

Conversation
Series



Public Health Emergencies & the Media

How non-scientists can spot the hype in media coverage on public health emergencies

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Public health emergencies, such as epidemics, are a tragic and unfortunately common part of our global society. Such moments can be marked by rapid government policy responses, frantic searches for medical treatments, social unrest, and complex ethical questions. In such times, the truth can be stretched by exaggerated news headlines—the phenomenon of hype. Hype can lead to troublesome consequences for science and society. This conversation series seeks to help non-scientists identify hype in media reports on public health emergencies.

Spotting hype

Understand the “hype pipeline”:

Hype can enter the scientific communication process from numerous sources at multiple points. From academic papers to news pieces to social media, a “hype pipeline” fuels exaggerated claims about scientific findings.

Critically evaluate calls for liberty-restricting measures:

Calls for quarantines or movement restrictions are sometimes motivated by fear rather than the best available scientific evidence. Not all public health emergencies warrant such measures, and even when they do, they merit ongoing critical evaluation.

Identify exaggerated claims:

Be on the lookout for claims that predict catastrophic outcomes for diseases we know little about or suggest imminent new “cures.” Such claims can be exaggerations.

Look for complete and balanced perspectives:

When reading an article covering a public health emergency, look for the inclusion of views that acknowledge uncertainty.

Validate the headline:

If a headline grabs your attention, read the article and compare the content with the heading. Does the heading reasonably match the content?

Responding to hype

Examine the justifications for liberty-restricting measures:

Fear and uncertainty should not replace clear arguments when justifying policy responses to a public health emergency. What do we know? What is uncertain? If the scientific basis seems accurate, is the response still ethically justifiable?

Check the facts:

It can be difficult to evaluate new information without other credible sources. If you are skeptical, find the original studies referenced by the article and other reputable sources or studies on the topic.

Develop your scientific literacy:

Many claims about public health threats can be understood without an advanced degree. Read available reports, studies, and educational materials. Increasing your scientific literacy will help you understand the underlying science and better interpret media reports.

Discuss with others:

Science is a shared resource, affecting and belonging to all citizens. Deliberations not only strengthen community and citizenship; they also educate. Discuss the topic with others to hear and evaluate new perspectives.

An example of hype: Ebola and the Media

In October 2014, the first imported case of Ebola into the United States, and the subsequent transmission to two U.S. nurses, created national fear and anxiety. Media coverage sometimes focused on theoretical—but dramatic—possible mutations of the virus rather than consistent, clear, and scientifically supported messaging regarding what is known about the virus and what U.S. residents could do to protect their health. It was also during this period that discussion and implementation of public health measures that involve monitoring and restricting movement, including quarantine, became a focus in the United States. Against a charged political backdrop and 24-hour media attention, frustrated public health officials struggled to convey, even before the first imported case, the low risk of individual and community transmission in the United States.

Adapted from: the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI). (2015, February). Ethics and Ebola: Public Health Planning and Response. Washington, DC: PCSBI, pp. 14-15.