



Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World

— 1st - 2nd of December | 2020 —

Infodemic:

How the International Media
Impacted the Pandemic

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Infodemic: How the International Media Impacted the Pandemic



- The role of a public broadcaster is to provide trustworthy information during emergencies. People tend to look towards public service media for guidance.
- Public broadcasters such as TRT, RIA and the ABU used a variety of innovative ways to provide information to people during the pandemic. These included tailored content, new content for education and e-learning, as well as documentaries and art-based programming.
- The brute number of coronavirus cases is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the extent of the spread of COVID-19 as it does not take into account population size or testing rates in a given country. This method of reporting has led to a skewed and overly negative picture that has helped create social and economic panic.
- Even though providing accurate and timely information as the coronavirus pandemic unfolded was challenging for public broadcasters, the biggest challenge lies ahead in the form of educating the public about vaccine safety.
- The COVID-19 vaccination process must be managed in a way that does not patronise and showcases a range of voices to share information and alleviate concerns by balancing emotion versus science.

Summary of the Session

The opening session of the TRT World Forum 2020 titled “Infodemic: How the International Media Impacted the Pandemic” examined the role of the international media in the unprecedented context of the 2020 novel coronavirus pandemic.

As highlighted by the Director General of TRT, Mr. Ibrahim Eren, a multi-layered approach to provide accurate and timely information to the public was required, without compromising on journalists’ safety and well-being. According to the panel, public service broadcasters were able to effectively meet the challenge of providing sound and balanced information as the pandemic unfolded. TRT, for example, invested in diversified content to cater to a larger variety of people during COVID-19 related lockdowns. Even prior to the widespread international reporting of the coronavirus outbreak, TRT produced a documentary during the early days of the pandemic to shed light on the challenges facing healthcare workers. As per Mr. Eren, the concern of the public about vaccines is fair one because it is a “known unknown” as we do not yet know its real world efficacy. Care must be taken to ensure the public does not feel like there is some hidden agenda with regards to the vaccine.

According to Dr. Javed Mottaghi, Secretary General of the ABU, COVID-19 changed the way public broadcasters work, but it did not change their responsibility of informing people, particularly when it comes to countering fake news. Additionally, he also referred to public broadcasters’ responsibility of reporting positive news. All panellists agreed that engaging youth was a priority for public broadcasting.

Regarding the negative comments and expectations about the probable impacts of the pandemic on Africa, Mr. Gregoire Ndaka, the CEO of the AUB, stated that people should tell their

own stories as they are the ones more likely to know about their strengths and limitations as well as the realities on the ground. He also said one of the biggest challenges for Africa at the onset of the pandemic was fake news. In particular, social media has proved to be counter-productive in the fight against COVID-19 thanks to the rapid spread of fake news and disinformation. On that note, Ndaka highlighted that public broadcasters could play a significant role in helping their governments convince people of the importance of vaccines. Ndaka also drew attention to ongoing deadly diseases on the continent, such as malaria, and stressed that these diseases should also continue to be an international concern.

On a related note, Noel Curran, the Director General of EBU, said that the manner in which the coronavirus was reported could have been more nuanced and sensitive. Just reporting the numbers of COVID-19 cases in a country could be misleading as this approach does not take into account other factors such as population size or recoveries. Mr. Curran also highlighted that public broadcasters must not be patronising and showcase a range of voices to share information and knowledge to convince sceptical or nervous audiences of the safety of the coronavirus vaccines.

Mr. Marcello Foa, the President of the Board of Directors for RAI, highlighted the importance of balancing the emotion of the moment and the accuracy of the news. For him, accuracy of news has to be of the highest priority in order to educate audiences about vaccine safety. As per Mr. Foa, public service media has to ensure that the public receives reliable information that enables them to remain safe. Responsible journalism is the need of the hour. He also underlined that reliable information is key for supporting society in its recovery period in order to facilitate their handling of economic and psychological difficulties.

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İbrahim Eren's Highlights



Chairman and Director General, TRT

İbrahim Eren was appointed as Chairman and Director General of Turkish Radio Television Corporation (TRT) in July 2017, following his previous post as Deputy Director-General. Mr. Eren launched TRT World, Turkey's first international news channel, as well as numerous popular national projects. Before joining TRT, he was the Deputy Director-General of ATV. Mr. Eren holds a BA in political science and international relations from Bogazici University and a MA in media management from the University of Westminster. Mr. Eren is a member of the Türksat Executive Board and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) Executive Board; Acting President of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union; and Director of the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

- ” The pandemic affected the media in many ways. In my capacity as the Director-General of TRT, I can say that we had a multi-layered approach to provide accurate and timely information.”
- ” We made sure journalists were secure by setting up their workspaces in their living rooms...we set up news operations in their living rooms, as you know. And our correspondents in the field took extreme precautions to keep themselves and their colleagues safe.”
- ” Yes, news is important, but people were in their homes and they were doing nothing there. So we made the most of it for them by engaging them for months via the 'Life Fits into Home' campaign. We changed all of our schedules on our main entertainment channel in the daytime, and focused on more health issues that supported health and wellbeing[...] the kind of issues that people are going to face when they stay at home.”
- ” Audiences were keen to tune into public news sources because we gave accurate information from the best sources. Even a year ago when not many [media outlets] were talking about COVID-19, we made a documentary about health workers trying to fight COVID-19.”
- ” As part of our multi-layered approach, we continue to develop content to keep our youth engaged, because even though the youth, may not be considered the ones facing a [severe] health risk, they can [through their behaviour] be very risky for older people. And so we need to keep them engaged with our news and programs. This is why we also really invested in our digital programs rather than in our television programs for youth.”
- ” Media coverage in Turkey was fair in general - What I did notice was that there was an appetite for a doomsday approach - people were waiting for a third world war - people were expecting a very bad situation all over the world. TV channels who have a culture of journalism gave more accurate information than other new-age platforms.”
- ” In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, everyone's reactions were more psychological rather than factual. I think this was the reason media organisations and people were very keen to know the numbers. Each country had its own patterns of providing numbers, for example, they differed on whether they reported hospitalizations or number of recoveries.”
- ” The concern of the public about the vaccine is a fair one because it has not been tested yet. We need to be balanced in our coverage, so the audience does not feel like there is some hidden agenda. Journalists and public service broadcasters also have to learn and have the courage to say 'we do not know yet'. Next year will be tough for public service media because even some of the journalists aren't on the same page.”
- ” TRT ratings went up during COVID-19. It is true that with the crisis, there comes opportunity as well. We can invest in very diversified content as a larger variety of people are watching TV at different times during the lockdowns. E-learning has become the norm during the coronavirus [pandemic]. These are opportunities for us. As a public broadcaster, we need to focus on programming for e-learning.”

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, everyone's reactions were more psychological rather than factual.

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Noel Curran's Highlights



Director General, European Broadcasting Union (EBU)

Noel Curran has been the Director-General of the European Broadcasting Union since September 2017. He formerly worked as the Director-General, Managing Director of Television, and Editor of Current Affairs for RTÉ, Ireland's national television and radio broadcaster. A strong and long-time advocate of public service media, Curran is an award-winning investigative journalist and producer. He has also been an executive producer on a range of live television and music events, including the 1997 Eurovision Song Contest. Curran graduated from Dublin City University with a degree in Communication Studies, specialising in the national and international broadcasting policy. He attended a postgraduate course at Trinity College Dublin in European Studies. He is currently an adjunct professor of journalism at Dublin City University.

- ” “The issue of disinformation is complicated because even though some of it is straightforward enough, such as coronavirus news that is based on lies, for example possible cures that are not scientific, there is the disinformation that is not so simple to decipher because we do not know many things about this disease yet. The volume of disinformation was so large that it became difficult. To make matters worse, some senior politicians said things that no scientist would ever believe and some celebrities also spread misinformation through social media platforms. This made the job of public broadcasters that much more difficult. There was not a single science on a lot of the issues related to COVID-19 - some of it, yes, but not on everything. Different countries then dealt with it differently.”
- ” “We have had fact checking operations all over Europe - I believe everyone in public service media has stepped up and the public have responded. This is evident by the fact that trust levels are up and public broadcasters' audiences have increased.”
- ” “We did not nuance the numbers enough. We did not focus on hospital bed capacity and comparisons between countries. It was harder to find the per capita impact of the virus. We realised that the numbers are complicated.”
- ” “I think from a purely EBU perspective, we learnt that we could work together and our members can work together as an organisation with a common goal, and it's been a really satisfying year for us in that regard. I think in terms of the lesson for general media, I think public service media did save lives.”
- ” “The main lesson for me in terms of my work during the coronavirus pandemic is that this is incredibly complex. There is no one science. There is one science on some elements of this, but very prestigious renowned people fundamentally disagree on other elements of it. I think the numbers regarding the spread of COVID-19 are misleading, because it depends on the population and also depends on testing. Some numbers are also missing here, based on the long term economic effects of COVID-19 or how many people died of other illnesses during this period, that we won't know for a long time. So I think the complexity around this is a lesson for all of us. When it started, it looked much more straightforward, and then it became very complex. Different countries had different experiences. Even with countries, different races experienced it differently such as in America. So I think that the main lesson is this is a very, very complex pandemic.”
- ” “We should not patronise the anti-vaxxers because many people are just nervous - it all comes back to the interrogation of the information available and focusing on providing accurate information.”
- ” “You can have a vast majority of scientific opinion or a small minority. At the same time, we cannot provide equal coverage for obvious reasons. That still raises impartiality issues for the media.”
- ” “Emotion versus science is an issue. We must not be patronising and showcase a range of voices to share information and knowledge to win the vaccine debate.”

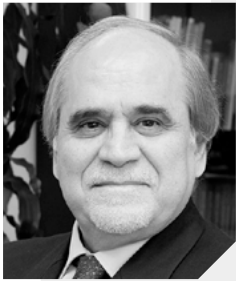
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Dr. Javad Mottaghi's Highlights



Secretary General, Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU)

Dr. Javad Mottaghi assumed office as Secretary-General of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union – the largest Broadcasting Union in the Asia and Pacific Union — in May of 2010. Before joining ABU, he directed the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) for 12 years. He has 38 years of collective experience in news and broadcasting for both radio and television. He has worked closely with regional broadcasting unions in Asia, the Pacific, Europe, North America, Africa, and the Arab world. He has also been a member of the board for the World Radio & Television Council (WRTVC) since 2001. He was awarded the Elizabeth R. Award for Exceptional Contribution to Public Service Broadcasting in 2009. Dr. Mottaghi was both an athlete and coach for the Iranian national swim team. He holds a PhD from the University of Teesside and a BA in Mechanical Engineering from Tehran's Sharif University of Technology.

” “COVID-19 changed the way we work, but it did not change the responsibility of a broadcaster. A broadcaster remains responsible for informing people.”

” “ABU is an organisation with 200+ members so it is a large organisation and coordinating amongst our members was a challenging yet rewarding experience as the coronavirus spread. We enhanced the news exchange network to get better accurate information from all corners of Asia in a timely fashion and we succeeded: within 2020, 7,000 news stories were disseminated through ABU. China contributed to this effort significantly, as did others. Our “Asian vision” of storytelling from the broadcasters directly to the public was able to be implemented effectively.”

” “Competition exists everywhere. Moreover, every country has the right to disseminate information. Fake news is not a new phenomenon, so it is the role of public broadcasters to tackle that, to tell the public what is fake and not fake.”

” “What we have seen is that good examples were not reflected as they should have been, and positive improvement was not reflected as it should have been... mainly we saw negative news. This negative news included talking about the number of infected people in India, Indonesia and Thailand, but there was no talk about the measures that were taken by the Asian governments. In Korea and Japan, they were able to contain the virus so much that the number of deaths remained minimal...even for the first few months, there was no death in Vietnam. It was important for me to see why that happened. And I noticed that from the very beginning, the Vietnamese government

actually came with strict regulations. Unfortunately, these good things that we saw in Asia have not been reflected in the mainstream media across the globe. The same happened when it came to Africa also. But there are many lessons that we learn from Asian countries who did very well when it came to managing the coronavirus pandemic, including Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand and Vietnam”

” “We have learned that the media was not prepared to deal with COVID-19 effectively. The media was not very well prepared on how to perceive the situation.”

” “Controlling people's movement was useful, but it was more important to educate people to look after themselves, and it was public service media that helped people. This is why this sector needs investment.”

” “Even though SARS, and other diseases in Asia, threatened to turn into pandemics, they did not. SARS was controlled because there was the combined will of the politicians to control it and the virus was not as aggressive as the coronavirus. COVID-19 was likely to be managed better in Asian countries because they had had more experience of disease and disaster management. This was evident by the fact that countries in Asia responded quicker. For instance, as I said, Vietnam took immediate measures to close the border and introduced health regulations in the interest of the public. However, even though Asia has witnessed more health emergencies in recent times, Asian media was still not as prepared as it could have been.”

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Grégoire Ndjaka Highlights



CEO, African Union of Broadcasting (AUB)

Grégoire Ndjaka has been the Chief Executive Officer of the African Union of Broadcasting (AUB) since January 2016. He is a senior journalist with 31 years of professional experience. He previously worked as the Director of Human Resources of Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), where he was the primary advisor to the Director-General and Deputy Director of Cooperation. Ndjaka graduated from the Advanced School of Information Science (Yaoundé-Cameroon). He is also a fellow at the Japan Foundation. He holds two master's degrees in human rights and humanitarian emergencies and project management, both from the Catholic University of Central Africa. He is a Knight in the National Order of Value in his country and a member of several professional organisations.

- ” “In Africa, the situation was very, very difficult. Mostly it was a psychological one. The big challenge that we faced in the beginning was the challenge of fake news.”
- ” “The Director-General of the WHO went on TV to state that Africa would not be able to face the pandemic as it is under-resourced - Only Africa can tell our stories because the way others tell the story of Africa is wrong. They don't take into consideration the realities of Africa. All is not bad in Africa.”
- ” “The situation in Africa is very specific. While we have used social media for good, in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, the use of social media proved to be very destructive. I want to give an example. A vaccination campaign for the coronavirus vaccine would not work in Africa because there is a lot of misinformation about it already that was spread via social media. People believe that it will sterilise young people and that the vaccine makers want to control the number of Africans in the world. This is not helped by the fact that many prominent politicians have also talked about the importance of population control in many African countries.”
- ” “The coronavirus vaccine campaign will be very difficult in Africa if there is no pre-campaign efforts to create awareness about the dangers of social media when it comes to fake news and its detrimental effects on people's health. I want to quote an example of a friend who has a school in Cameroon. At the beginning of the school year, a medical doctor came to check if the place was clean. And when the students and teachers saw the medical doctor, they all left the school and told people in the village that they were going to be vaccinated for COVID-19 and thus sterilised, and that led to an uproar. The government was obliged to send in the military to manage the situation.”
- ” “Even though we have social media and it is used for many purposes, in the COVID-19 fight, however, it proved to be disruptive by spreading disinformation. The effect of social media was very harmful in Africa when it came to the novel coronavirus. Moreover, social media has already discredited the upcoming COVID-19 vaccines.”
- ” “The vaccine campaign in Africa will be very difficult if people aren't educated about the dangers of social media as well as the importance of vaccines in fighting COVID-19.”
- ” “It is only with public service media that we can help the African governments meet the challenge of making people believe in the importance of getting vaccinated to protect themselves from the disease.”
- ” “The problem of counting COVID-19 deaths is very delicate in Africa. Because if you base your argument for more coronavirus related restrictions or the need for people to be more careful on those numbers, people will say, 'but what about people dying from Malaria?' Or they can say, 'the numbers are not that scary, so should I care to self isolate?'”

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Marcello Foa's Highlights



President, RAI

Marcello Foa was born in 1963 in Milan and as a child moved to Lugano, Switzerland. He graduated with a degree in politics from the Università Degli Studi in Milan. He is currently President of the Board of directors for RAI and member of the board of directors of the Treccani Institute. He has been CEO of the Swiss publishing group Corriere del Ticino. He started his journalistic career in Lugano, but in 1989 he was hired at the Italian daily Il Giornale by Indro Montanelli. Foa has been an international analyst and foreign reporter. He currently lectures on international journalism's influence in international affairs at the Università Della Svizzera Italiana.

- ” “RAI had to respond effectively and quickly to the challenges the coronavirus pandemic brought to Italy.”
- ” “RAI had to produce education programmes for schools very quickly, which we did, and to do that, we had to cancel some live shows. We were able to provide sound info 24 hours a day through all our channels. We were able to create an internal scientific commission to fact check news about the virus focusing on being open and precise about what news we were giving to the public.”
- ” “We were severely affected by CNN showing a viral chart showing that the virus was spreading from Italy. That created a lot of misinformation and panic. The Italian public television fulfilled the responsibility of showing that this was not true.”
- ” “The perception of Italy changed from scepticism to a good positive image as European friends realised Italy took some good measures.”
- ” “What is appreciated by the public is to see reliable information spread through our channel. Furthermore, if we keep talking about the number of people that are in hospitals today, we create a situation of social panic. So, the main challenge is: how do we provide balanced information?”
- ” “We are so focused on preventing our health systems from collapsing, which is reflected in the way we are reporting the pandemic. However, there is a need for a different type of messaging. There is an economic drama going on in Italy right now - 5 million people have become poorer. People now feel upset and worried. We feel the need to help the country to recover in a responsible way. If we keep talking about the numbers of people dying, about the numbers of people that are in hospital today, we tend to reiterate panic and pessimism, and this is a social tragedy. So I guess now the new challenge is how to provide reliable information on a daily basis that would support our society in its recovery. This is crucial. Otherwise, we will have hundreds of thousands of people dying from causes other than COVID-19”
- ” “Doctors are warning about a dramatic increase in numbers of people dying from cancer and other health problems because people are not visiting their doctors and are not getting the care they need because they are scared of being infected with the virus. So they prefer to delay controls, and that may lead to a lot of them dying. A few days ago, the Cardiologists Association made a statement that they believe a very high number of people will die of cardiovascular health problems in the near future. So we need to teach people that they don't have to avoid taking care of their general health because of the fear of coronavirus.”
- ” “We must be very strong about balancing the emotion of the moment and the accuracy of the news. Some of the experts themselves were wrong as recommendations have changed frequently. This balance is crucial for public service media as responsible journalism is the need of the hour.”



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