

The Media Fail Miserably at Coronavirus Coverage



By Alex Berezow, PhD and — February 21, 2020

Today, the only thing reliable about the collective media – both American and international – is how unreliable they are. Even on vital issues, like the coronavirus, they succumb to sensationalism and conspiracy theories. Is it any wonder, then, that more people are turning away?



Credit: Cogiati / Wikipedia [1]

McClatchy, a prominent U.S. newspaper chain more than 160 years old, has filed for bankruptcy. This has occurred during our era of “fake news” – a time in which the media say that the public needs fact-based, honest reporting now more than ever.

So why are the media still struggling? Because we aren’t getting fact-based, honest reporting. From politics to public health, the media are presenting a highly distorted, exaggerated version of reality.

We specialize in public health, so we will focus there. The single biggest topic today is the coronavirus outbreak. People are rightly concerned. Yet, instead of acting as guides that can walk the public through a confusing landscape, the media are guilty of spreading sensationalist nonsense.

Take [Bloomberg](#) [2] and [The Guardian](#) [3], for instance, both of which just reported that about two-thirds of the planet could become infected by coronavirus. That hypothetical number came from an

epidemiologist in Hong Kong.

Here's the truth: Any projection about what coronavirus is going to do in the future is little better than wide-eyed speculation. Previous coronavirus outbreaks followed very different trajectories.

SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) appeared suddenly in 2002 and soon disappeared. Ten years later, MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) emerged and stuck around. A handful of cases still occur each year.

Given how far the Wuhan coronavirus has spread already, it is reasonable to conclude that it might continue, especially in poor countries with inadequate healthcare. But it's also equally valid to conclude that China will get the outbreak under control and the virus will stop dead in its tracks inside wealthy countries. Or, the virus could become seasonal, like influenza.

The truth is that we just don't know. What we do know is this: Globally, [influenza](#) [4] infects hundreds of millions of people each year and kills 300,000 to 500,000, giving a case-fatality rate of about 0.1%. Even though the Wuhan coronavirus is currently thought to have a case-fatality rate of 2% (which would make it 20 times deadlier), it's unlikely that it will rack up a similar annual death toll because – at least for the time being – it is not going to infect hundreds of millions of people.

If the media want to be responsible, therefore, they will put the coronavirus in the context of other deadly diseases – then remind people to get a flu shot.

But that's not what we got. Instead, we got xenophobia and blatant racism. According to [U.S. News & World Report](#) [5], a French newspaper described the coronavirus as “The Yellow Peril,” and the widely renowned German weekly *Der Spiegel* ran a cover story titled “Made in China,” which used the virus as an excuse to denounce globalization.

Not to be outdone by its continental counterparts, the UK's [Daily Mail](#) [6] played a large role in circulating the myth that the Wuhan coronavirus was caused by a woman eating a bat. However, as [Foreign Policy](#) [7] notes, the video took place in Palau, and bats are not eaten in Wuhan. Despite being unambiguously debunked, the Daily Mail story is still posted.

Also still posted is another debunked story published by the [Washington Times](#) [8] that said the Wuhan coronavirus may be a clandestine biological weapon. This conspiracy theory is based on the fact that Wuhan hosts a [biological safety level 4 \(BSL-4\) laboratory](#) [9], similar to the one that exists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. These labs study dangerous microbes; they do not engineer them. Yet, [Fox News's Tucker Carlson](#) [10] just repeated the myth.

The moral of the story is clear: Even during a legitimate public health crisis, much of the media are not just unreliable but actively spreading misinformation. Indeed, one [study](#) [11] showed that nearly half of the top 100 most viral health stories in 2018 were at least partially misleading.

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[1]

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[2] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-13/coronavirus-could-infect-two-thirds-of-globe-researcher-says>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/11/coronavirus-expert-warns-infection-could-reach-60-of-worlds-population>

[4] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3278149/>

[5] <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-02-07/how-the-global-media-covered-stories-about-the-coronavirus-outbreak>

[6] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7920573/Revolting-footage-shows-Chinese-woman-eating-bat-scientists-link-coronavirus-animal.html>

[7] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/27/dont-blame-bat-soup-for-the-wuhan-virus/>

[8] <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/24/virus-hit-wuhan-has-two-laboratories-linked-chines/>

[9] <https://www.livescience.com/china-lab-meets-biosafety-levels-new-coronavirus.html>

[10] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2020/02/20/cell-phones-cancer-and-coronavirus-tucker-carlson-spreads-conspiracy-theories-14584>

[11] <https://healthfeedback.org/the-most-popular-health-articles-of-2018-a-scientific-credibility-review/>