



Canadian News Coverage During COVID-19
by Laken Crowell



Introduction

Like a puppet on a string. The news media control its audiences' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. The information fed to the audience by the media is often all the information the audience receive on many topics. Journalists' jobs are to inform, but they also decide what to inform us about. They influence what importance is placed on certain topics, how often people are exposed to a message, and what information is actually released to the public. During the COVID-19 crisis, the news media is giving constant attention to the virus. The majority of articles in the news are related to COVID-19. The question is, is the COVID-19 virus the only event going on in the world right now? Judging by the media attention it is receiving, one would think so. However, many other events may have a large impact on the future of the world that are not receiving the same media coverage they would have before COVID-19, such as the case with Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, the ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States, and the Syrian War and the refugees who are seeking help from that; just to name a few. The Canadian news media is not efficiently doing its job during COVID-19.

Role of the Media

Journalists are responsible for reflecting society's needs and issues "comprehensively and proportionately" (Schwitzer et al., 2005). When numerous events occur at one time, it is the media's job to determine what events need to be focused on. According to Schwitzer and his colleagues, "journalists have a special responsibility in covering health and medical news" because the public makes their decisions based on the information provided by the media (2005). The media is effective during a pandemic in informing the public about risks, prevention, and containment strategies (Smith et al., 2013). Therefore, it seems necessary for the media to provide an increased amount of coverage for COVID-19. Generally, whether a journalist perceives an event as a "news story" depends on "news values" such as timeliness, proximity, significance, prominence, conflict, disaster, and human interest (Johnson, 2004). Using these

news values, it again shows that COVID-19 should be the top news story; however, there are other events currently going on that fall under many of these news values. With limited reports on other events, the media is going to have a lot of catching up to do after COVID-19 to explain what else is going on in the world. That is if it is not already too late.

Mass Media Theories

Many mass media theories can be used to describe what is going on here. For one, agenda-setting theory. This theory shows that journalists can set the media agenda. It says that the “media attention to various political issues or frames matter for public opinion formation” (Djerf & Shehata, 2017). People’s knowledge and concerns about societal problems are created by the amount of media attention given to those issues (Djerf & Shehata, 2017). Whatever the media chooses to inform the public about is what the public has knowledge of. Therefore, giving the media the power to decide what the public does and does not know about. The media also has the power to place importance on certain topics. Public opinions correlate with the dominant messages provided by news media (Djerf & Shehata, 2017). During the COVID-19 crisis, the public only knows about the information provided by the news media. With the dominance of reports related to COVID-19 compared to any other news, it shapes public opinion to think COVID-19 is the only event that they need to be concerned about.

Secondly, cultivation theory can be applied to this situation. This theory suggests that the news media can cultivate public beliefs (Potter, 2014). Mass produced messages form “a common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence” (Potter, 2014). In other words, the media messages which the public is constantly exposed to can cause the entire public to think about and share beliefs about the same things, creating a cult-like group. Based on the media’s messages related to COVID-19 the public shares the same notions about the facts and share beliefs about what this virus is doing to the world. Again, it creates a shared belief that COVID-19 is the only event that needs to be worried about at this time.

Thirdly, gatekeeping theory can be applied. This theory looks at the channels that possible news stories must go through before they are released into the public (Johnson, 2009). At each of these channels, people decide whether a news item passes through the gate and gets released to the public (Johnson, 2009). Journalists decide what is news and then what aspects of that are “newsworthy” (Johnson, 2004). An editor then shortens, tightens, or just throws out the story and decide how big of a headline the story gets (Johnson, 2004). The media has full power over what information is released to the public. During COVID-19 the media has decided that stories related to COVID-19 are most newsworthy and everything else is lesser than that. This is why some information about other events has not been provided to the public by Canadian news media or has been buried under all the COVID-19 articles.

These theories all play off one another in this situation. The media is gatekeeping what stories they share with the public, cultivating them by exposing them to the same messages over and over, and setting the agenda by putting extra importance on one particular topic. All these theories together suggest that COVID-19 is the only thing going on in the world that the public needs to know about and be worried about.

What the Media is Missing

There is much more going on in the world right now than COVID-19. COVID-19 is affecting the whole world and many events are connected to the virus, but there is still more that is very important and would be larger news stories if they were not being drowned out by COVID-19 news. For example, take the case with Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. The two Michaels were detained in China on December 10, 2018, a few days after Canadian authorities arrested CFO of Huawei, Meng Wanzhou (Connolly & Lao, 2020). When the event happened, it received a lot of media coverage. This event is still ongoing, but it receives next to no media coverage, especially with the dominating coverage of COVID-19.

Secondly, the tensions between Iran and the United States continue to rise, but due to the extensive media coverage of COVID-19, many people do not realize this. When the tensions between the two countries began to heat up it was one of the top news stories and people were predicting the beginning of a war. Now, during the COVID-19 crisis, the media have significantly decreased the reports on the ongoing event. On March 11th there was a rocket attack on an Iraq base. On March 12th the U.S. retaliated with an attack on an Iranian Shia militia group. On March 14th another barrage of rockets hit a base housing U.S. and other coalition troops. All these events had an article written about them in the Canadian news media, but they were buried by all the reports related to COVID-19. The tension and actions between the two countries have continued throughout March and into early April. On April 2nd, Stars and Stripes reported that the U.S. deployed Patriot missile batteries in Iraq (Garland, 2020). The journalist is calling the current event a “war of words between Washington and Tehran” (Garland, 2020). Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded on Twitter to Trump’s warnings by saying, “openly Iran starts no wars, but teaches lessons to those who do” (Garland, 2020). The rising tensions between the two countries could have a huge impact on the future and is something the public should be aware of, but because of the dominating coverage of COVID-19, many think that is all they have to worry about.

Many other events are going on during the COVID-19 which are in the shadows of the virus, but the final one to be discussed in this paper is the continuing developments in the Syrian war and the refugees who are trying to escape from it. The Syrian war has been ongoing since 2011 (Rodgers et al., 2016). It is largely a war between those for and against President Assad (Rodgers et al., 2016). The war has included murder, torture, rape, and enforced disappearances from all parties (Rodgers et al., 2016). There has been a blockage of food, water, and health services (Rodgers et al., 2016). The healthcare systems have deteriorated rapidly and more than 70% of the medical community has fled (Zarka et al., 2019). Overall, it is not a safe place to live at all. Just in 2015 alone, 1.2 million people had been driven from their homes (Rodgers et al., 2016). This war has caused one of the largest refugee exoduses in recent history (Rodgers et al., 2016). There are about 5.6 million Syrian refugees and another 6.2 million are displaced within Syria (Reid, 2020). The majority of Syria’s refugees have fled by land and sea to neighbouring countries (Reid, 2020). There are 3.6 million in Turkey and 90% of them live outside of refugee camps and have limited access to basic services (Reid, 2020). There are 915,000 in Lebanon (Reid, 2020). 656,000 are in Jordan, 120,000 of which live in refugee camps (Reid, 2020). 250,000 are in Iraq and 130,000 are in Egypt (Reid, 2020). In 2015, 1.3 million Syrians requested asylum in Europe, but the number has significantly decreased since then (Reid, 2020).

Many of the refugees live in primitive conditions (Reid, 2020). Again, this is an ongoing event that people should know about, but with the increase in coverage of COVID-19, there has been almost no acknowledgement of the current situation. This comes as a surprise considering there actually may be connections to the Syrian refugee crisis and COVID-19. It could be argued that the Canadian news media has not done its job in connecting these dots and informing the public about this possibility. There is a lot to be said about the history of wars and the spread of pandemics. The conditions created by war increase the spread of infectious diseases which affects both armies and civilians (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). These conditions include mass movement of populations, overcrowding, lack of access to clean water, poor sanitation, lack of shelter, poor nutritional status, and a collapse in public health infrastructure and lack of health services (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). These conditions are exactly the conditions currently created by the Syrian war. During the Napoleonic wars, eight times more people in the British army died from disease than from battle wounds (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). During the American Civil war, two-thirds of the estimated 660,000 deaths of soldiers were caused by pneumonia, typhoid, dysentery, and malaria (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). In Afghanistan, malaria, which was well controlled in 1979, has resurfaced in the past 20 years since the conflict began (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). Diseases have been known as the “third army” in war (Connolly & Heymann, 2002). Connolly & Heymann noted that “globalization and increased travel have made previously remote threats relevant to healthy security worldwide” (2002). With the conditions refugees of Syria and the people living in Syria are facing, it is easy for a virus like COVID-19 to spread rapidly, and with a lack of health care, there is no one to help them. Just back in late February, Syrian government forces in Southern Syria launched a deadly attack on Turkish troops and 33 Turkish soldiers were killed (*BBC News*, 2020). After this event, Turkey’s communication chief said the country has not received enough support hosting millions of Syrian refugees (*BBC News*, 2020). Turkey, which previously prevented refugees from leaving for Europe under an aid-linked deal with the European Union, is now allowing them to leave (*BBC News*, 2020). Turkey’s communication director, Fahrettin Altun, said migrants were now also Europe and the rest of the world’s problem (*BBC News*, 2020). Greece and Bulgaria, which both border Turkey, have been preventing people from entering; Greece is using tear gas (*BBC News*, 2020). Similar events are continuing to occur during the COVID-19 crisis and with the conditions created by the war and the movement of people, it is possible that, like in the past, this has played and will continue playing a large role in the spread of COVID-19. This may be important information, but the Canadian news media has failed to share it with the public.

Conclusion

The Canadian news media is not efficiently doing its job during COVID-19. The role of the media is to inform the public about what the needs and issues are around the world. A pandemic requires a large amount of attention from the news media, but should it cover up all other news? A pandemic does not freeze everything else going on in the world. Looking at mass media theories such as agenda-setting theory, cultivation theory, and gatekeeping theory, it is clear that the stories chosen to be in the news are majorly related to COVID-19, the public is constantly exposed to the same messages about COVID-19, and the media has placed extra importance on stories related to COVID-19. These all influence the public’s opinions about the virus and makes them believe that it is the only event going on right now that they need to have knowledge

about and to be concerned about. Like a puppet on a string. The media has controlled its audiences' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about COVID-19 and current world events.

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