A short history of pandemic coverage on the Internet: SARS, H1N1 and MERS
by Will Mari

Abstract
This short history of previous online pandemic news coverage (of SARS, H1N1, MERS, c. 2003–2012) draws on Pew Research Center data and then-contemporary primary sources, including meta-journalistic analysis, to explore continuities and divergences to the present and our ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Numerous trends, including a cycle of neglect and panic, emerged on the Internet in the 2000s, and have become exacerbated over time. Other, more positive trends, such as more interactive and helpfully mediated/curated access to health experts, have also emerged. This study provides important context for our current moment.

Contents

Introduction
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) c. 2003
H1N1 (“swine flu”) c. 2009
Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) c. 2012
Conclusion

Introduction

During previous pandemics, earlier eras of online journalism covered outbreaks in similar ways to today, but with some key distinctions that are worth reflecting on.

One important concept at the outset that helps us understand coverage of the current pandemic is the slowing of “Internet time,” as Dave Karpf described so well in a 2019 issue of Social Media + Society. “The Internet seems to be stabilizing, and the pace of change seems to be slowing down,” he observed, so much so that “the Internet of 2019 is a lot more like the Internet of 2012 than I had predicted“ [1]. Karpf, whose insightful research on “a history of the digital future” as portrayed in Wired has helped to inspire my own, believed that the perceived pace of change was an important part of that story, too (Karpf, 2018).

With this in mind, Caitlin Rivers and Thomas Zimmer, among other epidemiologists and historians of medicine, have identified a “cycle of panic and neglect” around pandemics and responses to them since the 2000s (Zimmer, 2020; Rivers, 2020). This process, if anything, accelerated in the early twenty-first century, due to the arrival of online news.
As part of this cycle, news consumers in the West have tended to learn about pandemic disease outbreaks in the developing world, become alarmed, respond temporarily, then forget and ignore any later, emergent dangers after the fact. Due to the always-live nature of online news, the lifecycles of stories about pandemics are both elongated and shortened, made manifest with thorough coverage in the imaginations of citizens and policy-makers alike, but then as quickly dispensed with, in ways pandemics in the twentieth century were not.

With the H2N2 or H3N2 viruses of 1957–58 and 1968, for example, in which 1.1 million people around the world and some 116,000 in the United States, and then about one million and around 100,000 in the U.S., died, respectively, coverage by newspapers, radio and network TV was more slow-burn, in an era of belief in, and investment in, a post-World War Two global power structure, including organizations such as the World Health Organization (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). To be clear, it was slower in the sense that while radio and then TV would break the news, newspapers still provided crucial analysis. This would continue for weeks and months after outbreaks. As historical research on coverage of previous global flu pandemics in particular has shown, outside narratives, including beliefs about the role of science in society, impacted that analysis (Blakely, 2003).

In early twentieth century, in a faster churn-and-burn news cycle, that tendency toward lingering coverage began to fade. In a series of surveys from the 2000s and early 2010s, Pew Research Center found that pandemic news coverage was tied to technology trends, including the appearance of new ways to access information online. This essay explores some possible reasons for the rise of a panic-forget-repeat tendency in those spaces, and its implications for the current pandemic, with a possible return to a longer news cycle.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) c. 2003

In the early 2000s, coverage of outbreaks, epidemics and pandemics was still mostly produced for, and consumed, off-line. When online news did exist, newspaper home pages were the primary online presence for stories that appeared on the Web, with Internet-only news acting as a definite adjunct to “traditional” broadcast network, cable news, news radio and print news organizations’ work. Most news consumers who went online did so after reading their paper, listening to a drive-in talk show, or viewing the evening news, and when they did, they went online via dial-up Internet on desktops. To put it another way, except for a relative minority of enthusiasts and scholars, the average Americans’ awareness of health news, including reports from the CDC, came via more old-school mediums.

But there were early reflections on the role of the still- civilian Web to convey news about disease and disaster to the wider world. Some trends noted by scholars and practitioners alike included the use of semantic-search tools on Yahoo, Google and other early rivals. SARS was in fact the most-searched topic on Yahoo during the height of the outbreak (Wang et al., 2010). This outbreak, which first appeared in China in 2002, quickly became major international news. In 2003, the Pew Research Center found that 63 percent, or about 126 million Americans, used the Internet at least somewhat regularly in August of that year, but less than a third had access to faster, or “broadband” connections. E-mail, instant messenger, chat rooms and online forums were still a dominant form of usage, but there were signs that users were increasingly seeking heath information and news, with growth in those areas (Madden and Raine, 2003).

Still, that growth was modest, Pew researchers noted, with news coverage of SARS only driving moderate concern in the U.S. and western Europe (Pew Research Center, 2003). While there were extensive news reports about China and its government’s response to the outbreak, it was chiefly concerned with narratives of failure and blame (Fong, 2017). This could be seen on sites such as the Drudge Report, but also by the major American TV networks. The former and news aggregators like it were important places of early online news commentary, but did not yet drive traditional news coverage, at least most of the time,
A short history of pandemic coverage on the Internet: SARS, H1N1 and MERS

including with stories about SARS [2].

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**H1N1 ("swine flu") c. 2009**

By the late 2000s, however, more and more Americans were receiving their news online, as laptops, tablets and other devices became more common. A third of Americans were going online regularly, *i.e.*, on a daily basis, for news, with that number closer to half if you counted the first-generation of smart phones, including the iPhone and BlackBerry. Pew found that Americans used both new technologies and traditional news platforms, with more than two-thirds of them using some combination (Pew Research Center, 2010). “News has many different functions in our lives; the proliferation of devices, platforms and products makes that variety more recognizable for us as consumers,” Tom Rosenstiel (2010) observed. Briggs and Hallin (2016), in contrast, found that online news played a still-decisely secondary role in covering swine flu.

Citing the CDC-sponsored Harvard Opinion Research Program, they observed that most Americans got their news via “legacy medialocal and network TV and newspapers,” with only about 19 percent preferring to get their pandemic news via the Internet; only about six percent reported using Twitter, blogs, Facebook or discussion boards to get information.

A 2010 study by Chew and Eysenbach (2010) also found that a comparative few sought out Internet news about swine flu — in their study of tweets, in particular, just about 12 percent linked to news-oriented blogs, news feeds or other specialized news, with two percent to more generic blogs and two percent to social networks. Despite this slow growth, scholars believed that media ecologies were “already shifting in 2009” [3].

When successful, as with swine flu, news flows about health, or “biomediatization,” as Briggs and Hallin termed it, involved “a kind of fusion of science, the state and media, a largely harmonious collaboration between health officials and mainstream journalists,” a combination that was both fragile and fortuitous and dependent on excellent leadership and communication from elites in government to corresponding elites in news organizations [4]. With the 2009 A(H1N1) “swine flu” crisis, new tools like the newly-more-accessible Facebook (opening up for non-college students in 2006), Twitter (also launched in 2006) and podcasts (growing steadily in popularity, but not yet hugely popular) became available (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Phillips, 2007). Most news outlets focused their online efforts on their home pages, however, with some controversial results.

Media observers writing about coverage of the 2009 influenza found similar story patterns to what had transpired in the late 1970s and before: stories often contained numbers, government experts and not a lot of nuance. These trends were exacerbated and accelerated by the Internet. Alongside this, however, were disturbing new trends. These included the growth of “alt” news, conspiracy sites and an increasingly fragmented and polarized blogosphere, one that foreshadowed what would come later and included anti-vaccine, white supremacists and other fringe groups that were growing in popularity, if still on the margins of the Internet. Misinformation about health issues, in particular, was already becoming an exceptional challenge for social media companies to self-regulate (Wang, *et al.*, 2019). Other recent research identifies the early 2010s as an inflection point. The rise of “contemporary authoritarian populist discourse” (Hrynyshyn, 2019), the growth of a “vocal, visible, persistent white identity movement” online (Phillips and Yi, 2018), the increasingly visible role of conspiracies in news (and the work now placed on journalists to actively fight such misinformation; see Konkes and Lester, 2017): these and other related trends made it easier than ever for misinformation about everything from vaccines to genetically modified mosquitoes to spread (Mitchell, 2019). Thus, the roots of medical fake news go back to at least the late 2000s, when they took on a more fearsome life of their own. The current, confusing environment is the result of at least a decade’s worth of spurious sources worming their way into our media ecosystem.
Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) c. 2012

But even just a few years later, online news consumption had increased significantly, especially with the emergence of Facebook and Twitter as news platforms — however provocative — in their own right. Briggs and Hallin noted significant, discordant differences between how government figures were able to control their messages in 2009 with swine flu versus 2012 with MERS and still later, with Ebola, in 2014. The confluence of good luck, still largely traditional outlets, political consensus (or at least some residual good will toward U.S. President Obama in his first few months in office) and a lingering Cold War civil defense ethos meant that swine flu was both covered and controlled well, while MERS and Ebola were less so. They were right to be worried about what might come later.

Misinformation, xenophobia and a disharmonious public information response was present with Ebola, though some of these trends emerged before this, between 2010 and 2012. A breakdown in consensus-driven, expert-reliant coverage, and worse, still, a disbelief in experts and a waning belief in government-led solutions, was part of the problem [5]. Another was the decline in a centrist news culture (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011).

But perhaps the chief underlying issue with a coverage of MERS may have been device proliferation and consumer choice. News consumers in 2012 were receiving more news on smartphones, tablets, desktops and laptops — on all devices, in fact, and in smaller and more rapid doses — compared to similar rates of consumption in the mid-2000s (Rosenstiel, 2012). And again, coverage of pandemics was already becoming politicized and driven by partisan beliefs, not just in the U.S., but in East Asia and elsewhere (You and Ju, 2018; Lee and Paik, 2017).

Conclusion

Looking at these three key pandemic points in tandem, especially the pivot in the late 2000s and a broken consensus to how public-health emergencies should be covered, post swine flu, it is obvious that while some things have changed in how publics perceive the ways journalism works during periods of crisis, other things have remained the same. What we are experiencing now is both a wilder and more fraught media environment, but also one in which a certain amount of news fatigue has set in.

Despite the presence of more digital tools, and experiments with them by news organizations to reach their readers, audiences during the early 2000s become more resistant to older ways of telling pandemic stories. If anything, journalists and online journalism tended to reflect existing values even more during moments of crisis or stress, such as during pandemics, and moved to adopt to the shorter attention spans of their viewers/listeners/readers. This is perhaps due to the shredding of newsrooms of their experienced journalists, who tend to get laid off when margins grow thin during dire times. The survivors are just that — surviving — and may not have the energy or time to really shake things up. These overworked, remaining reporters, who need to labor double time online, simply cannot deploy the latest and greatest digital tools [6]. Or, if they can, again, they may not have time to exploit them fully.

There are some signs of hope, as online subscriptions since the early 2010s have increased for marque news organizations, as has an appetite for long-form news (Mitchell, et al., 2016), but the long-term concern is for local news: how will pandemics get covered if smaller communities do not know what is going on? Online news still imports and reifies, and sometimes innovates and pushes boundaries, but through isomorphism and other, deep-seated institutional pressures and influences, tends to not radically depart
from conventional news coverage, with its reliance on experts and official sources (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Forces outside of journalism are less considerate of data and fact verification, and this is poignantly true during pandemics. A collision of path-dependent news values and an emergent, fact-defying misinformation environment mean that our pandemic coverage is both like and unlike that of generations before us. As flawed as it was, at least it tended to emphasize solutions and a collective effort. But like the coverage of past pandemics, during the experience there is a thorough saturation of such news. Today, then, at the national level, we are seeing a modern version of coverage more like that of the 1918 pandemic, which, though produced in a markedly different era, was also written with concerns about the presidency, the global order and the role of science in making public-health decisions. At the local level, however, there is some danger that smaller news organizations will not be able to sustain their operations in the face of formidable challenges. While nonprofits such as Report for America, Poynter and others are helping to engage with this issue, more buy-in from local communities will be necessary.

In summary then, the recent historical context of online news seems to indicate that panic-and-neglect cycles are here to stay, at least for the time being. But we can hope for an escape from this repetition, in a post-pandemic world, if consumers demonstrate that they prefer more sustained coverage. Like news about the weather or about the economy, news about healthcare may routinely include conversations about pandemics and our preparations for them. Let us hope that is the case.

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Notes
2. Using the Internet Archives’ Wayback Machine, as well as http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/, one can see that Drudge in particular was a relentless driver of anxiety and fear about the virus. But as Bob Norman (2020) noted recently in the Columbia Journalism Review, this role was not necessarily reflective of the larger Internet world or out of place for its time. Norman makes the case for Drudge as a kind of odd, inconsistent, contrarian and populist collector of news, then and now.
6. A former student of mine, who worked for a suburban paper in Washington state, was laid off during this most recent pandemic despite producing up to seven thoroughly reported stories a week; she was recently hired, however, by a regional magazine and will be able work remotely for the foreseeable future.

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**Editorial history**

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