9 Ways to Strengthen your Local COVID-19 Coverage

1. Be precise with numbers and use caveats when reporting on estimates.

New data are emerging daily, but everything can look equally new on the web—so use timestamps! Be extra precise about when and where you sourced numerical information about positive cases or personal protective equipment, so it’s clear when the information becomes outdated. When reporting on forecasts and projections, be clear that these are estimates or predictions. For example, all COVID-19 fatality rates (percentage of infections that lead to death) are approximations, since without widespread community testing no one knows how many people are actually infected. Use phrases like “Scientists have estimated that...” or “Based on the information available, experts have approximated that...”.

2. Explain the process of science to help alleviate anxiety.

Remind readers that science is a gradual, iterative, and self-correcting process. As new data and sometimes contradictory updates to scientific understanding emerge, remind your readers and viewers that this is normal and means that the scientific process is working. Be clear about what scientists do know and (equally important) what they don’t know yet, and why consensus may have shifted based on new information. Knowing that this is how the process works and that talented people are working hard to understand a fast-evolving situation can be reassuring for those who are anxious about uncertainty or changing information.

3. Reiterate key concepts, even when it feels redundant.

It may feel like you’ve written the same story a dozen times already, but your audience of news consumers interested in COVID-19 is growing by the hour or day. It’s helpful to repeat basic principles and facts for newcomers to the story. For example, include information about the importance of hand washing and social distancing in local stories about coronavirus, even if the advice seems obvious. It may not be news, but it’s important public health information that people need to know.
4. Replace misinformation with facts from trusted sources.

If a conspiracy theory hasn’t gotten much airtime yet, don’t amplify it by covering it. Research shows that merely mentioning misinformation can strengthen its hold in people’s minds. But if misinformation is already widely circulating in your community, it’s a public service to investigate and report the facts. Some types of misinformation are inadvertent and stem from fear or confusion; others may start with those trying to profit from a crisis (e.g., selling quack products). In any case, research indicates that people tend to resist accepting that something they believe to be true is wrong. So when debunking or myth busting, take care not to demean the beliefs of those who are misinformed and simply provide accurate information as substitute. You can also report on the source of the misinformation and why it may have been believable, as a way of relating to resistant readers. Importantly, people are particularly swayed by information shared by trusted sources. So in addition to citing primary sources such as a report or study, quote a trusted community member or local expert who has shared the correct facts. Last, it’s important not to inadvertently become a purveyor of misinformation yourself. So when a source tells you something, always ask: “How do you know that?” It’s arguably the most important question a journalist can ask.

5. Mine social media threads, reader comments, and community forums for story ideas.

A great way to cultivate contacts and story ideas—and to serve your local audience—is to pay attention to what your readers and viewers are saying in the comments section of news stories, including your own. You can also track Facebook groups, Twitter threads, community forums, and other digital meeting places where concerns or fears might be shared. Beyond lurking to discover what your audience cares about, you can also chime in proactively to ask questions or solicit story ideas and leads.

6. Start thinking about narrative and accountability stories now.

While the current focus is on day-to-day breaking updates, there will be an inevitable demand for deep-dive stories in the weeks and months ahead. You can start thinking now about potential accountability stories in your community. Who are the most vulnerable people in your area, and who is not being appropriately cared for (e.g., health care workers, elderly communities, or the homeless population). Choose a thread to follow and
then ask: Who is responsible for this? Is there something that should have happened but didn’t? What ball got dropped and why? You can also start gathering string for longer-form narrative pieces that you already know will resonate. For example, how is the shift to telework and remote-learning changing businesses and schools in your community? How are lockdowns and self-quarantines impacting mental health and social relationships?


The global pandemic is playing out differently in different locations on a very large scale, but ultimately it is also a very personal story. Some of the most meaningful stories are those about the people affected by the virus—directly or indirectly—and how their lives, families, and communities have changed as a result. Even in places without current cases, there are preparations underway, loved ones affected, and organizations and institutions grappling with decisions about next steps. Build connections now with contacts at your local hospitals, schools, faith centers, and businesses. As the COVID-19 story intensifies, these will become go-to sources for personal accounts of what is happening on your community’s front line. If you feel comfortable doing it, you can also acknowledge that COVID-19 is affecting you. Think about ways to incorporate firsthand accounts and narratives in your stories when appropriate. This can help humanize journalists and build trust with readers.

8. Build a stable of trusted, off-the-record sources.

Take the time to track down an epidemiologist, a laboratory technician, an emergency medicine expert, and local public health officer—and ask if they’d be willing to occasionally serve as an off-the-record source—not as someone to leak unofficial information but as someone you can bounce ideas off of and get candid reactions from. Get their cell phone numbers and program them into your phone so they’re always accessible. Use these sources to vet information that is confusing or surprising, or to get a gut check when needed. These contacts can help you determine, even quickly over text, when something seems bogus and should stay outside the news stream, or when information sounds like it is in the right ballpark.


Covering a scary situation always runs the risk of exacerbating fear and chaos. When reporting on things that could raise alarm bells, such as panic-buying or depleting stocks of hand sanitizer, be sure to also discuss what people can do, and what kind of solutions may be available. Suggest, for example, best times to avoid large crowds, ways to minimize exposure, or
more effective methods of hand washing. Similarly, think hard about the words you choose; are they needlessly alarming? Is your tone a little breathless? It’s easy to get caught up in the excitement—and fear—of something big and dangerous like a global pandemic. But your role is to be a steady, dispassionate, and reliable source of information. By imposing self-discipline when choosing language and tone, you build trust with your audience—a commodity that will serve you well beyond this crisis.

This advice was condensed from information shared during SciLine’s March 19 media briefing: Covering COVID-19.

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