



# Media Bite

The Covid-19 Reality is not a  
Point of View:  
Media in the coronavirus era



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**It has been thirteen weeks since news of the COVID-19 virus saw light, six weeks since the first case was detected in Lebanon and three weeks since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. Today, we count new cases every day, only to keep record of the duration for which the world has been paralyzed, people have been under lockdown, and health systems have been deviating from the “curve”.**

Coronavirus has challenged us all, and media is a major player in disseminating information to the general public. Misinformation has been spreading faster than the pandemic. Not only because this fast-moving pandemic demands exhausting follow-up and reality checks, but because of the dearth of specialized health reporters in Lebanon. Local media is politically oriented; and social media and informal news sources have facilitated the spread of misinformation and rumors about the virus.

The International Press Institute, in Hungary, warned of a new draft legislation in Hungary threatening journalists and others accused of spreading “false information” with jail as a step toward total information control. In Vietnam, the government took advantage of social media platforms to communicate coronavirus-related information to its citizens. The Vietnamese Ministry of Health created an official account on these platforms, to keep citizens informed about the current situation of the epidemic as well as reminding them about protection measures. In Spain, 52% of people surveyed indicated that Spanish media coverage of the pandemic is causing panic while only 13% believe that the media is downplaying the situation.

Media response is based on the context of each country, but guidelines to ensure objectivity and control panic can encourage community-oriented measures and motivate the government to make the right decisions.

#### **Guidelines for media for the COVID-19 journey:**

- > Consider credible sources that viewers would trust for informing them about disease updates
- > Use appropriate, neutral, non-stigmatizing language
- > Explain any scientific terminology thoroughly and carefully
- > Reduce the use of emotional, sensational words and expressions so as not to incite fear, panic, or anxiety
- > Stay vigilant in selecting images and videos that could mislead or send the wrong message
- > Be mindful that media platforms are meant to inform and educate in the COVID-19 era
- > Report the facts with the intent to expose the latest outbreak news, and not carry out a political motive
- > Call on the government to be transparent and proactive with delivering information on the status of COVID-19 to the media, citizens and other stakeholders

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Being used to the political field, the media in Lebanon should now exercise the greatest power there is in politics: the power to define reality, to say what is—and what is not—important at any given time. In this particular case, however, the COVID-19 reality is not a point of view.