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The H1N1 Pandemic Our Analysis of Global Media Coverage

Few health issues in recent memory have garnered more coverage and public reaction in such a short span of time than that of the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic. In the wake of this mass attention, we the partners of [GLOBALHealthPR](#) — expert health communicators in each of our countries, took a step back, analyzed the communications in order to offer you insight on the way the H1N1 pandemic has been reported worldwide.

Fear Spread by Sensationalism and Speculation?

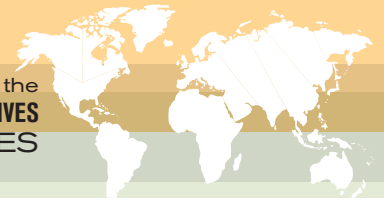
In every country the tone of media coverage of H1N1 has ranged from thoughtful, science-based reporting, to overt sensationalism and speculation. A universal criticism of coverage outside of the U.S. and Japan is that the media has created an unnecessary sense of general panic.

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The volume of coverage has varied quite a bit from country to country. For instance, in the U.K. initial coverage of the H1N1 flu was rigorous yet informative, and always credible. However, soon after the initial wave of coverage interest in the story seemed to wane. Later news accounts in the U.K. tended take a more sensationalized and extreme tone.

In Spain, coverage of the H1N1 flu had almost the exact opposite flow. Initial coverage could best be described as alarmist, causing a sense of general fear throughout the population. As the story developed, subsequent coverage became more responsible and involved credible spokespersons, including doctors and politicians. Over time, the initial feeling of fear and panic subsided with credible experts emphasizing the need to explain the facts behind the spread of H1N1 in a calm manner.

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Key Organizations Worldwide Take Action

Across the globe, key opinion leaders, politicians and scientific societies have universally demonstrated a desire to disseminate succinct, credible information to the public related to the spread and prevention of H1N1. Organizations such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Governments of England, Argentina, Spain, Mexico and France all provided excellent information to the public. Similarly, many media outlets, such as the BBC, have delivered fair and balanced reports. Yet the number of these reports carrying a more informative tone has been equalled, and in some countries overwhelmed, by coverage tending towards the extreme.

H1N1 Flu Affects Politics, Society and Economy Worldwide

It is a fact that coverage of the H1N1 flu has had great social, economic and political impacts on countries around the world. Interestingly, there is a remarkable difference between countries that were directly and abruptly affected by the flu, such as Mexico, Argentina or Brazil, as opposed to other countries that had more time to prepare for the pandemic.

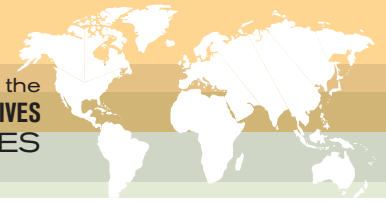
The first countries to be negatively affected by H1N1 were impacted significantly. Many experienced a noticeable drop in tourism - theatres closed, winter vacations were extended, there was a decline in economic activity, expectant mothers began working at home and people avoided crowded places such as shopping malls.

By contrast, in countries that had more time to prepare for the pandemic, actions were not as dramatic. Indeed, there seemed to be a great deal of focus on prevention measures before H1N1 reached crisis levels. Prevention campaigns outlined how to minimize the risk of mass infections. Doctors and schools were kept on maximum alert. Vaccine availability became a major issue. In general, the tone was that of a country preparing for a crisis rather than reacting to one that is already present.

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Governments All Across the Globe Continue to Take Action Against H1N1

- In **Germany**, the government is currently preparing for inoculation of a huge group of its citizens (50 million doses have been ordered). The cost for inoculation is being split by the health insurance funds and the federal states.
- In the **U.S.**, the CDC and other health authorities are doing a thorough job communicating directly to schools and other organizations that are at high-risk for the virus. By leveraging mass communication outlets and social media channels, authorities have effectively communicated prevention measures to the public.
- In the **U.K.**, an initial helpline phone number was set up, but was subsequently scaled back due to a low volume of calls. A vaccination program against the virus is rolling out initially focused on key healthcare professionals and at-risk groups.
- In **Spain**, the National Health Service has defined the "first risk group" (chronically ill, pregnant women and workers of the healthcare system). There will be a stockpile of vaccinations to cover as many people as possible. The specific anti-viral drugs for the treatment have been removed from chemists' shops to prevent unjustified hoarding. In general, the flu has not affected school schedules in any way.



H1N1 Remains A Popular Topic Among Media

Now that the H1N1 story has been extensively covered, there has been a noticeable shift in the tone of communications. While there is still the occasional sensational headline engendering fear about the pandemic, a substantial amount of coverage has begun to acknowledge that the reality seems to be significantly less dramatic than had been expected.

While the tone of the coverage evolved to become more reasonable, H1N1 remains a popular topic among reporters. Countries in the Northern Hemisphere moved into their traditional flu seasons. As news outlets report on the traditional flu, updates on H1N1 are included as well. Many countries in the Southern Hemisphere were hit suddenly with the initial outbreak of H1N1. As news of the local crisis has subsided, recent coverage has focused on how the flu is affecting the rest of the world.

What Should We Expect Next?

As each country has been impacted by H1N1, local government and media have attempted to appropriately, yet effectively, inform the public. People are being encouraged to take simple prevention measures now and in the future. Moving forward, the focus of news coverage will most likely be on vaccination policies and how the virus continues to spread in both hemispheres. To date there has been a staggering amount of news and information reported about H1N1. As a result, it may be that the opportunity for alarmist reporting has run its course and future coverage will take a more measured tone overall. As the flu season continues on, it will be interesting to see not just how the media presents the story, but how long it will take until interest in the story fades and reports of H1N1 gradually begin to disappear.

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