

Coronavirus: From Outbreak to 'Infodemic'

PART 3: Insights from Latin America



Over the past two weeks, the COVID-19 outbreak has taken new twists and turns, with cases now rising faster outside of China than inside. The spread of the virus to more than 70 countries has presented new challenges for governments, health professionals and media covering the outbreak. Italy, South Korea, the United States and Iran have now begun to dominate coverage—and public concern—around the virus' risk and impact.

Coronavirus Outbreak in Numbers

At the time of publication, 3 March, the outbreak has caused¹:

3,159 fatalities

80,151 confirmed cases in mainland China

12,657 confirmed cases across **76** countries outside of mainland China

In Part 3 of this global series on the media impact of the coronavirus, GLOBALHealthPR leaders from the Latin America region provide insights about the spread of information in their markets and the impact it has had locally.



Argentina

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Despite First Case, COVID-19 Detracts from Much-Needed Attention to Measles and Dengue

On Tuesday 3 March, Argentina reported its first local case of coronavirus.

During the past few weeks, the media in Argentina have extensively covered COVID-19 topics, such as the increase in the number of cases in China and worldwide, the potential for the disease to spread and infect Argentines, the economic impact of the outbreak, as well as progress in developing a vaccine. Recently, media outlets have focused on covering a case in which an Argentine tested positive for the virus while on a cruise ship. Speculation on how and when this individual will be allowed to return to Argentina has been addressed extensively.

At the end of January, Health Minister Ginés González García held a press conference in which he assured citizens that they are in regular contact with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and that it was imperative not to travel to China if possible. Health authorities also recently organized a meeting with the Argentine Network of Scientific Journalism to communicate the potential risk of Argentines contracting the virus, which is still quite low. However, extensive coverage of COVID-19 in the media has taken away attention from other viral diseases, such as dengue and measles, which currently pose a greater threat to citizens.



Brazil

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Communications Planning Prepares Public for First Confirmed Case

On 26 February, the Brazilian Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Brazil and Latin America: a 61 year-old who had contracted the virus in northern Italy. The federal Government was quick to collaborate with its local counterparts to keep the public up-to-date on any further suspected cases.

Expecting this development, the health ministry had already begun implementing a robust communications plan to combat fake news and the spread of misinformation from non-medical professionals. Officials have held daily press conferences about COVID-19 and provided consistent updates via official social media channels.

Even before the first confirmed case, myriad reports and news stories focused on the estimated 34 Brazilian nationals who were evacuated from Wuhan recently and remain in quarantine at an Air Force base in Anápolis, in the state of Goias. Action was taken partly due to a six-minute video posted on Youtube in which some of these Brazilian nationals pleaded with President Jair Bolsonaro to fly them back home. Once the plane was en-route home, Bolsonaro took to Twitter to thank China for their cooperation. When the plane touched down in Brazil, Brazil's defence ministry issued a press statement emphasising that all evacuees arrived without any signs of infection.



Mexico

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Media Coverage Intensifies as First Five Cases of COVID-19 are Confirmed in Mexico

On 28 February, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Mexico. Prior to this, unconfirmed cases of the virus were reported in areas such as the US-Mexico border, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Tamaulipas, and Mexico City, among others. Although perceived as an emergency on a global scale, Mexican citizens do not consider it an imminent threat, and the general public have remained relatively calm.

As of 2 March, four more cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, and media coverage on the topic has subsequently intensified. Reports have focused on spreading hygiene practices that the population should adopt in order to avoid contracting the virus. The general tone of the information being disseminated is not alarmist and many outlets have taken to debunking myths that are spreading via social media.

The Mexican Health Ministry has stated that its main objective is to avoid the virus spreading in the country, so it is closely monitoring all potential cases reported and working on containment strategies. Simultaneously, the government has enacted a campaign promoting sanitary habits, such as covering the mouth with the forearm when sneezing or coughing, avoiding greeting others with a kiss (which is a traditional practice in Mexico), as well as reporting to the hospital with a fever and a cough.

Reference: 1. Johns Hopkins (2020) <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

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