

Coronavirus: From Outbreak to 'Infodemic'

PART 1: Insights from the Asia-Pacific Region



The spread of the novel coronavirus known as 2019-nCoV has caused shockwaves around the world since its initial discovery in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. On 30 January, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern"—but not until the impact had been felt around the globe, both in terms of casualties and media reports.

Coronavirus Outbreak in Numbers

At the time of publication, 7 February, the outbreak had already caused¹:

638+ fatalities

31,000+ confirmed cases in
mainland China

295+ confirmed cases across **25+**
countries outside of mainland China

As media outlets across the globe churn out thousands of stories, the outbreak and subsequent response has been accompanied by an epidemic of information—or, as aptly coined by the WHO, an 'infodemic'. Some of this information is accurate and some is not, making it difficult for people to seek out trustworthy sources and reliable advice at a time when they need it most.

With this as the backdrop, GLOBALHealthPR partners worldwide collaborated to develop a series focused on the most impactful aspects, topics and evolution of media conversation surrounding the outbreak. In this first installment, GLOBALHealthPR leaders from the Asia-Pacific region provide insights about the spread of information in their markets and the impact it has had locally.



Hong Kong

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Fake News Fuels Panic

For media outlets, health authorities and companies alike in Hong Kong, the coronavirus outbreak has been the ultimate test of organisational response capability. Here, fake coronavirus news has become a key issue. For example, a rumour was spread via social media that a coronavirus patient had dined at a local congee (rice porridge) restaurant. The restaurant emptied as soon as the news broke. Later that evening, the owner issued a statement clarifying that the news was false and based on unfounded claims. Business returned to normal the next day!

In another example, a rumour was spread online that the global supply chain for toilet paper was affected and unable to reach Hong Kong. Within hours, panicked consumers rushed to their local supermarkets. Pictures and videos circulated on social media of people piling rolls of toilet paper into their baskets, clearing the shelves. One supermarket chain responded quickly, rectifying the rumour and ensuring a stable supply of products.

Although rumours were swiftly addressed in those scenarios, others are not as quick to rectify misinformation, which can lead to panic and cause unnecessary harm to others. It's important to emphasise that, in a time of crisis, while organisations cannot control the spread of fake news, they can control their responses.



Singapore

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Government Intervention Helps Ensure Accurate Coverage

In Singapore, the very first report of the coronavirus was an international news story syndicated from a newswire. However, the local press started working on the issue very quickly, giving a localised angle to the coronavirus outbreak. There are several themes which underpin the government's key messages to the public: not to panic as the government has enough medical supply reserves; hospitals are more than equipped to handle the situation; correcting online falsehoods; and public education notices on best practices to maintain personal hygiene. On social media, calls have been made for local media to use the scientific term for the virus – 2019-nCoV – or coronavirus rather than 'Wuhan Virus'. Local media have responded by gradually addressing the virus as coronavirus or 2019-nCoV.

Singapore recently approved the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in its attempt to root out fake news. In this time where fear-mongering fake news is spreading over social media, POFMA acts as a good measure to counter falsehood. The government has made clear it will not hesitate to use POFMA especially in this period of heightened tension. Already, POFMA has been used against an individual who falsely claimed on a popular online forum that someone succumbed to the coronavirus in Singapore.



Australia

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Alarmist Coverage Leads to Prejudice

In Australia, the coronavirus outbreak has captured front page headlines daily. As the only other country outside of China that has developed a lab-grown version of the disease, headlines initially took an 'informative' angle, providing audiences with factual updates as news came to light. However, as the virus continues to spread around the world, coverage has become increasingly alarmist in nature. For example, a recent news report declared that the coronavirus would soon reach pandemic status.

Further, although there has been a significant rise in racial discrimination towards people of Asian origin, very few commercial news media outlets are reporting on it, leaving it to the independent titles to cover the issue extensively. Just last week, it was reported that a man of Asian descent was left to die of a heart attack on a busy Sydney street because bystanders feared he may have coronavirus.

Simultaneously, reputable Australian media outlets have been providing regular updates as events/news unfold. The Australian Government has also been consistently updating the public on the outbreak through near-daily public statements and media interviews across popular mainstream news outlets. In fact, the Australian Government's Health page ranks third on Google for coronavirus, after the WHO and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Reference: 1. Johns Hopkins (2020) <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

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