

Too much news: How the tone and content of COVID-19 coverage affects mental wellbeing

April 2 2020, by Dr Cherie Lacey



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Tuning in for news on COVID-19 has now become part of many people's daily lives. Millions of people around the world who now find themselves in lockdown are frequently accessing numerous social and

news media platforms to seek up-to-the-minute information.

My current research project, alongside Professor Annemarie Jutel from the University's Faculty of Health and others, focuses on the communication of COVID-19 and how it shapes and influences the public's response. Our research explores how the tone and content of [information](#) about COVID-19 affects the mental wellbeing of tertiary students in New Zealand.

World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Misinformation, fake news, and rumours abound, so how is the [media](#) shaping our understanding of, and emotional responses to, this crisis?

The media play a vital role in not only communicating important [health](#) and safety information to the public, but in shaping how we respond to this pandemic. In times of crisis, the media have to be careful to enhance the public awareness of the virus and the measures taken to contain it, without spreading fear and panic.

As we've seen in the New Zealand media over the last month, COVID-19 has been described as "deadly", or a "killer", or even that we are "bracing for war". Currently, we are in "lockdown". Words like these, which evoke combat or invasion, can make us feel under attack. Metaphors like these can also influence how we might behave—provoking panic buying, for example.

Traditional media have a key role in providing evidence-based information to the public. But what we're seeing at the moment is a situation where the media are torn between echoing the official messaging from the government, WHO, Ministry of Health, and so on, while remaining independent and competitive in an attention economy.

Professor Jutel and I have also found it difficult to find examples of accurate and straight-forward medical descriptions of the virus itself in the media. Instead, we see the vigorous use of metaphors being used to describe the virus. In addition to war-like metaphors, we've also found COVID-19 being likened to natural disasters, such as bush fires, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Together, these sorts of descriptions can invoke anxiety, fear, and a sense of powerlessness.

We can see the appeal of using these kinds of metaphors in trying to communicate the magnitude of the situation, however, there's a real danger in using them because they play a big role in shaping how people perceive the disease. They can generate emotions that are unsuited to a health crisis, and to appropriate individual and public health action.

We know that technology can affect our health and wellbeing and there's a danger of people spending too much time consuming media about this health crisis. People's social media use can also very quickly spiral to see them feeling overwhelmed with information. In addition, all the negative aspects of social media that we've known about for some time only become more extreme during times of health crises.

But there is a flip side to this.

We're seeing people actively engaging with technologies for personal and community wellbeing. This involves activities such as video chatting with friends and family, using technology for exercise and stress relief, fostering connections in the local community, and keeping informed about key health information about the virus.

My biggest tip for digital wellbeing right now would be to put limits around the use of media in general, but especially around news consumption.

It's pretty tempting to check the news throughout the day for more information about COVID-19, but I suggest limiting this to two or three times a day. In New Zealand, there are daily press conferences at around 1pm and 3pm or 4pm. Perhaps check the news around these times for the latest health information but try to avoid it for the rest of the day.

It's really important to be mindful about how you're feeling when you use your devices. Are you feeling more anxious or overwhelmed than before? Then put down your device and focus on something else—bake some 'lockdown' bread or go for a walk!

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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