

## Accurate and Effective Reporting in a Pandemic: Ethical Choices in COVID-19 Stories in Indian Media

Billions of rupees (millions of U.S. dollars) are on the line in dueling lawsuits over a single trial dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII) (Kumar, 2020). A participant who “developed a neurological condition” after vaccination is suing SII for damages, yet SII claims the patient was thoroughly examined and clearly told that the condition was not a result of the vaccine. As such, the SII is countersuing for “reputational damage,” calling the participant’s claims “malicious and misconceived” (Kumar, 2020). The drama dominated headlines in India but still lacks sufficient information to conclusively determine whether appropriate action was taken, making reporting on the incident difficult. Government officials and medical professionals have debated whether the ordeal threatens the legitimacy of the vaccine trial in the public eye, potentially affecting whether people will participate in trials in the future or agree to receive the vaccine if it is approved.



The highly contestable and highly public nature of the competing suits all but guaranteed news coverage. The ethical issue is *how* journalists should report on stories tied to a global health crisis. SII provides “polio, measles, hepatitis, and tuberculosis” vaccines “to more than 160 countries” and is manufacturing tens of millions of coronavirus vaccines monthly (Kumar, 2020). Reporting has the ability to either instill confidence or inject skepticism in their vaccination efforts. The former, if warranted, could bolster public participation in vaccination programs and quell the virus faster. If unwarranted—in other words, if skepticism really is needed—comforting reporting could put citizens at serious risk amidst an already massive public health crisis.

Within days of COVID-19 being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), an editor at *The Hindu* warned of the importance that “reports ... neither create unwarranted panic nor underplay the gravity of the situation” (Panneerselvan, 2020). Dr. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, a professor and journalism researcher at Cardiff University, argues news organizations need to confront “both the nature of the threat and their responsibility to manage the emotion of audience, and not unduly spread fear.” The goal is “informing readers without generating anxiety” (Panneerselvan, 2020).

While some recommendations—avoiding the spread of rumors—are obvious, others might give pause. For example, First Draft, a non-profit organization working to combat misinformation, recommends that journalists “avoid using sensationalist language” like “catastrophe,” “turmoil,” or “killer” when covering COVID-19 (Panneerselvan, 2020). Hannah Storm (2020), CEO of the

Ethical Journalism Network, offers a similar guideline: stay away from “scaremongering in language and images” such as pictures “of empty supermarket shelves.”

Taken at face value, avoiding panic-inducing language and images may be a clear ethical good. Yet, when discussing a once-in-a-century global health disaster, words like “catastrophe” may simply be accurate. If news organizations avoid showing readers supermarket shortages, where else might they get that same information? Spectacle can also go in the other direction; Singh (2020) warns of excessive positivity by many Indian media organizations whose uplifting reporting on minor or irrelevant activities can be seen as “trivialization of the crisis and a toxic ‘positivity’.”

A similar question has been posed throughout the pandemic about news organizations using photos of people in masks (Storm, 2020). Some experts recommend differentiating between whether such images are “newsworthy or simply attention grabbing” and grappling with what kind of face coverings are being used and whether these are regarded by health experts as effective (Storm, 2020). In India, a survey of 18 cities found that 90% of those surveyed were aware that wearing a mask reduced the spread of the diseases but that only 44% of respondents were doing so consistently (Alves, 2020). Masks, vaccines, and other public health measures can curb the spread of disease. Journalists need to cover these issues in a way that both encourages the public to take appropriate precautions and leaves room for criticism of national and local pandemic response (Singh, 2020), which is a hard ethical needle to thread with so many lives on the line in India and across the world. The SII case may be the first of many in the region and across the globe as vaccines continue to be tested and deployed. How journalists handle these developments could prove as crucial as the shots themselves.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What language or tone should journalists use when covering pandemics or other rare, widespread crises?
2. Is it ethically preferable to take the pandemic seriously and risk scaring readers into inaction or to avoid anxiety-inducing reports in way that might trivialize a crisis?
3. How can news organizations in India and across the world best report on issues where facts are inconclusive or unavailable?
4. What other ethical considerations are present for reporters covering a pandemic, especially in a country as large and diverse as India?

### **Further Information:**

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Sanjay Kumar, “‘Malicious and misconceived.’ Indian vaccine producer hits back at complaint from trial volunteer.” *Science*, December 2, 2020. Available at: <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/12/malicious-and-misconceived-indian-vaccine-producer-hits-back-complaint-trial-volunteer>

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Bhupen Singh, “Media in the time of COVID-19.” *Economic & Political Weekly*, April 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/media-time-covid-19>

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