

Fact-Based Reporting on Social Media During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) made its outbreak in the United States, coverage focusing on the epidemic has significantly increased among many news networks and online. Types of this coverage include televised hearings, interviews, and social media posts. However, new influxes of information daily, whether it be fact-based or partisan-tied, leaves much room for the general public to speculate what type of news to trust, and from which source. More specifically, as journalists and government are utilizing social media more often by sharing daily COVID-19 updates, the pressing question is: which of these posts are most likely to engender trust with the public? Thus, I argue that in times of crisis, fact-based reporting in social media posts is the most trusted style in receiving news rather than emotional-based reporting, due to its beneficial effects for both the public and journalists themselves.

Although only 18% of U.S. adults rely on social media as a reputable news source (Barthel, Gottfried, Mitchell, & Shearer, 2016 p. 8), it is crucial to consider its role for the present day and the future. Whether users seek news updates or not, social media continuously changes the global age of communication and interaction, with billions of online users accessing different platforms daily. Also, because of the rise in social networks and e-technology, journalism is shifting its norms to expand its reach and potential impact on the general public. For instance, many journalists have recently adopted new social media practices by including Twitter in their regular routines (Molyneux & Mourao, 2017, p. 3), which shows promise for potentially reaching larger audiences. While journalists adapt to online norms, it is essential to balance these alongside their journalistic standards by sharing fact-based stories about the real world through “text, audio, and visuals, stories which people can relate to, share and appropriate,” (Castells, Parks, & Van der Haak, 2012, p. 2926).

Given today's context, it is essential that journalists practice these techniques, as a majority of Americans favor fact-based and trustworthy COVID-19 news (Koetsier, 2020). However, other studies highlight that current media distrust levels continue to rise, where 46% of Americans claim to "mostly" trust the media in its COVID-19 coverage (Rackich, 2020). Although these statistics focus on all media formats instead of social media itself, the results are no surprise due to other studies examining changes in journalists' use of Twitter amidst conflicts. These studies highlight journalists' crossing "traditional lines of journalism" by remaining neutral as informational sources while sharing personal emotions and judgments, showing they "employ more opinionated reporting styles in tweets than in traditional reporting formats," (Pantti, 2017 p. 127). One example of this can be seen from a tweet by Laura Ingraham, a Fox News reporter, saying, "Hilarious! CNN ... just dumped out of the WH Coronavirus Task Force briefing [because] the president is exposing their rank bias," (Ingraham, 2020). While the digital environment pushes journalists to achieve attention in their stories, which might involve straying from traditional values to gain this attention, they should still prioritize assuming the responsibility of informing the public by providing critical information. If journalists want to offer helpful information for audiences, they need to devote stronger focus to reporting fact-based news stories, such as useful ways to practice social distancing, rather than analyzing other political figures' actions at a press briefing.

Another argument made by scholars is that journalists see major world disasters as opportunities for incorporating media bias techniques like indexing: the "weighting of key story elements according to power blocs' positioning at key decision points along news beats," (Bennett, 2012, p. 49); and episodic framing: the "presentation of an issue from specific angles that directly delve into a developed situation and place emphasis on the main characters,"

(Bennett, 2016, p. 35). Such examples include a tweet from New York Times reporter, Michael Barbaro, saying, “The regularity with which Trump reverses himself on questions of enormous consequence is astonishing” (Barlbaro, 2020), and Washington Post columnist, George Conway, tweeting his op-ed that argues how blaming President Trump’s failure in addressing COVID-19 on his previous impeachment process is inaccurate (Conway, 2020). Using indexing on social media poses significant problems because it not only puts focus on what elites say instead of on fact-based evidence, but it also marginalizes other voices not participating in these elite discussions. Additionally, using episodic framing by selecting such specific angles to share online results with audience members only having “shallow understandings of the world around them,” (Bennett, 2016, p. 35). While Barlbaro’s tweet and Conway’s op-ed are relevant to current news discussions, users might not be able to easily understand its relation because not many users stay up to date on each story. Also, because users believe that media has exaggerated its content regarding COVID-19 to some extent (Pew Research Center, 2020), this further supports that the general public favors factual-based reporting rather than listening to journalists attack each other with their opinions on the situation.

With a health concern as critical as the Coronavirus, the general public needs to receive more factual-based updates or news stories to easily comprehend the severity of this crisis and how to function in today’s society. As this paper argues, it is journalists’ role and responsibility to successfully provide audiences with this relevant information across various platforms, in which numerous studies emphasize the significance of doing this on social media websites. Not only would this impact the user’s knowledge and loyalty to the source providing them with information, but also it would potentially increase their attitudes on journalists and the media in general. As a result, this could have positive impacts on the reputation and future successes in the

media's role in society, allowing for journalists and media networks to be trusted in performing their jobs rather than facing constant criticism.

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