasters or tragedies, the impact is not confined to a single location, or a group of victims. The potential for trauma exposure is present, yet unpredictable. Communities and individuals can experience trauma from loss of loved ones, from being unable to access health care, from forced quarantine or isolation, and from associated events such as witnessing people being forcibly removed from their homes or other drastic measures taken by authorities to contain the virus (for example, authorities welding the doors of quarantined individuals in the early days of the crisis in Wuhan). There may be other trauma exposure events that directly or indirectly occur as a result of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on communities can be so sudden and shocking that general resilience is tested. People who are not directly affected may still engage in psychologically unsafe behaviour, such as fighting over resources or panic travelling in order to return to family and friends, or ignoring social distancing requirements. People who are already under significant stress, or have prior mental or physical health conditions, may experience heightened symptoms.

For reporters, media practitioners, editors, fact checkers, content moderators and all those covering the COVID-19 story, both the story itself and the logistics of covering it are changing daily, and in some cases hourly. In the initial outbreak period, reporters were often reporting from location at the centre of an outbreak, leading to a potential compromise of their own personal safety. As more and more countries go into lockdown to prevent community spread, journalists need to discover home-based ways to find and report on stories, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection - not to mention a sense not being "on" the story itself, since news practitioners know the importance of being on the scene whenever possible. In addition, the fast-moving nature of the story means that decisions made with the best information at the time can lead to unforeseen consequences, or can become out of date and inaccurate quite rapidly. This requires relentless fact-checking, which can exacerbate stress for media practitioners. Content moderators and other online editors are also overwhelmed with information and must navigate the need for accuracy and responsiveness.

Tips on covering a pandemic

BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT

If you are physically attending a scene, ensure you have as much protective equipment as necessary for the assignment. This includes, but is not limited to, gloves, masks, wipes (for your equipment) and hand sanitiser, or soap and a towel.

Try to get as much information as possible about the environment you are entering. Assume that anyone you visit may be, knowingly or not, carrying the virus.

Talk to your editor or manager if you do not feel comfortable with the protective equipment available to you.

Those working online and in isolation – plan for breaks. Working from home means that personal time can get eaten up. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and you need to plan for this new way of working. Identify your social support – write down a list of times when you can have virtual check ins.

DURING THE ASSIGNMENT

In the field, remain vigilant about personal protection from surfaces or being in close proximity to others. Avoid “news scrums” whenever possible and ensure that your equipment is wiped clean as soon as possible afterwards, even if it doesn't come into direct contact with others.

Interviewing people affected by the virus – either online or in person – comes with its own set of specific challenges. People who have been diagnosed with the virus are likely to be experiencing extreme anxiety. In addition, they are likely to be forced into isolation from their loved ones, and this could lead to unexpected levels of distress and also the loss of important emotional regulating functions such as physical contact with loved ones. Therefore, interviewing should follow the basic principles of trauma-informed reporting, including the following:

- Ensure consent is given for the interview, and provide as much information as possible about where the interview might appear.
- Conduct interviews through distance tools (video conferencing) when possible. If you are in the same location as your interview subject, keep your physical distance. Compensate with more attention to eye-contact and other signs of connection and respect.
- Ask them to talk about what they want to tell you, rather than focusing only on the information you are looking for.
- Ask them to describe how they are managing, or what steps they are taking to look after themselves. Helping them draw these elements to conscious attention can create protective factors for an interviewee.
- End the interview by making sure there isn't anything else the person wants to say, that they are returning or staying in a safe environment, and providing your contact details for follow-up.

Look for non-obvious angles

Big stories often end up with a number of common narratives that need to be followed up and reported on. In pandemics, these include:

- A running toll of diagnoses, recoveries and deaths
- Celebrity infections
- Healthcare access issues (including rationing)
 - Quarantining and its consequences
 - Community panic
 - Conflicting health advice
 - Political responses
 - Economic responses
 - Wellbeing and resilience

While these are important, keep an eye and ear out for the unexpected stories that you might otherwise miss if you decide in advance what the story is likely to be. Be open to noticing, and reporting on, the moments of humour or human kindness connections that are also on display at times of community stress. This is likely to increase your sense of control over the work you are doing from day to day, and give you a greater sense of creativity; both important elements of psychological resilience.

Check your facts

While all ethical news professionals check their facts, covering pandemics requires a greater vigilance and a willingness to return to previous reports and update them with new information when required. This is particularly true of health advice; which can change quickly and result in your published story being wrong, even within a few hours. Given that the community are making decisions based on public information, it is important to ensure that all accessible content is as accurate as possible, in an ongoing way.

Breathe/relax/eat well/self-massage

Important psychological protective responses to trauma involve activating what is called the parasympathetic nervous system. These are the functions that we engage when we are relaxed. Signs your body is in parasympathetic nervous system is functioning well is your ability to engage in laughter, slow or normal breathing, and digestion. If you notice you are short of breath, startle easy or are not hungry, these are indications that your sympathetic nervous system is dominating.

This is normal in the middle of stress, but there are simple things you can do to help your system regulate:

- Stop regularly and take a couple of deep breaths. Make sure the exhale lasts longer than the inhale.
- Self-massage or even just gently slap down your body with your hands. This will stimulate the peripheral nerves.
- Watch a funny video or meme.
- Eat something nourishing, even if you aren't hungry.

AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT

Make sure you get a chance to “switch off” the story; don’t spend your downtime scrolling Twitter or the news wires. You can catch up again when you start your next shift.

Create as much of a normal routine as possible. If you normally go to the gym, exercise from your room or home at around the same time of day. Watch your favourite TV shows. Continue the practices of parasympathetic system activation – breathing, relaxing, eating well and finding opportunities to laugh. Write out a daily schedule. Order helps us feel a sense of control, which helps our wellbeing.

Connect with your loved ones. If you can’t do that in person due to being isolated or quarantined (or a long way away), do so via phone or video conferencing.

Connect with colleagues who are covering the same or similar stories. Share your experiences and listen to theirs. Peer and social support is vital. Find ways to do it online and as always, be sure to inject some humour and kindness.