# How newsrooms can tone down their coronavirus coverage while still reporting responsibly

March 4, 2020 [**Al Tompkins**](https://www.poynter.org/author/atompkins/)

Let’s see if you can guess where this passage comes from:

I don’t know of any journalist who sets out to scare people, but reporters may unintentionally alarm their audiences with shoddy coverage of a virus that’s entered a frenzied news cycle that may lead to panic and ineffective overreaction.

It’s time we start thinking carefully about the headlines and images we use to cover this story. Context is critical, and there are important local stories to be told that don’t emphasize the virus’ doom and gloom.

[**It was an article I wrote in 2016 about Zika**](https://www.poynter.org/educators-students/2016/how-to-report-on-zika-without-scaring-people/). And here we are again.

Let’s be clear: There is no law that says every time journalists mention the word “virus” that they have to precede it with the word “deadly.” It is true some people die. But we don’t call the traffic jams every day in every city “deadly traffic jams” even though somebody will die every day in traffic.

**Limit adjectives**

Everywhere I turn I see news headlines blaring the words “deadly virus” even though for most people the virus is not deadly. Dr. John Torres, medical correspondent at NBC News, said he edits out phrases like “horrific” or “catastrophic.”

My general recommendation is the worse a situation is the more journalists should limit subjective adjectives. By now people know this is a serious issue. Stick to the cold hard facts.

[**Related: A readers’ guide to understanding what you need to know about the coronavirus**](https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/the-readers-guide-to-understanding-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-coronavirus/)

**Choose images carefully**

I recommend that every time you show somebody wearing a facemask, you remind the viewers/readers that experts say the masks do not help prevent the spread of the virus. I would use that information in every cutline regardless of where the photo comes from.

It would be easy to imagine that the public is confused about masks. In China the government forced people to wear them. [**Doctors and nurses wear them**](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/world/coronavirus-news.html). It’s understandable for people to think wearing a mask must be important somehow.

Yesterday I just flew on a packed Tampa to Detroit flight. One person wore a mask. I thought to myself that if we journalists chose an image from that flight, and the image showed that one person close up in a mask, how out of context would that image be?

Social media has been awash in images of people running to Costco to buy emergency supplies. They are buying, among other things, cases of water. Not once did I hear anybody ask customers what they were thinking. Is somebody going to turn off water to your house? Is anybody predicting a water shortage?

**Frame stories with context**

Back in 2016, while helping journalists cover the Zika virus, Poynter put together a training workshop that included Dr. Barbara Reynolds, a crisis communications expert. She was with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention then. She passed along some thoughts that are useful today. I will adapt Reynold’s teaching to the coronavirus story.

**Stories that recommend people take action but don’t require them to are less scary.**The more governments force people to act, the more upsetting the story becomes. Stories that explain ways to prevent being exposed are less scary than stories that do not.

People want to know “what to do.” And even if you have written and reported the recommendations a hundred times already, keep doing it.

**Man-made emergencies, such as nuclear attacks or biological accidents, are far scarier than natural incidents, like a virus.** We live in a world that experiences a wide range of ever-changing viruses. Some are way more deadly every year than this strain of coronavirus has been so far.

Not to underplay the serious nature of a spreading illness that the CDC calls “a public health emergency of international concern,” but it might be useful context to remember that dengue, a virus, is common in more than 100 countries around the world. 40% of the world’s population, about 3 billion people, lives in areas with a risk of dengue. 400 million people get infected with dengue. Approximately 100 million people get sick from infection, and 22,000 die from severe dengue.

Compare that to the 92,000 cases of coronavirus recorded so far.

A key difference is that we know more about dengue, including how it is spread by mosquitos and that it is a tropical illness. It won’t find me on a New York train or a Seattle coffee shop.

The CDC said around 45 million people in the U.S. caught the flu last year. Between 18,000 and 46,000 people died. There may have been a half-million hospitalizations due to the flu this season. Did your news stories characterize this year’s flu season as the “deadly flu” season?

We have come to accept that we are susceptible to seasonal flu. [**Fewer than half of Americans**](http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/47/9/E45) get the flu vaccination, just accepting the chance of getting sick as a part of life. Is the lack of a vaccine that you could get if you wanted it what makes this illness so unsettling compared to the seasonal flu?

Journalists should remember — and emphasize — that coronavirus is, for most people, non-lethal. [**The World Health Organization said**](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/world/coronavirus-news.html) the disease caused by the new coronavirus has a 3.4% mortality rate. That is deadlier than the seasonal flu but the seasonal flu does not spread as easily. Most people who are exposed to coronavirus will have mild symptoms and some people might show no symptoms at all. That may be the trickiest part of this situation. People might not know they are spreading the virus because they don’t feel awful.

**Statistical stories are less scary than anecdotal stories.**For news stories to really connect with the public, we want to attach faces and names to issues.

During the Zika outbreak, the scare took off when we started seeing children born with deformities. Those closeup stories of individuals overwhelm the statistical probabilities of contracting the virus.

When you do anecdotal stories about sickness and death from coronavirus, infuse them with the data that points out the wider context of the issue.

**When an emergency affects senior citizens or children, it tends to get more play.** The coronavirus appears to be most dangerous for senior citizens who already have health problems.

News coverage has not mentioned as prominently that this virus seems [**not to be affecting children**](https://www.livescience.com/why-kids-missing-coronavirus-cases.html) but that children may be a silent carrier. It would be easy to wonder whether a child is silently carrying a virus that could infect a whole class or school.

**When fright affects big plans**

You probably have heard that some big players — including Facebook, Intel and Twitter — [**have dropped out**](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/03/coronavirus-facebook-intel-twitter-drop-out-of-sxsw-as-disease-spreads/) of SXSW, set for March 13 through 22 in Austin, Texas. A fourth of the 73,000 people who attended last year were from outside the U.S. and, this year, 30,000 people signed on to a [**Change.org petition urging SXSW to cancel**](https://www.change.org/p/petition-to-have-sxsw-cancelled-amid-coronavirus-outbreak?use_react=false) the whole event.

It is worth pointing out that the World Health Organization has not issued any broad warnings that would lead to cancelations with Spring Break season approaching, though [**a Seattle area biologist**](https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/03/washington-state-risks-seeing-explosion-in-coronavirus-without-dramatic-action-new-analysis-says/) said it is time for people who think they might be infected to self-impose “social distancing.”

As we are seeing in Austin, there are three main voices emerging, each with a different angle. One voice comes from locals who do not want sick visitors to come to their city. A second voice is from the organizers who have made big plans and want to be reasonably safe and not overreact. And a third motivation comes from vendors who don’t want to force uneasy employees to travel.

China imposed strict “no-travel” and quarantine measures even at the height of the year’s biggest holiday season. Today, China is seeing its death rate from coronavirus slow and, for the first time, there are more deaths outside of China than inside. It would be easy to see why people are pushing for less travel and the cancelation of international gatherings after China’s experience.

[**Some airlines**](https://www.marketwatch.com/story/these-airlines-are-waiving-flight-change-fees-because-of-the-coronavirus-outbreak-2020-03-03) and [**Amtrak**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/02/us-airlines-amtrak-waive-fees-travel-changes-concerns-rise-over-coronavirus/) are making it easier to change travel plans. Travel insurance may not cover cancelations for travelers who are merely concerned about the virus, though insurance with a [**“cancel for any reason” policy**](https://www.squaremouth.com/press-room/travelers-guide-travel-insurance-for-coronavirus/) may help. Credit cards may not cover a cancelation either, though they may with a doctor’s note. Even a CDC alert probably is not enough to get a refund for a canceled trip. But travel insurance may cover some medical bills for travelers who get sick on a trip.

**Bust myths**

In my travels yesterday I tried to think of all of the ways I could come in contact with various kinds of germy and viral ick.

I handed my boarding pass to a TSA agent. Did he wash his hands? I held on to a pole on the airport train. Should I be wearing a glove? I washed my hands in the bathroom but had to use my hand to open the door. I rode on the moving sidewalk at the Detroit airport and touched the rubber railing — that’s not being wiped down nonstop.

I thought how interesting it would be to travel about my day, even for a few hours, alongside an expert in virus prevention and let them document the many ways I may have exposed myself to my germy environment. This strain of coronavirus appears to live much longer on surfaces than the seasonal virus, so just being aware of what you touch and then what you do with your hands could be important.

[**The New York Times ran an interesting**](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/02/well/live/coronavirus-spread-transmission-face-touching-hands.html) story that reported one of the best ways to slow the spread of a virus is to wash your hands a lot and to stop touching your face so much. In fact, health experts say, we should be telling the public that. The story quoted a 2015 study:

“While medical students attended a lecture, the researchers filmed them and counted the number of times they touched any part of their faces. Over the course of an hour, students touched their faces, on average, 23 times. Nearly half of the touches were to the eyes, nose or mouth — what infectious disease researchers call “the T-zone.”

The story goes on to say that, “During the SARS epidemic, hand-washing reduced the risk of transmission by 30 to 50%. But after washing your hands, you must still be mindful about face touching.”

**Get creative**

Sunday night, NBC Nightly News [**did a terrific segment**](https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/coronavirus-outbreak-top-infectious-disease-specialist-answers-your-questions-79779397871) that was as informative as it was creative.

The network took Vanderbilt University Hospital infectious diseases expert Dr. William Schaffner to the streets of Nashville. Standing there in his white lab coat, Dr. Schaffner answered people’s questions about vaccines, about the ways the virus spreads and whether there was much to worry about.

The public is starting to freak out. Don’t add to it with screaming clickbait headlines and scary generic images.

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