

Ebola and Coronavirus: A Retrospective

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Abstract

The sensationalist response to the ebolavirus outbreak in 2013 and the various responses to the coronavirus outbreak in 2019 were the result of news media and social media outlets attempting to attract the attention of the public.

Introduction

In 2013, there was an outbreak of the Zaire ebolavirus in West Africa. The virus left the United States relatively unaffected; nevertheless, fear consumed many in the United States on the news and social media. For the many people who had lived through sensationalized outbreaks before, the panic over Ebola was nothing new. However, the American response to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 was vastly different. The coronavirus pandemic had a drastically larger death toll for Americans—and the world—than the Ebola pandemic but was a significantly more divisive issue among Americans.

What is common to both outbreaks, however, is that Americans were afraid. Even during the coronavirus outbreak, when America was divided about whether to fear the virus at all, the Americans who did not fear the virus were instilled with fear towards another issue. The largest source of this division and fear was the American news media on cable and social media news outlets.

Many people who are looking at the American response to the coronavirus outbreak in 2019 would be tempted to believe that the fervor on each side was incited by politicians. However, a comparison with the American response to the ebolavirus outbreak in 2013 reveals that—while the political stage played a role in developing the passions on each side of the political spectrum—the national response was incited and dictated by social media and news media outlets who were utilizing fear to attract the attention of the American people.

Background

When the ebolavirus broke out in West Africa, Americans across the country panicked about the impending death and destruction that was expected to ravage the nation. When two Americans treated a foreign patient and contracted Ebola, these fears only worsened. Contrary to popular expectation, however, not a single American citizen died of the Zaire ebolavirus. What caused Americans to be so

afraid of a virus when they had almost no chance of contracting it?

In December 2019, there was an outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus that began in Wuhan, China. Immediately, Americans were bombarded with claims that the disease was a bioweapon the Chinese would use to level American society. Americans were inundated with reports of massive mortality rates across the country and the world. However, as the details about the virus—especially its mortality rate—became more apparent, many people began to stop fearing the virus.

For people who were more afraid about where their next meal was going to come from or how they were going to afford the next month's rent for their apartment, the small chance of death from the virus was not enough to scare them. At this point, cries began to rise from poorer and working-class Americans that they wished to *return to normal*.

The response from the media at this point is the most obvious example of how the media utilizes yellow journalism to create fear. It was at this point that the media clove itself almost cleanly in half. One-half of the media continued to present increasingly overblown and exaggerated death statistics, telling the viewers who still feared the virus that they had every reason to remain afraid. The other half began to present the Americans who had become disillusioned with the virus with supposed evidence of why they should fear that their "civil liberties [were] at stake." Thus, Americans who stopped tuning into the nightly news or visiting social media pages that claimed to present the news since they were no longer afraid of the virus were drawn back in and given new things to fear.

If the news media seemed to play such a large role in inciting fear among Americans during the coronavirus outbreak, this raises the question: "What role did the media play in the American perception of the ebolavirus outbreak?" Here, a similar pattern is visible. During the ebolavirus outbreak, the media was not subtle in its approach to scare Americans into tuning in. Calling the ebolavirus "The Isis of Biological Agents," and presenting viewers with descriptions of Isis contaminating illegal immigrants with Ebola, "sneaking them into this country and setting them free among the people."

In both cases, politicians from across the political spectrum fed into the different strains of extremism by either saying that America should not ignore the virus in question and not pay any attention to it—yet encouraging that the fear of the virus not be eradicated, but rather shifted away from the virus and towards their opponent—or saying

that America was being ravaged by death and devastation on an unprecedented scale—and that electing them was the only way to prevent the impending death of the country.

As a result of the high emotions created by the news media and the exacerbation of natural divisions by the American approach to politics, by 2022 what had been a common general apprehension of the disease had become a clear and passionate division between those who thought that even acknowledging the virus was detrimental to the American people and those who thought that the virus should be the primary concern of Americans.

Analysis

News sources on television, on the internet, and especially on social media need to attract the attention of potential consumers, which often results in the utilization of yellow journalism. When the American media chooses to focus its hyperbole and emotional manipulation on certain topics, its focus leads to increased concern among Americans about those issues. Andrew Breitbart once said that “[p]olitics is downstream from culture,” and the validity of that statement is the most obvious during episodes of national crisis—and even more so when there is a crisis during an election year.

The media coverage of any given issue influences the political stage since, because of the increased concern among Americans, the issues that the media chose to highlight become issues that American politicians must pledge to deal with to gain the support of the now-concerned American voters. The combination of the news media and American politics results in a vicious cycle whereby increased media attention on an issue creates fear among voting Americans that politicians must address, and politicians addressing those issues bring those issues even further into the forefront of discussion among news media outlets.

Many might argue that the national response was rooted in politics, not the media, and point to the clear division between the parties in their approaches to the coronavirus. However, politics was not the source of the divide as much as it was a symptom. While the American political machine served to exacerbate the division on the issues, the division can be traced to a person’s media source more directly than it can be traced to his political party. Studies from the BMJ Global Health Journal and BMC Public Health Journal suggest that the difference between people who watch Fox News and the people who

watch CNN is like the difference between the people who self-identify as Republicans and the people who self-identify as Democrats when it comes to continuing risky behaviors through the coronavirus pandemic.

This metric is flawed, though, because the survey only included moderately extreme members of each party in the statistics separated by their party; viewers of more extreme news sources—who would serve to increase the disparity in the risky behavior between viewers of different sources—were not included in either study. If the difference between the behavior of people watching one relatively central news source and people watching another relatively central news source is approximately like the difference between people self-identifying as Republican and people self-identifying as Democrat, it is safe to assume that the difference between people watching news sources that are more biased than Fox News or CNN would be higher than the difference between the behaviors of Democrats and Republicans.

The high correlations between the source a person uses for his news and his political affiliation—that are not necessarily reciprocal—seem to suggest that a person’s news source plays a larger role in deciding his political affiliation than a person’s political affiliation does in deciding his news source. The correlation between news sources and political leaning also explains why there has been a marked increase in the political crossover in recent years—a change that is almost directly correlated with a decline in the trust of the media and an increase in the distinct news sources viewed by the average American.

Even though it may seem like politics played a role in creating the division, when the statistics regarding public response are considered, a picture begins to emerge that suggests that American politics only serves to exacerbate a divide that already exists. This is because the media coverage of an issue is designed to create intense emotions, such as fear and anger. Because the media is attempting to manipulate the emotions of its viewers, different viewers often hear entirely different presentations of the issues in question. This disparity in the presentation of information is where the division seems to first appear.

For example, during the coronavirus epidemic, Fox News convinced its viewers to tune in by telling them to be fearful and angry. Fox News said that the viewers should fear losing their rights and they should be angry at the people who sought to take the viewers’ rights from them; Fox News said that the viewers should be angry and afraid

because the pandemic was simply a weapon and an excuse to institute practices that would help *the enemy* commit election fraud and establish a covert dictatorship.

However, to convince its viewers that the quarantine measures were a political weapon—to convince the viewers that they should be emotional enough to tune in—Fox News needed to strip away any claims to legitimacy that the coronavirus pandemic response measures might have had. To delegitimize the response to the virus, Fox News began to present the epidemic as less and less of an issue. It began with reporting less often on the death toll, but after a year of the pandemic, even the death toll itself was under attack as Fox News pointed to instances of comorbidities and scattered instances of deaths that were included fraudulently as a reason that the death toll should be disregarded entirely.

Eventually, the viewers of Fox News were presented with entirely different information than the viewers of other channels, such as CNN. When one viewer saw an overinflated death statistic presented in a way meant to scare the viewer, another viewer would see claims that the entire pandemic was a hoax and be told that the only way for the viewer to fight back against people who seek destruction for the viewer—and the values the viewer holds—is to completely disregard anything that he hears about the hazardousness of the virus.

This disparity in information was even greater on social media websites, as accounts that claimed to share news would assist the cable news media in developing hysteria by presenting viewers with a series of sound bites and headlines in a format where the viewer is almost guaranteed not to look beyond the surface of the information he is given before scrolling to the next item.

As social media sites such as Truth Social and Parler gained popularity in the wake of controversies about data mining and censorship within mainstream social media platforms, the echo chamber that viewers placed themselves in became even more extreme—and ripe for misinformation and emotional manipulation.

From that point, however, the divide only grows more. The divide that the media creates by presenting different viewers with different information is amplified by its infusion into politics. After Fox News tells its viewers that they should not fear the virus, but they should fear the *covert dictatorship* that Democrats are seeking to create, the Fox News viewers, who almost completely self-identify as Republicans, come to their—mostly Republican—politicians and say they are concerned that the public health measures are a weapon of the *elites*.

The viewers tell their politicians that the viewers will not vote for the politician unless the politician acts—or pledges to act—against the issue the viewers have been taught to fear. It is at this point that politicians are forced to take a stance based on the extreme views that have been developed by the media. However, because of the disparity in the information that each news source gives its viewers, the voters who have been presented with different information—the information that the pandemic is way deadlier than it is, for example—are simultaneously calling for their politicians to address the issue.

As a result, the sizeable divide about the issue—that already existed from the emotional manipulation and yellow journalism that the media utilized against its viewers—is inflated drastically on the political stage as it is weaponized by politicians and interest groups to attract the attention and support of the viewers that the politicians know are worried about the issue. The attention that politicians pay to the issues further legitimizes the coverage of those issues on cable news and social media in a vicious cycle that is repeated with every issue that makes its way through the media.

Conclusion

The American sensationalist response to the ebolavirus outbreak in 2013 shows how the extreme reactions to the coronavirus outbreak in 2019 were the result of *yellow journalism* and emotional manipulation utilized by news media and social media outlets who were attempting to attract the attention of the American public and were exacerbated by the American political machine. This is the same pattern that can be seen in the American response to the threat of World War III—where Americans stopped fearing the coronavirus, so the media told Americans to fear a draft that never came—and the American response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine—where Americans stopped fearing the advent of WWII, so the media began telling Americans to fear a nuclear Armageddon that will never come.

To change the way that the media approaches the news, two things must happen. First, Americans must make the current method unprofitable, and doing that requires a change in American culture. A culture change sounds intimidating, but while it would be difficult, something as simple as reading deeper than the headlines of a social media post or news article—something many Americans do not do—would make a massive difference in the way that the media must approach their portrayal of the news. This is because articles that lack substantive claims, but are circulated

because of their appealing headlines, will be shared less if people stop and consider the claims and arguments that the article makes. In addition, articles that may not have as attractive headlines, but present interesting evidence and arguments, will see more circulation if more people read the body of the article, which is where more substantive articles show their strength.

The second thing that must happen also involves a culture change, albeit one on a much smaller scale. Academia must change the way it views the average person. Because of the way that laymen are thought of in academic culture, it is not thought to be as important as it should be to make science—and especially scientific articles—accessible to readers from outside of academia.

Part of the reason that the media has as much influence as it does on the public perception of an issue is that the media is the only means that laymen must be exposed to scientific discoveries. If academics made a more concerted effort to make academics more accessible to the average person, perhaps by a change as slight as including a simplified version of the abstract alongside the normal abstract, people from outside academics could view science without looking through one of the lenses that the media presents the information in. More direct accessibility to the facts would also lead to an increase in accountability for the media because more people would be able to separate exaggeration and emotional manipulation from the truth.

Cultural changes—even changes as small as the ones suggested—are always difficult to enact. The chance of bringing even such simple changes to fruition might seem hopeless. However, recent trends in American media viewership and the increasing awareness of the way that the media attempts to manipulate its viewers, in conjunction with calls among academics to learn how to better present data to laymen, offer hope for a future with less polarization.

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