Covid-19: The First 100 Days of News Coverage
Lessons about the U.S. Media Ecosystem for Librarians, Educators, Students, and Journalists

April 12, 2020

Alison J. Head, Ph.D., Executive Director, Project Information Literacy (PIL), Visiting Scholar, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Senior Researcher, metaLAB (at) Harvard, alison@projectinfolit.org

Steven Braun, PIL Fellow in Information Design, Visiting Assistant Professor, Art + Design, Northeastern University, College of Arts, Media and Design

Margy MacMillan, Senior Researcher, Project Information Literacy (PIL)

Jessica Yurkofsky, PIL Research Analyst, Principal and Creative Technologist, metaLAB (at) Harvard

Within the first few months of 2020, a new strain of coronavirus transformed a health crisis in China into a worldwide pandemic. The bustling pace of daily life came to a grinding halt. In the U.S., an extensive travel ban went into immediate effect. Theaters, restaurants, shopping malls and businesses were shuttered overnight. National sports events, concerts, and conferences were abruptly cancelled, and K-12 schools and universities closed their campuses while public officials everywhere urged for social distancing to stave off advances of the highly contagious virus. By the third week in March, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continued to report alarming statistics as cases of the virulent pathogen spread to every state in the nation.¹

Unsurprisingly, a plethora of news and information circulated online and offline as people eagerly searched for updates and answers. Common questions revealed their grave uncertainty: What is known about the deadly coronavirus? How is the virus transmitted? Who is most at risk? When will the pandemic end? When Pew Research Center surveyed 8,914 Americans in mid-March, a majority of the sample said they were “very closely” following the coronavirus news story.² Seven in 10 agreed the media as a whole was covering the outbreak fairly well. Almost half of these respondents (48%), however, reported that they had also run across some misinformation about the coronavirus.

In a three-part series, we will examine how an unprecedented public health story of inestimable global impact spread in the U.S. media ecosystem during the first 100 days, and how media messages were
represented and received. In a broader sense, we will explore what drives or impedes the flow of accurate news accounts across time and digital spaces during a worldwide health crisis.

Three sets of questions will guide this inquiry:

(1) When did U.S. top news organizations start to cover the Covid-19 news story on their websites? What was the rate of news diffusion as cases of coronavirus grew in the U.S.?

(2) How did the coronavirus story develop during the first 100 days? What aspects were covered, what visuals were presented, and what rhetorical characteristics were represented in the rapidly changing news narrative?

(3) How did individual media consumers get Covid-19 news? And, how did news outlets intentionally frame stories to try to reach different news consumers situated in a massively distributed and interactive media ecosystem?

Results from this analysis will be presented in three research briefs (3-4 pages each) that will be released in August 2020, and will be written for librarians, instructors, students, and journalists. Each report will include graphics that help explain underlying and complex patterns in the media ecosystem dataset. With this series, PIL, the most complete and influential source of basic research into how students interact with information, will also provide critical practices and exercises suitable for classroom (virtual or in-person) or individual use will serve as a way for readers to reclaim information agency by stepping outside the torrent of endless information about the Covid-19 story to critically evaluate the news.

Media Cloud, an open-source platform for media analysis developed in collaboration between MIT’s Center for Civic Media and Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center, will be used for our large-scale content analysis of Covid-19 news coverage of stories. We will examine thousands of news stories from mainstream and digital native press outlets published in English between January 1, 2020 and April 9, 2020. Much of this quantitative analysis will be done in the statistical computing software R and be made open access through the publication of R Markdown files that show how we did our analyses. This is another important outcome of this project, since these details will give journalists and media researchers access to raw datasets for conducting further research of their own as the Covid-19 story continues to develop.

---


3 Media Cloud’s website is at: https://mediacloud.org/