



CORONAVIRUS: WHY WE SHOULD KEEP OUR EYES AND EARS OPEN AS WELL AS OUR HANDS CLEAN

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What if the infodemic is causing more damage than the pandemic?

The world's headlines have been dominated by COVID-19 for about two months and as the virus continues to spread this wall-to-wall coverage is likely to continue. At the time of writing, the US has [banned travel from most of Europe](#) and all six of CNN's top new stories focus on the virus, including headlines such as "[Epidemiologist: This is just the tip of the iceberg](#)" and "[Bodies 'pile up' in morgue as Iran feels strain of coronavirus](#)".

The World Health Organization (WHO) has aptly coined the term "[infodemic](#)" to describe the unconstrained spread of information. Could we even have reached a level of "information terrorism", where fearmongering – often only loosely based on facts – is terrifying readers, viewers and listeners across the globe?

This "infodemic" is a direct result of how information flows have changed over time. For most of our history, facts about events were relatively difficult for the public to access – buried in reports, press releases, interviews and academic articles. We relied on the media to collect facts and interpret them for us.

Changing media landscape

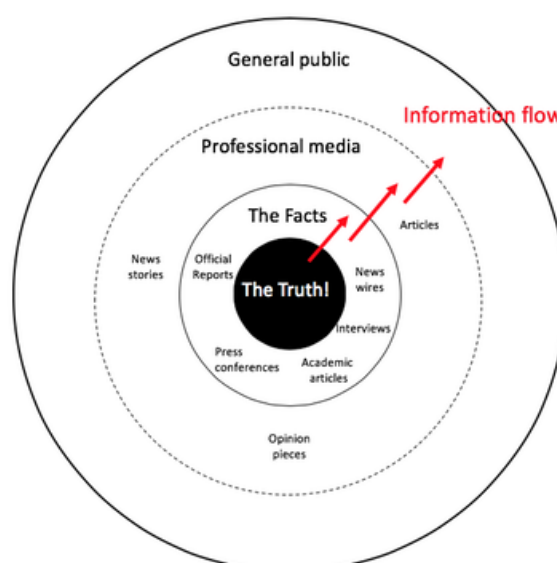
The professional media "filter" has always contained biases, but these biases used to be relatively consistent and well known: The New York Times leans left, the Daily Mail leans right, and so on. So, even though people had limited access to facts, we had relatively good access to reliable information about the facts. This information flow is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Traditional Dissemination of Information

For the majority of our history, facts has been relatively difficult to access. Therefore, we have relied on the professional media for three functions. 1) to collect facts, 2) to interpret these facts, and 3) to present the interpretations to us.

The professional media has always contained biases, but these biases were relatively consistent and well known (the New York Times leans to the left, etc).

Thus, even though we had limited access to facts, we had relatively good access to reliable information about the facts.



Traditional media information flow. Michael Wade, Author provided (No reuse)

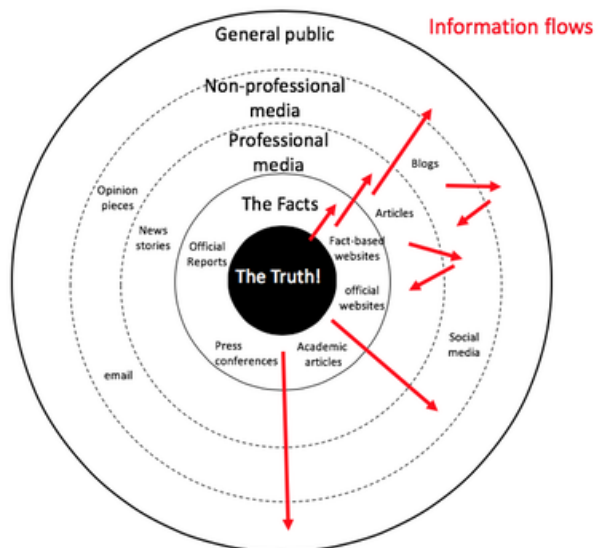
Today's world functions in a very different way. The information flow may start with the facts, but many waves of interpretation and reinterpretation by professional and non-professional media (blogs, social media posts, instant messaging) mean that the messages reaching most of the public quickly diverge from the objective reality.

Instead of the top-down information flow of years past, governments and other figures of authority today find themselves having to react to situations created by non-professional media outlets in a bottom-up fashion. The issue with non-professional reporting versus the traditional media is that the motivations of the content creators are not always obvious: biases are unclear and quality control is largely absent.

Figure 2: The Current Dissemination of Information

In our more recent history, the flow of information has become increasingly convoluted. Facts are continually being interpreted and reinterpreted by professional and non-professional media.

As this cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation progresses, it is easy to lose sight of the underlying facts.



How information and opinion can become muddled. Michael Wade, Author provided (No reuse)

The credibility of many social media personas comes from reach, via millions of followers, rather than expertise and – all too often – opinion over facts. Even the traditional media is not without blame. It's increasingly reliant on click-through advertising and a premium is placed on headlines that grab the short attention span of viewers, as Figure 2 suggests. Scaremongering today is rampant – does a death rate of 0.4% sound the same to you as a recovery rate of 99.6%? Why does the media focus on the former, rather than the latter?

Echo chamber of horrors

At the same time, cookies and social media algorithms help to intensify the echo chamber of fear by showing online readers more of what they've already clicked on. The online world suddenly becomes entirely colored by COVID-19 coverage, and the sheer amount of reporting overshadows the fact that people have a very low chance of catching the virus and if they do, they have a very high chance of a complete recovery.

Yet many people are living in fear for their lives. Entire industries, including tourism, transportation and education are [suffering huge losses](#), companies are going [bankrupt](#), and people are losing their jobs. Fear is being perpetuated by the wearing of masks in public, despite health authorities [pleading with people not to do so](#).

[Racism is rearing its ugly head](#) as people begin to judge others' likely degree of contagion by their appearance. Supermarkets are being stripped of toilet paper, pharmacies of antibacterial liquid. In many places, panic has set in.

A dual responsibility

How does one stand up against this tsunami of unverified, at times highly inaccurate and fear-inducing pseudo-information? The answer is within our grasp. We can go straight to the sources and search beyond the attention-stealing headlines.

It takes time to go beyond the sensationalized headlines, but in today's world it is necessary to do so. In the case of COVID-19, there are plenty of fact-based websites that present the situation as it unfolds without any obvious bias. In the case of COVID-19, there are plenty of fact-based websites, such as [Worldometers.info](#), that present the situation as it unfolds without any obvious bias.

But this road to responsibility is two-way: viewers have a responsibility to pay attention to the facts, but the owners of those facts have a responsibility to present them in a way that is easy to take in and understand.

And so, those on the frontlines of the COVID-19 battle – the experts with actual insight into what is happening and the fact “owners” – including the WHO, national healthcare systems across the world, scientists and researchers – all have a responsibility to ensure that their reporting is broadly and consistently available, accurate and digestible for people lacking specialized training.

Websites too should be designed in a way that allows everyone to access the information easily and comprehend it. This means fewer links to hard-to-read and nearly impossible-to-comprehend academic research reports. More plain language summaries please.

Let's look for the good news: we do have the ability to verify the authenticity and accuracy of the information we are being served. We can cut out the noise and focus on the truth, if only we choose to.

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