

Trust the Science

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the news media has played an essential role in communicating scientific information to the majority of people who receive their information as reported online and on TV. Although some media on the political extremes promoted sensationalism and misinformation, it is safe to assume that most mainstream media engaged in a relatively good faith effort to cover the many rapidly changing aspects of the pandemic. Yet, even in such good faith reporting, choices must be made about what, when, and how to report—choices which, for something as elusive and unpredictable as the pandemic, are not always easy to make.

A particular challenge for the media is that the situation on the ground, as well as the scientific community's understanding of COVID-19 and its spread, changes so rapidly. For example, mask-wearing, which we now know is at the core of preventive practices, was deemed unnecessary and ineffective for healthy people in the beginning of the pandemic by scientific authorities.¹ This advice was quickly updated as new understandings of transmission were gained, but the about-face by the scientific community and the ways in which it was reported in the vast array of media outlets left many of the public confused about whether or not they should be wearing masks.

A very similar situation has been playing out with so-called 'breakthrough' infections, or the contraction of COVID-19 by already vaccinated people, particularly around the delta variant. The discussion of these breakthrough infections was ubiquitous and constant in the media in late summer 2021. Yet, at the time of drafting this case, there remained a great deal of disagreement among the experts on the delta variant, vaccine effectiveness, and whether or not such breakthrough infections were actually a significant problem.

Much of the media's reporting has involved relaying scientific data and statistics to the public, with varying degrees of commentary. The problem is that even the best of us are notoriously bad at interpreting and understanding such information.² From the start, because of the nature of science, the numbers themselves are often uncertain, or valuable only for drawing very specific, narrow conclusions. Such nuance is often lost in reporting. In addition, the ways in which the numbers are reported can create both unintentional and deliberate distortions. For example, an increase in cases from 10 to 20, or from 1 million to 2 million, can both be reported as simply "cases doubled," which lacks the context necessary for full understanding of the implications of the data. Add to all of this that even the most reputable media still rely on gaining consumers through attention-grabbing headlines and engaging content, and you have a recipe for confusion.

Such misunderstandings have real and significant consequences. For example, many resisted wearing masks because they had been previously been told masks were ineffective, and similarly the reporting on breakthrough infections led many who remained unvaccinated to resist getting the vaccine. What's the point, some wondered, when the news says you'll catch COVID whether you have the shot or not? Such a conclusion may not be totally accurate, but it's also not unreasonable that people have come to hold such beliefs from the news.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the ethical responsibility of science reporters when discussing something like the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Is it ever ethically acceptable for science reporters to withhold information in the interest of the public good?
3. Should the media collaborate with the government on reporting pandemic data? If not, why not? If yes, then given the value of an independent media, what are the limits of such collaboration?

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/31/824155179/cdc-director-on-models-for-the-months-to-come-this-virus-is-going-to-be-with-us>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/opinion/coronavirus-china-numbers.html>

