

Coronavirus: From Outbreak to 'Infodemic'

PART 4: Insights from Europe



Over the past two weeks, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 has been spreading like wildfire, with cases now rising faster outside of China than inside. The latest global death rate for the novel coronavirus is **3.4 percent**, which is much higher than that of the seasonal flu, which kills about **0.1 percent** of those infected.¹ The spread of the virus to more than **100 countries** has presented new challenges for governments, health professionals and media covering the outbreak.

Coronavirus Outbreak in Numbers

At the time of publication, 11 March, the outbreak has caused²:

4,369 fatalities

80,967 confirmed cases in mainland China

40,283 confirmed cases across **117** countries outside of mainland China

In Part 4 of this global series on media coverage of the coronavirus, GLOBALHealthPR leaders from Europe provide insights about the spread of information in their markets and the impact it has had locally.



Italy

Stefano Ardito
Chief Growth Officer,
Connexia

Health experts use social media to keep the public informed

Italy's first coronavirus cases were reported on 21 February. On 9 March, a spike in confirmed cases across the country sparked a total lockdown. This includes blanket travel restrictions, a ban on all public events, and the closures of schools and public spaces. To date, Italy has over 9,000 confirmed cases and more than 450 fatalities, the second highest reported numbers outside of China.

That said, COVID-19 has dominated headlines in Italy over the past few weeks. News reports tracked confirmed cases, fatalities, as well as the impact the virus has had on the stock market. Simultaneously, sensationalist reports with racist undertones as well as fake news have spread rapidly.

In an effort to provide accurate information to Italian citizens, health officials and scientists have doubled down by using traditional media outlets as well as social media to stem the flow of fake news as well as to communicate safety measures. In one example, Roberto Burioni, an Italian physician virologist who also serves as a major media personality and an internet savvy advocate for science, posts daily about the virus on his social media accounts and retweets links to reputable news articles. Additionally, many local celebrities and influencers are supporting the government-backed campaign "Stay at Home" to remind citizens how important it is to remain at home for the time being.

References:

1. WHO (2020) <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--3-march-2020>
2. Johns Hopkins (2020) <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>



Spain

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Journalists meet with scientific experts to educate themselves about the outbreak

Since the first cases of COVID-19 surfaced in Spain, the media has been churning out daily reports tracking cases and providing the general public with as much information as possible. Recently, dozens of journalists from the mainstream media attended a conference organised by the National Association of Health Journalists (ANIS) with seven panel experts (virologists, epidemiologists, experts from the WHO and the Ministry of Health) in order to address any questions or concerns about the outbreak. Notably, these experts emphasised that it was crucial for journalists to rely on scientific sources when reporting on the virus, to equip the population with evidence-based prevention measures as well as to mitigate any unfounded fear based on rumours or fake news.

To date, Spanish authorities are providing effective, constant and fluid communication and specialised journalists are seeking out authorised and scientific sources. However, on various occasions, we have heard health professionals complain about "alarmist" headlines. It's important to note that the cause of these complaints is often not sensationalist reporting, but rather quotes attributed to official sources. One such example was when coverage cited the Director-General of the WHO referring to COVID-19 as being "the number one public enemy to the whole of humanity."



Nordics

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Government steps in to provide citizens with evidence-based prevention measures

When coronavirus first hit the headlines in the Nordics, speculation and uncertainty ran rampant, with reports frequently posing questions such as: *How many people will get infected and how many will die? Should all citizens be quarantined and be required to wear masks anytime they go outside?* The global mortality and infection rate, as well as the virality of the disease have varied from report to report, making it difficult for the public to assess just how serious and dangerous COVID-19 is. Over the last week or so, it seems that the novelty and sensation of COVID-19 is beginning to wear off and the tone is becoming less alarmist in nature.

Within the past few days, the Danish Health Authority has, for the first time, given an estimate on how many people they predict will be infected with COVID-19 in Denmark over the coming months- approximately 10-15% of the population. However, they have reassured that approximately 80% of those who contract the virus will only experience mild symptoms. Additional preventive measures have been taken to curb the outbreak, including encouraging people in Denmark not to shake hands, kiss or hug each other. The government has also asked organisers to cancel large events.

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