



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Coronavirus and the Western Media

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,492, March 19, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While the Western media initially perceived the coronavirus pandemic as exclusively belonging to China, they are now faced with the challenge of covering the crisis as it spreads across the Western world. An analysis of Italian front pages shows that fear is a recurrent feature in news coverage and reveals a delay in journalists' understanding of the need to adopt difficult measures. Despite the weaknesses of their coverage, their example can perhaps help other Western media not only avoid politicization in a challenging time but also fight the constant stream of fake news spread via social media.

The role of the media in public health crises has long been an area of interest in the field of communication studies, with media coverage of SARS, influenza, and Ebola epidemics providing grist for research. Studies have examined the effect on media of proximity to the virus epicenter, national contexts, and local cultures, as well as the specific features of the media organizations selected for analysis.

Generally speaking, fear always receives major coverage. While journalists do report on precautionary measures, dramatization of the crisis, almost always fueled by messages sent by the political elites, tends to be a regular feature in media discourse.

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is ongoing, it is premature to draw hard and fast conclusions about how it is being covered by the Western media, but some preliminary insights can be offered.

Their response is best assessed in two phases: the outbreak of coronavirus in China and its rapid and broad spread across the West. During the first phase, most Western media defined the problem as Chinese and situated their news stories in the context of Sino-Western tensions. Coronavirus was seen as an

opportunity to criticize the Chinese government, condemn its practices, and advocate for media freedom rather than focus on potential repercussions for global public health. Western journalists attributed measures taken in China to contain the virus, such as the lockdown of the Wuhan region, to its different political system. When fear was expressed, it had to do with potential consequences to the world economy. The assessment by US commerce secretary Wilbur Ross that the coronavirus outbreak in China could accelerate the return of jobs to North America did not generate much optimism in the media discourse.

To no one's surprise, the coronavirus sparked disagreements between Washington and Beijing. In early February, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by the American academic Walter Russel Mead, "[China is the Real Sick Man of Asia](#)," that angered Beijing so much that it demanded an apology. (Mead responded that he was responsible for the content of his op-ed, not the title, which had been selected by the editors.)

In mid-February, the US put more pressure on China by announcing that it would treat five major Chinese state-run news agencies with operations in the country as foreign missions. As a result, these agencies would need to register their employees and properties with the State Department. At about the same time, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it would revoke the press credentials of three *Wall Street Journal* reporters working in Beijing. Whether or not the two announcements were directly linked, they reflect a ratcheting up of mutual suspicion.

If the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic was relatively easy and safe for most Western media to report on, the second was, and continues to be, more complicated and emotional. Italy has been suffering since mid-February and a chain reaction has occurred in several other European countries. At this stage, it is easy to see the traditional trend of the media to amplify risk. Media scholar Karin Wahl-Jorgensen [notes the usage of frightening language in British media](#), including the phrase "killer virus." In response to this media tendency, the World Health Organization published a [guide](#) to prevent social stigma. The guide encourages the spreading of facts and narration of sympathetic stories while challenging myths and stereotypes.

An analysis of the front pages of three Italian newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*, over the three weeks from February 20 through March 10 reveals interesting trends in coverage. In the first days, the papers almost completely ignored the coronavirus, focusing instead on other stories like the Hanau attacks in Germany. As they gradually realized the severity of the situation, they began to publish images from hospitals and reported on urgent government measures to block off the northern part of Italy and later

the whole country. Only after the number of victims dramatically rose did the three papers put an emphasis on advising readers how to protect themselves and stressed the importance of staying home and abiding by the rules.

Subsequently, most stories have addressed the health dimension of the problem and its economic ramifications, hospital capacity, the heroism of doctors, the difficulty citizens are having supplying their basic needs, and some social consequences, such as limited revolts in prisons. The Italian government was criticized to an extent for not having put travelers returning to Italy from China into quarantine. The coverage was not politicized, however, with the exception of some pieces that appeared following calls in late February by Matteo Salvini for PM Giuseppe Conte to resign. The Italian papers' coverage reflected a sentiment of national unity, especially in March.

The Italian media provide an example for other Western media of how to prevent high politicization during the pandemic. The mainstream American media might not be able to absorb this lesson, however, as the passionately anti-Trump agenda of much of the media cannot easily be reined in. With that said, politicization is not the greatest media risk during the crisis. Much more serious are misinformation and disinformation.

Unlike previous public health crises, the coronavirus pandemic is evolving amid an almost completely uncontrolled flow of fake news. Social media facilitate its spread. Whereas the debate about fake news up to now has revolved principally around its alleged impact on the political process, the current discussion is different. Inaccurate information cultivates illusions about nonexistent cures and can deceive desperate citizens into sharing personal details with malicious websites.

The traditional online media will have a greater and greater responsibility in the coming weeks to expose these activities and disseminate factual information provided by health authorities. This is also true of technology companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which both need to improve their fact-checking policies.

Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA Research Associate, Lecturer at the Democritus University of Thrace, and Visiting Lecturer at the European Institute of Nice.