



Coronavirus – Reporting On A Pandemic

I'm writing this brief article in hopes it will be of some help to journalists who are reporting on the Coronavirus Pandemic. I spent more than 30 years as a news manager and hope some of that experience guiding journalists will be useful at such an important time in our nation's history.

History of Epidemics and Pandemics

Journalists have been covering epidemics and pandemics during most of the history of the United States. We can look back at how journalists reported on them.

The following list contains some of the major epidemics and pandemics that affected people living in the United States. Some were localized in that just Americans were impacted. Others were worldwide in scope that affected many countries including the United States. It demonstrates both how many serious disease outbreaks we have faced as a nation and how journalists reported on them. What journalists reported became part of our historical records.

- Yellow Fever Epidemic of the late 17th to late 18th century
- Smallpox Epidemic of the early to late 18th century
- Flu Epidemic of the early to late 18th century
- Measles Outbreak of the early to late 18th century
- Flu and Typhus Epidemic of the late 18th century
- Yellow Fever epidemic of the late 18th century to late 19th century
- Typhoid Pandemic of the mid-19th century
- Flu Pandemic of the late 19th century
- Cholera Pandemic of the late 19th century to early 20th century
- Bubonic Plague of the early 20th century
- Cholera Epidemic of the early to mid-19th century
- Scarlet Fever epidemic of the mid-19th century
- Typhoid Epidemic of the early 20th century

- Spanish Flu of the early 20th century
- Diphtheria Epidemic of the early 20th century
- Pneumonic Plague of the early 20th century
- Encephalitis Lethargica Pandemic of the early 20th century
- Polio Epidemic of the early to mid 20th century
- Asian Flu of the mid-20th century
- Cholera Pandemic of the mid-20th century
- H3N2 Epidemic of the late 20th century
- Measles Outbreak of the late 20th century
- AIDS Epidemic of the late 20th century to early 21st century
- SARS Epidemic of the early 21st century
- Chikungunya Outbreak of the early 21st century
- Zika Virus Epidemic of the early 21st century
- Swine Flu Pandemic of the early 21st century
- Ebola Epidemic of the early 21st century, the Zika Virus epidemic of the early 21st century
- MERS-CoV Outbreak of early 21st century
- Seasonal Flu Outbreak of the early 21st century (2017)
- Coronavirus Pandemic of the early 21st century (current)

The way journalists in the United States reported on past disease outbreaks, epidemics and pandemics is important to our learning how to do a better job at reporting the current Coronavirus Pandemic and future outbreaks of disease in our country and around the world. We can see where journalists got stories right and where they got stories wrong. The job of the journalist is to get every story right every time, but how do they do that?

Here are two examples of covering pandemics: one from my first year as a full-time journalist and another from the year I retired.

The first was known as both the [H3N2 Virus Pandemic](#) and the Hong Kong Flu. It began in China in 1968 and impacted the world for more than a year. It killed more than a million people worldwide and about 100-thousand people in the United States. The majority of those who died were 65 years of age and older. The H3N2 Virus Pandemic of 1968 has some similarities to the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic in scope and target.

The second was the [novel H1N1 virus](#), also known as the Swine Flu. It started in 2009 in California and eventually spread to other countries. The World Health Organization announced that the pandemic ended a little more than a year later. The Centers for Disease Control estimated that several hundred thousand people died worldwide from H1N1. The majority of deaths were people under the age of 65. One thought was that younger people didn't have antibodies to the virus that older people had from a previous strain.

Covering Epidemics and Pandemics

Covering epidemics and pandemics can be chaotic for a journalist because of how much information is coming into newsrooms through both official and unofficial channels. That information often changes from one day to the next and is often contradictory. The job of the journalist is to sort through that avalanche of information, do the necessary source and fact checking, talk with experts to confirm the information to determine what's correct and incorrect, write their story in a way that is clear and easy to understand while ensuring the accuracy of the story, and present the story objectively through the journalist's particular medium (e.g. broadcast, publication, online).

Professional journalists in the United States are citizens who have unprecedented access to the halls of power and information and into the lives of other citizens through a variety of communication devices. What journalists report often become what people believe. That is an awesome responsibility that should make every reporter, anchor, producer, editor and news manager in our country fearful of doing anything less than their best to get their stories right every day.

Unfortunately, there is a growing trust gap between journalists and the people they are reaching with their stories. A recent Gallup poll ([September 2019](#)) found that "Americans remain largely distrustful of the mass media." Gallup began measuring trust in the news media in the early 1970s. 68% of Americans said they trusted the media at that time

and trust grew to 72% by 1976. However, that trust level had fallen to 53% by 1997 and to 32% by 2015. It is currently listed at about 41%.

Partisan trust and mis-trust in the media is part of the reason the numbers have fallen. Here's a quick look:

1997 Gallup Poll

- Democrats — 64% trust media
- Independents — 53% trust media
- Republicans — 41% trust media

2008 Gallup Poll

- Democrats — 60% trust media
- Independents — 41% trust media
- Republicans — 27% trust media

2019 Gallup Poll

- Democrats — 69% trust media
- Independents — 36% trust media
- Republicans — 15% trust media

That is a huge divide in how Americans trust or distrust the news media. Is there anything journalists can do to improve their fellow citizens' trust in their reporting? I believe there is. Journalists need to do the hard work of restoring the trust that's been lost.

In another Gallup Poll from 2018, 69% of the adults who said they had lost trust in the media also said that trust could be restored. How so? By being **accurate and objective**.

Really? That simple? Yes, but a simple answer doesn't mean an easy fix. Older journalists and news managers are retiring or have retired. It will be up to younger journalists and managers to turn the ship around and head toward a more trust-worthy relationship with their audience. Here are some thoughts about how they can do it.

Be Curious

A journalist should be curious about everything. Most journalists are NOT experts on any particular subject, so curiosity is vital to finding all angles to a story. I can tell a lot about a journalist's curiosity by the questions they ask in news conferences and on the street and how they report what they see and hear. What I have seen and read in the past few months (even the past several years) has demonstrated a tremendous lack of curiosity on the part of many journalists. I sometimes wonder if they think they are the experts on a subject. They seem to have little to no interest in hearing any other information about a story even when it's handed to them by people with opposing viewpoints.

When I watch a news conference, for example, hear a reporter's questions and later see or read that journalist's report, it often lacks a sense of curiosity on their part. It's painfully obvious that they could have asked a wider variety of questions and done some basic research into the answers they received that would have helped them present their story in a way that made the story complete. So many stories today are partial in both information, scope and perspective. Why?

There could be many reasons for that. It may be that they just aren't curious. It could be they don't care. It could be they are lazy. It could also be they have an agenda or narrative to fulfill. An editor or manager may be expecting a certain *take* on a story and the reporter knows they have to deliver that particular perspective to keep their job. Whatever the reason, it's not good for journalism or for the country. People are watching.

I know how the news business works and how it should work. I saw its progression over a period of four decades. News managers have tremendous power over their news team. They should use that power to help their team members develop curiosity and find truth, not fulfill a particular political or social agenda.

I lay the blame for poor journalism at three doors:

1. University Journalism and Communications Professors
2. News Managers
3. Media Owners

It begins in colleges and universities where aspiring journalists learn about journalism and how to do it well. If bad seeds are sown in the education of journalists, it is up to news managers to re-educate them. If news managers sow bad seeds in the early experience of journalists, it is up to media owners to change the negative atmosphere. If media owners don't make those changes or even support bad news management, it falls to news consumers (viewers, listeners and readers)

to do the heavy lifting of determining what to believe. That's **not** how it should work. People should be able to trust that the news they're seeing, hearing or reading is true and fairly reported.

Instead of pushing any particular social or political agenda or narrative, news managers should teach their team the fundamental requirements of real journalism and ensure that every story meets those requirements. Media owners should demand real journalism from their newsrooms.

Journalists should be filled with wonder about the world and every story they cover. They should appreciate the great responsibility they have constitutionally. The First Amendment to the Constitution actually protects the rights of journalists to do their jobs freely and without interference from powerful people with biased agendas.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

That always humbled me as both a citizen and member of the ‘press’ that the founders of our nation thought enough of the importance of what I did as a journalist to protect that right against Congress and the Government. However, that doesn't necessarily protect journalists from bad management or media owners.

I often said that the most important story I've ever covered is the one I'm covering right now. Journalists should never rest on their laurels or awards. A news director told me as a young reporter that I was only as good as my last story. That thought drove me to find more and more stories through the years and for each one to be better than anything I had done before. I was curious then – and still am.

Be Skeptical

A journalist should be skeptical. That means having “an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object” (Merriam-Webster). Being skeptical in the original sense of the word (from the Greek *skeptikos*) means being “an inquirer.” That’s someone who is “unsatisfied and still looking for truth” (Encyclopedia Britannica). It doesn’t mean that we are still skeptical when we find the truth. Skepticism ends when truth is told. It means not being *satisfied* until truth is found. Truth should satisfy the skeptic. Truth is the goal. The fact that so many journalists today seem satisfied with stories that obviously are not complete and often not even right is a national tragedy. The founders of our country understood that because of their experience with previous governmental tyranny.

I was skeptical of what people in power said and how they answered my questions. Just because someone in power says something does not make it true. Powerful people at every level of government, military, business and religion may or may not be telling the truth at any given time. So, our job as journalists is to be *skeptical* of what they tell us until

we find the truth. Once truth is found, we can report the truth and be satisfied truth has been told. Then we move on to the next story with the same skepticism and drive to find truth again. It's a wonderful process that will get you up in the morning and keep you awake at night.

That truth-seeking skepticism led me to become an investigative reporter and eventually manage a team of investigative reporters. Unfortunately, there are not many real investigative reporters today. Most of the journalism I see, hear and read is basically repeating what people say rather than doing the hard work of digging deep to discover if what they say is true or not. Once truth is found, report it. I can tell you from personal experience that real journalism will take over your life. It is a high calling that comes with a personal price, but a price worth paying.

Be Objective

Objectivity simply means a “lack of favoritism toward one side or another: freedom from bias” (Merriam-Webster). Fortunately, I had an old-school professor who drilled into me and other students the importance of being fair and objective. We had many interesting conversations in the classroom about the world we were about to cover as journalists and two things were of utmost importance to the professor: objectivity and accuracy. I agreed and determined to be that kind of journalist.

My early news managers also insisted that we reporters be objective in all of our coverage. We were to be unbiased in every aspect of our reporting – from asking questions, to researching the answers we received, to writing stories, to selecting the soundbites from interviews to insert into the story-telling process, and how we presented the stories visually and audibly on air to ensure objectivity.

We were not to take any side in any story. We were not even allowed to take a position politically in our community. That included having campaign bumper stickers on our cars and campaign signs in our yards. I remember news directors asking us how people would ever trust us if they knew our political leanings. I started my career as a political independent and am still an independent to this day. If a news manager even heard a hint of bias in something we said to someone in the newsroom or to a contact on the phone or in a live report or in our writing and reporting, we would be called into the manager's office and our job would be in jeopardy. I wonder if that's still being done in newsrooms today?

Why were those older news managers so tough on us young reporters? Many of them were reporters ten or twenty years earlier and had helped fight for a strengthening of journalistic principles. Many journalists in the 40s and 50s were little more than stenographers, note takers. They simply wrote down what powerful people said and regurgitated the same words in their news reports without any research, challenge or context. Those older news managers had fought hard to get journalism back to being fair and objective and they weren't about to let a bunch of young

reporters take the craft backward. I'm so glad for that kind of tough conditioning as a young reporter. That early training was the foundation for my career as a journalist.

Be Accurate

To be accurate is to be right about a story. Accuracy and Objectivity are tied for #1 in journalism. We can't have one without the other. That's still true today, even though we don't see it often enough in actual reporting. Here are some of the top examples from a variety of journalism organizations. I was a member of some of these groups years ago and am pleased they still have Truth and Accuracy at the top of the list for ethical journalism. Reporters and editors who belong to these groups should take note and ask themselves if they are living up to these expectations.

Ethical Journalism Network's [Five Principles of Ethical Journalism](#)

1. Truth and Accuracy
2. Independence
3. Fairness and Impartiality
4. Humanity
5. Accountability

American Press Association [Principles of Journalism](#)

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification

4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power

Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics

1. Seek Truth and Report It
2. Minimize Harm
3. Act Independently (serve the public)
4. Be Accountable and Transparent

Committee of Concerned Journalists Principles of Journalism

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power

RTNDA Code of Ethics**

1. Truth and accuracy above all
2. Independence and transparency
3. Accountability for consequences

** The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTNDA) was called the Radio and Television News Directors Association when I was a member years ago.

Conclusion

The news media today lacks the trust of the majority of citizens in the United States. Watching newscasts (especially from networks and major market television stations) and reading newspaper stories might explain the reason for people's distrust.

- Reporters often withhold important information in their stories that would give context and possibly change the narrative the station or newspaper is promoting.
- Reporters sometimes manipulate recorded interviews to give a false impression about what the interviewee really said.
- Reporters sometimes quote from one unnamed source. The old rule for sourcing was three independent sources confirming the same information. News managers had the final say in whether a reporter could use *triangulation in sourcing*. They preferred to name sources whenever possible so that the public could trust the information reported, but would allow three independent sources confirming information when they weren't able to name the sources.
- Reporters add comments in their stories, sometimes live, that are obviously personal opinion rather than facts and information. Those opinions help build narratives and fulfill agendas for the news agencies that employ the reporters, but also help build a growing gap between the journalists and the people they are supposed to serve.

How would viewers and readers know if what they're watching or reading is true? Members of the public can do their own fact and source checking by watching multiple networks and stations and reading a variety of newspapers and publications. I developed the habit early in my career of watching all of the network newscasts every day (there were only three news networks to watch in the 60s and 70s), listening to several radio station news reports, reading several morning and afternoon newspapers along with many weekly and monthly magazines. That task is much easier today with cable and the internet. We can fact check stories quickly and see how journalists are doing their jobs. That has added to the growing trust gap as the public sees the lack of objectivity and accuracy with their own eyes.

If the media is concerned about regaining that trust, they can do something about it. However, it will take major changes in how journalists do their jobs and how news agencies manage those journalists. Will that happen? Will reporters do what's right? I hope they will for the sake of the future of our great nation.

