

COVID-19 and EDITORIAL STANDARDS

The novel coronavirus **COVID-19** is a huge and all-consuming story, and likely to remain one for some time.

The pressures on working journalists in covering such a fast-breaking and high-impact story are immense. Reporters are working long hours on a story which is evolving rapidly, often at risk to their own physical and mental health, and news organizations are mindful of the well-being and safety of their staff.

At the same time, there is a need to maintain the highest of editorial standards on such an important story. The fundamental principles of accurate, timely and responsible journalism have never been more important. Mixed, conflicting, inaccurate or irresponsible information can lead to dangerous outcomes for public health and safety. Journalists have a responsibility to ensure they are providing the public with the information they need to understand and respond to the virus.

At the same time, the need to question and scrutinise what is happening has not disappeared. A balance needs to be struck between legitimate public debate on matters of importance and the communication of essential information.

The [Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors](#) stands for integrity, transparency and accountability in journalism. Its members represent some of the major news organizations around the world, and our work on a daily basis is designed to ensure the news is ethical and accountable.

All responsible news providers (and all ONO members) have codes of ethics and editorial standards that enshrine the importance of good journalism that is done in the public interest.

It is worth remembering some of the fundamental principles of these codes of ethics, and how they relate to coverage of **COVID-19**:

- **Accuracy:** ensure that the information you are providing in your story is accurate and up-to-date. Make sure information is appropriately attributed to its source. Official announcements, official information and statistics and other medical advice to the public need to be clear, accurate and as widely reported as possible.
- **Context:** Providing appropriate context is an important part of accurate reporting. For example, covering of hoarding and panic buying is valid, but it is important to contextualise what is happening. If it is unnecessary and unjustified, provide that context in your story lest you simply amplify and contribute to the panic.
- **Diversity of perspectives:** the impact of the virus will affect different sections of society differently, whether it be business, schools, hospitals, the workforce, families with children, the elderly, etc... Be sure to cover a wide range of these perspectives and to consider them in your reporting.
- **Balance of opinion:** there will be differences of opinion among experts, governments and other authorities over how to respond to the virus and what public health policies may be required. It is appropriate to cover these differences of opinion, but it is also important to do so in a way that does not sow unnecessary confusion or concern. Ensure that it is always

clear in your reporting what the *official* medical advice is, and do not engage in false balance by equating informed expert medical opinion with uninformed speculation or wild theories. Balance that follows the weight of evidence will often mean there is no place in a story for ill-informed opinions and speculation.

- **Corrections:** In the current climate, it is more important than ever that any factual errors in reporting are corrected quickly and prominently.
- **Respect and honest dealing:** Many of the people you will encounter in your reporting will be under great stress. Be respectful of that and consider people's reasonable expectations of privacy, especially if they are ill or traumatised.

Many news and journalism organisations have issued specific advice on how to report the coronavirus. Here is a selection of them:

- **First Draft's [tips on reporting coronavirus](#)**
- **Poynter's [coronavirus fact checking alliance](#)**
- **The Reuter's Institute on [how misinformation is spread](#)**
- **Journalist's Resource: [5 tips from a Harvard epidemiology professor](#)**
- **The Guardian's ['promise to readers'](#) on covering coronavirus**
- **Mother Jones on [how to think like a science journalist](#)**
- **Columbia Journalism Review on the [balance between scrutiny and amplification](#)**
- **Poynter on [providing the truth, even if the truth is grim](#)**
- **Poynter again, on whether there is an [ethical duty to remove paywalls during a crisis](#)**

The flow of information and the ethical discussions around reporting the coronavirus will be with us for some time. The one message that remains front and centre, however, is the value of a responsible and trustworthy media serving the public interest in times of crisis.

Journalism matters.

Alan Sunderland

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