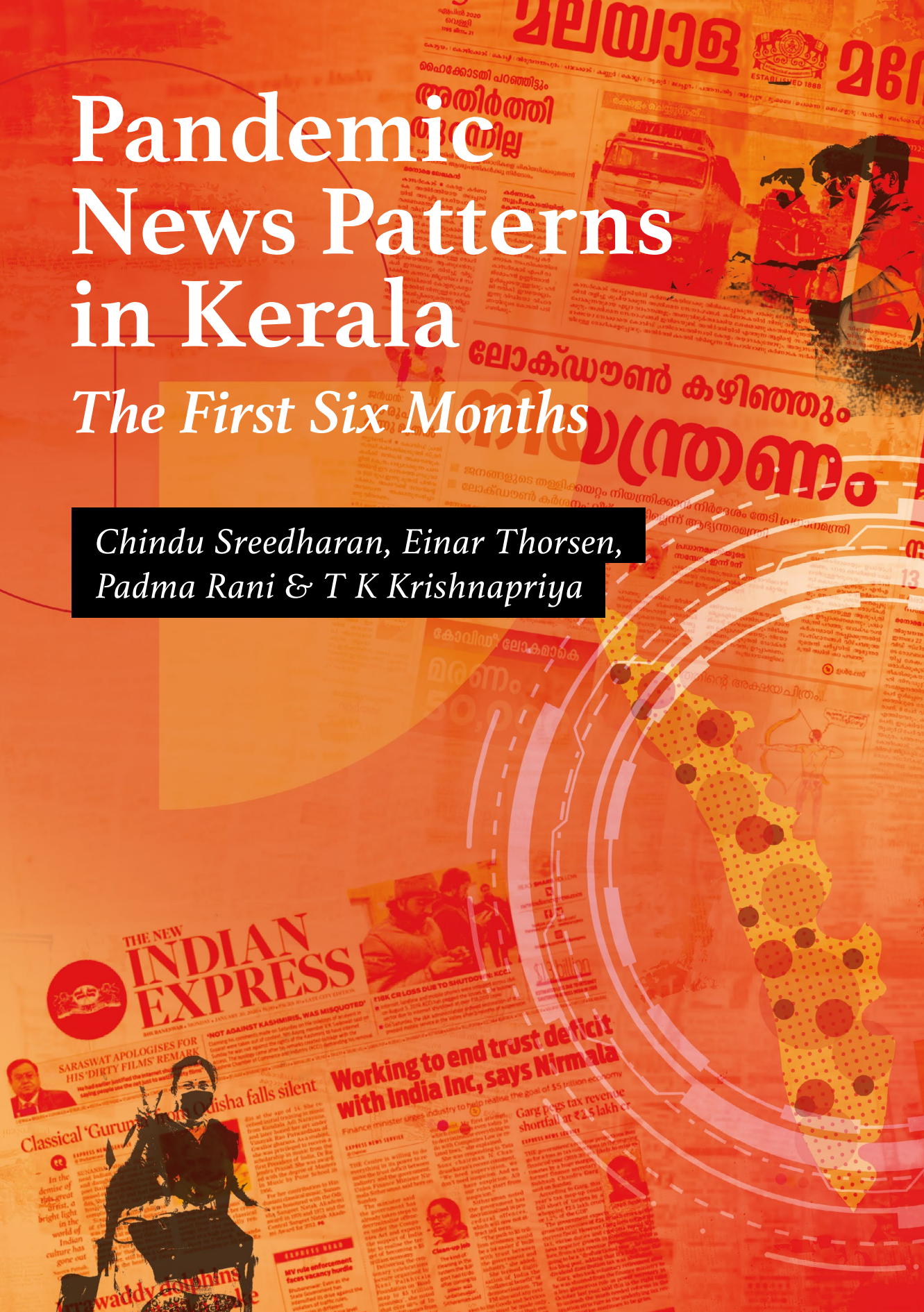
# Pandemic News Patterns in Kerala

## *The First Six Months*

*Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen, Padma Rani & T K Krishnapriya*



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## The First Six Months

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Pandemic News Patterns in Kerala: The First Six Months

Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen, Padma Rani, and T K Krishnapriya

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John Mary, Director of the Institute of Journalism at the Press Club, Thiruvananthapuram, and former resident editor of the *Deccan Chronicle*, contributed the foreword to this report at very short notice. We thank him for his patience and generosity with time.

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**Chindu Sreedharan**
**Einar Thorsen**
**Padma Rani**
**T K Krishnapriya**

# Foreword

On 22 January 2022, the Covid-19 test positivity rate (TRP) in Kerala stood at 44.81% and its weekly average at 37.84%, against a national average of 16.65%.

The uptick is attributed to the Omicron variant, but that alone does not explain why Kerala, which had won praise initially for flattening the curve, has ended up trailing other Indian states during the peak of the third wave.

For the latest surge, part of the blame lay with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which leads the ruling coalition, for going ahead with its district conventions in violation of the general consensus prevailing against large meetings. It called off a few such potential super-spreader rallies at the last minute — but only after the High Court of Kerala stepped in. But the main Opposition alliance, the United Democratic Front, and the Bharatiya Janata Party were cautious, suspending all public meetings till the situation improved.

Even before, the state government had faced Opposition flak for undercounting Covid deaths. Systemic lethargy had contributed to a delay in installing state-of-the art testing facilities such as genome sequencing at the Institute of Advanced Virology in Thiruvananthapuram and the decade-old Institute of Virology in Alappuzha. The Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology, located in Thiruvananthapuram, chips in but samples also need to be send to the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, New Delhi, for detailed analysis.

An expert panel to advise the state government on the pandemic is led by a neurosurgeon, in place of an epidemiologist or infectious diseases expert. The public has no idea how much of the committee deliberations are accepted by the government because its minutes are not in the public domain.

In highlighting such issues, journalists play an important role. How did the news industry respond to the state government's handling of Covid-19? *Pandemic News Patterns in Kerala: The First Six Months* shines light on that key question.

This study reviewed 3,084 news reports, articles, reader responses and editorials on the pandemic, published by leading dailies — *Malayala Manorama* and *The New Indian Express* — between 31 January and 31 July 2020. Kerala had the first case of the viral infection in the country — a medico back from the Chinese city of Wuhan — on 30 January 2020.

The study discerns a conventional pattern of reportage, with journalists relying on 'elite' government sources than independent experts. Reporters with little formal training in crisis journalism produced a staple fare of government guidelines, and morbidity and mortality reports. They failed to see the pandemic as an opportunity to be better journalists, struggling with the twin tasks of informing the public and being the watchdog at the same time.

The government was upbeat when the pandemic began, following its success of containing a Nipah outbreak in the northern districts in 2018. It unilaterally amended the criteria for counting Covid deaths, leaving out cases of comorbid fatalities. It denied any deliberate fudging of numbers, saying the toll was based on guidelines of the Indian Council of Medical Research. However, the numbers kept rising, and, as this report goes to press, Kerala (51,607 deaths) is second only to Maharashtra (142,023 deaths).

This study says the news coverage of the pandemic was lopsided as government regulations and morbidity rates overwhelmed aspects of crisis journalism. The media's mouthpiece role could have been the result of either a cluelessness when hit by an unprecedented health crisis, or its decision to stand by the government in a moment of crisis — a kind of wartime courtesy. Subsequently, when the virus and its action were better understood, the media regained its claws. But how well they fared in that, beyond the first six months covered in this report, is a matter for another study.

This research urges resilience and capacity-building to help journalists cope with emerging challenges, including climate change. It's the responsibility of news organisations to support journalists with the logistics to meet the "known unknowns".

*Pandemic News Patterns in Kerala* is perhaps the first systematic study of print media coverage of a disaster in the state. I hope this research gives

journalists and news organisations the impetus to pull up their socks and be ready for a more professional approach in their discharge of duties and responsibilities during disasters, especially in speaking truth to powers-that-be.

**John Mary**
Director, Institute of Journalism
Press Club, Thiruvananthapuram

*22 January 2022*

# Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an inquiry into the journalism on Covid-19 published by two prominent newspapers in Kerala. We analyse the reportage on the pandemic in the six months after the first case in the state was reported, drawing on a content analysis and semi-structured interviews with journalists.

## Context

From the beginning of the pandemic, the south Indian state of Kerala has stood out for its crisis response. It was remarkably proactive in its efforts against the virus, initiating a containment strategy even before[1] its first patient tested positive on 30 January 2020. In fact, by 27 January, the state had adopted the World Health Organization's test, trace, isolate, and support protocol, and set up a Rapid Response Team; and on 3 February, with confirmation of its third positive case, Kerala declared a state calamity, placing more than 2,239 travellers from affected countries in quarantine. Despite being affected early by the virus, Kerala reported its first death only on 28 March, and it took nearly 110 days for the state to record its first 1,000 cases. And by April, when much of the developed world was overwhelmed with rising cases, infections in Kerala were falling[2].

This initial efficacy in containing the virus makes Kerala an interesting site of study in terms of its news coverage. As we know, the news media play a critical – and complex – role in crisis situations[3]. On the one hand, journalism connects the government and the governed in near-real time during situations of uncertainty, providing trustworthy information to the public, and raising concerns of the community for redressal by the authorities. Journalists are at the same time also expected to perform their watchdog function vital to every democracy, holding the state and health agencies accountable for

1 The coronavirus slayer! How Kerala's rock star health minister helped save it from Covid-19. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/the-coronavirus-slayer-how-keralas-rock-star-health-minister-helped-save-it-from-covid-19

2 Biswas, S., 2020. Coronavirus: How India's Kerala state 'flattened the curve'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52283748

3 Haddow, G.D. and Haddow, K.S., 2013. *Disaster communications in a changing media world*. Butterworth-Heinemann.

their emergency responses. The contradictions of this dual role, which requires journalism to both support *and* interrogate the state, becomes significantly difficult when news workers are hindered by the very crisis they are reporting on[4]. Individual health concerns, restrictions on movement, and disadvantageous economic climate[5], among others, make journalism more challenging at a time when it should be ever more efficient.

This study emerges against this backdrop. Our objective here is to profile the news coverage of the pandemic in Kerala – to discern, among others, the significant themes of focus, patterns in news sourcing, and the sense of crisis preparedness among journalists. As indicated above, Kerala's news response is particularly of interest, given the state's success in 'flattening the curve' well ahead of other global

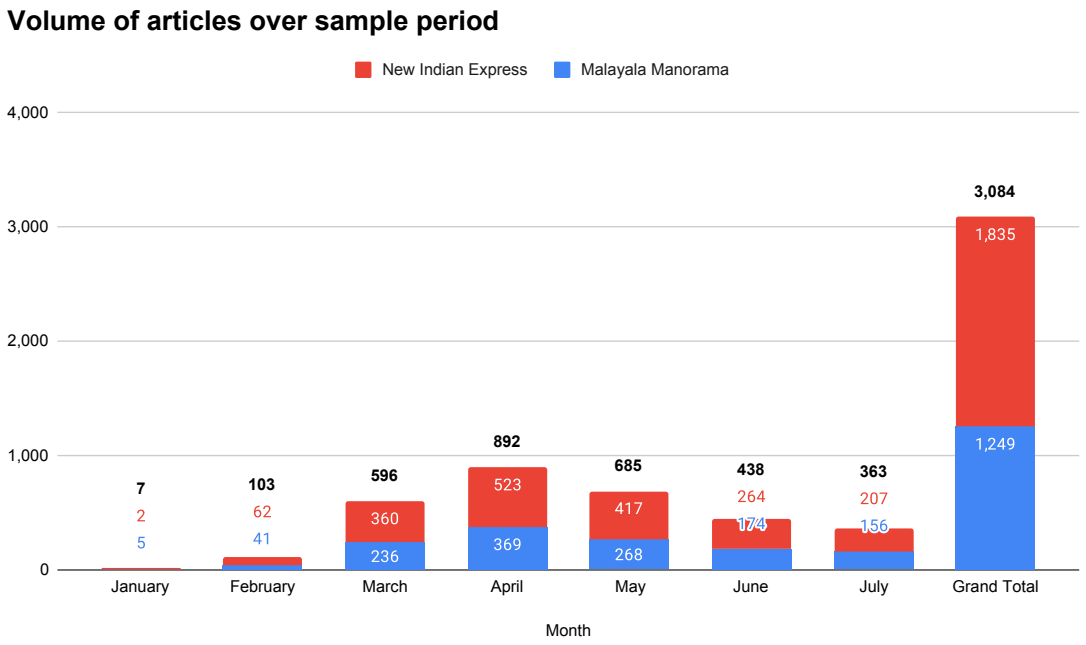



*Figure 1*

4 Sreedharan, C. and Thorsen, E., 2020. Reporting from the 'Inner Circle': Afno Manche and Commitment to Community in Post-earthquake Nepal. In *Media, Journalism and Disaster Communities* (pp. 35-52). Palgrave Macmillan.

5 Like in other national contexts, this was a significant concern across India, where news operations were downsized and journalists laid off. See Sreejan, B., 2020. Social distancing of truth and masking of fact. In *Covid-19 infodemic: problem, prospect and retrospect* (pp.94-101 ) for an analysis of the Kerala situation.

communities[6]. Aligning with this timeline, we focused on the first six months of news coverage: when the pandemic was at its rawest, and news outlets in Kerala – much like their counterparts elsewhere – were most challenged by the unprecedented crisis.

## Method

This report primarily draws on a content analysis. News coverage that appeared in the *Malayala Manorama* (MM) and *The New Indian Express* (TNIE) between 31 January 2020, when news reports confirmed the first infection in Kerala, and 31 July 2020 were analysed[7] in this study. We included all articles relating to the pandemic that appeared in this six-month period on the front and editorial pages of MM and TNIE. This resulted in a cache of 3,084 articles, which we coded and categorised. Further, to illuminate the patterns arising from the content analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 journalists who worked for the two newspapers, six each from MM and TNIE. Interview transcripts were then thematically analysed.

## Key findings

Our major findings are summarised below, while areas for action arising from these findings are presented in the final section of the report.

- **Pandemic reporting followed a conventional pattern**, emphasising official narratives and relying heavily on 'elite', governmental sources. Kerala government (26.2%) and India government (14.3%) were the most dominant sources of information, typically cited in relation to public order and pandemic regulations.
- **By contrast, expert sources relating to the pandemic featured much less**. Scientists and medical researchers, and the World Health Organization were cited significantly fewer times, in comparison (4.9% and 3%, respectively) to government sources. Instances where district-level medical professionals and other medical professionals figured in the news reports were also low (2.5% and 7.8%, respectively).

6 Even though the state was to come under criticism later, its management of the virus is still seen as laudable and a relevant response model. See Chathukulam J, Tharamangalam J. The Kerala model in the time of Covid-19: Rethinking state, society and democracy. *World Development*. 2021;137(105207):1–13

7 We analysed the Kozhikode edition of both newspapers for reasons of access.

- **A significant percentage of the content analysed dealt with government regulations and morbidity rates, overwhelming other aspects of crisis journalism:** 20.8% of the reportage on the analysed pages, we found, was on Covid-19 stipulations or guidelines announced by the state and central governments, while morbidity and mortality updates (15.4%) were the second most prevalent theme.

- **The vital, watchdog function of journalism suffered significantly in the first six months.** Reports that scrutinised governments' health responses were nearly absent (only 3.8%). There was also a noticeable dearth of news stories that drew on opposition politicians as sources (4.3%), and only a small percentage of stories that emphasised political disagreements or rivalry (2.0%).

- **There were indications that science report was an unfamiliar territory for a significant section of journalists and audiences.** While some of our interviewees indicated they avoided such stories for that reason, those who sought out science and medical sources said they faced reader-backlash as aspects of their report were at times disbelieved by the public.

- **The geographic focus of the pandemic reportage was split fairly evenly between national (45.7%) and state levels (42.2%).** This reflects the scale of the crisis, with the national response more prominent even where there was relative autonomy for the state to craft its emergency response. MM evidenced a significantly stronger regional affinity, dedicating 62.4% of its coverage to state-level stories, compared to TNIE (28.4%).

- **The focus on morbidity and mortality rates varied significantly across MM (25.2%) and TNIE (8.8%).** MM's higher focus on regional communities manifested in constant follow-ups of increasing infections and mortality in the state.

- **Some key issues related to the pandemic that featured prominently in other national contexts were almost absent in Kerala reportage:** conspiracy theories accounted for only 0.1% of the coverage, whilst environmental impact featured in only 0.8% of articles.

- **Most journalists interviewed had not received any form of crisis journalism training**, and indicated the need for capacity-building in this area.

# Frequency of Covid news

MM and TNIE published a total of 3,084 articles related to Covid-19 on their front and editorial pages in the six months of this inquiry. An average of 114 articles, thus, appeared per week, with MM publishing an average of 46 articles per week, while TNIE averaged slightly higher, at 68. The volume of articles increased significantly in March, and peaked in April, tapering off in June and July.

The first Covid-19 case was reported in Kerala on 30 January 2020. The pandemic coverage that began on 31 January 2020 was concentrated on the arrival of the virus in Kerala. MM published 5 articles – 3 news reports on the front page, an editorial, and a column on the pages we considered. Headlines such as 'കേരളത്തിലും കൊറോണ ജാഗ്രത' (Corona caution in Kerala now), 'ചൈനയിൽ മരണം 170; സ്ഥിരീകരിച്ചത് 20 രാജ്യങ്ങളിൽ' (170 deaths in China; confirmed in 20 countries), '75% പേരിലും വൈറസ് ബാധ കുഴപ്പമുണ്ടാക്കില്ല' (In 75% of cases, the virus does not cause problems), and 'ആശങ്കകൾ അടുത്തെത്തുമ്പോൾ' (As concerns get closer) emphasised the severity of the situation while steering clear of fearmongering. TNIE, on the first day of news reporting, published one news article on its front page, a report that presented an update on the medical student who had tested positive to become India's patient zero, headlined '1st coronavirus case confirmed in Thrissur, India on high alert'.

Week 5, the first week of the sample period (see Figure 2), produced 15 articles on the front and editorial pages, while Week 6 published 40 articles. The spurt was driven by MM, which carried double the number of stories than TNIE.

Week 10, the first week of March, recorded a jump in the total volume of articles published, to 60, moving up from the 19 of the previous week. Subsequent weeks leading to Week 17 exhibited similar trends, with Week 14 registering the highest coverage, at 229 articles with an average of around 33 articles per day. Overall, from Week 11 to Week 17 inclusive (March-April), an average of 27 articles per day were published on the front and editorial pages in the two newspapers.

From Week 18, we see a fall in news coverage, with Weeks 19, 20, and 21 (May) holding steady. In Week 25, there's a marked reduction, as the

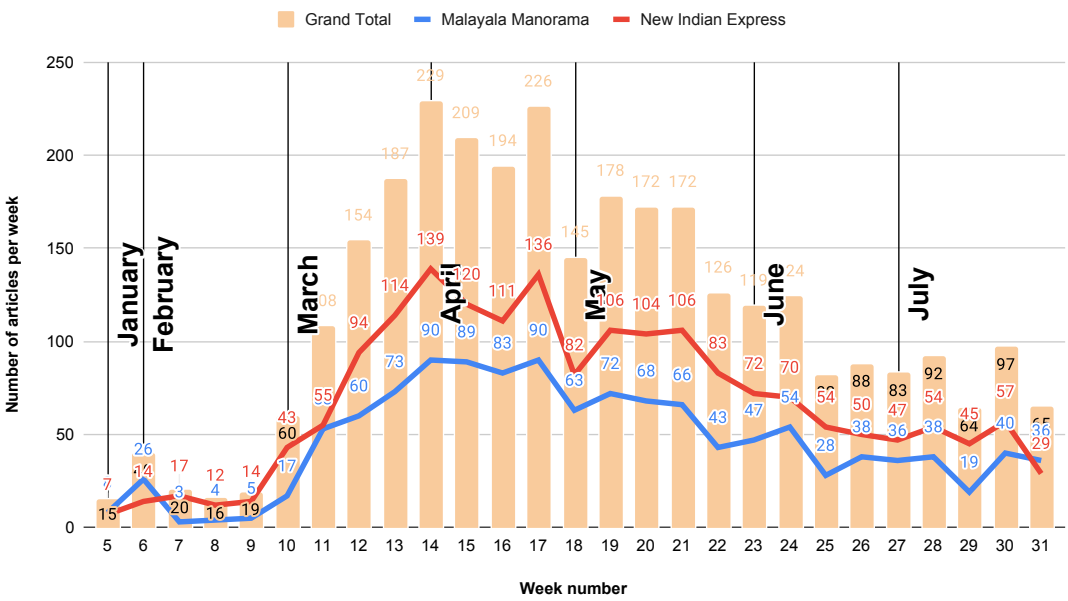



*Figure 2*

volume falls to a total of 82 articles for the week. This trend continues to the end of our sample period: MM and TNIE published a weekly average of 82 articles between Week 25 and Week 31 (June-July).

By the end of Week 6, the initial Covid-19 cases in Kerala were contained, and the state government withdrew the order declaring Covid-19 a state calamity. MM's reduced coverage, after the initial burst of articles coinciding with the arrival of the virus in Kerala, is arguably a reflection of this subsided situation. At the same, internationally, Covid-19 was gaining traction: the number of fatalities had crossed that of the SARS outbreak (2002-2004) in Week 7. By Week 10, as the patient zero in Kerala, was emerging from quarantine, the virus had also spread to other Indian states[8]. TNIE's rising curve of coverage during this week, which kept well above that of MM thereafter, can be explained to an extent by this evolving situation outside Kerala, and the newspapers national and international focus. A contributing factor was also the increased reader content featured on TNIE from places outside the state, where the virus had spread. Overall, the volume of coverage mirrored the pandemic spread, plateauing out and then decreasing

8 Sreedharan, C., 2021. India: A Spectacle of Mismanagement. *In:* Lilleker, D., Coman, I., Gregor, M. and Novelli, E., eds. *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. Routledge, 123-131.

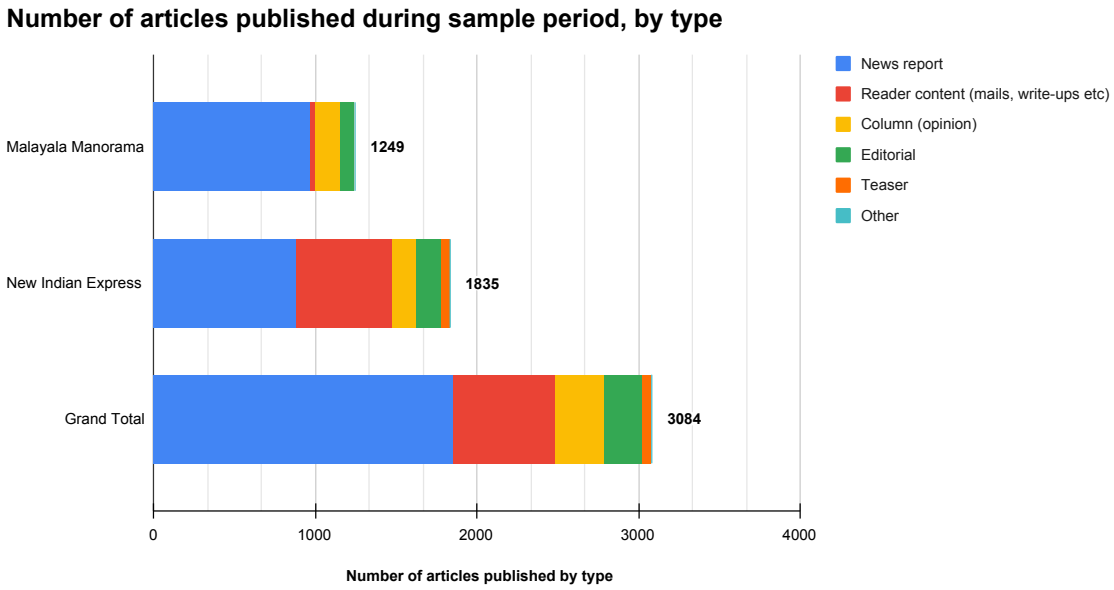



*Figure 3*

when the initial panic surrounding it decreased.

# Types of articles

60% (n=1,851) of the articles analysed were News reports, the rest a mix of Editorials, Reader content, Columns, and Teasers. Reader content formed the second largest section, accounting for 20.4% (n=629), followed by Columns at 9.9% (n=305), and Editorials at 7.6% (n=234).

MM published 1,249 articles in all on its front and editorial pages during the sample period. Of this, 77.7% (n=971) were News reports. The second largest category was Columns: 12.7% (n=158).

TNIE, for its part, carried 1,835 stories, of which 48% (n=880) were News reports. Comparatively, this was 29.8% lower than the percentage of News reports in MM. The second largest category in TNIE was Reader content, at 32.6% (n=599). This was substantially higher than the Reader content in MM (2.4%), by 30.2%.

The third largest category was Editorials, at 6.9% (n=86), in the case of MM. Reader content formed the fourth largest section (2.4%, n=30) of the content we analysed. In TNIE, Columns and Editorials accounted for the third and fourth largest category, at 8.1% (n=148) and 8% (n=147) respectively.

| Type of article | Malayala Manorama | New Indian Express | Grand Total | Malayala Manorama | New Indian Express | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| News report | 971 | 880 | 1851 | 77.7% | 48.0% | 60.0% |
| Reader content (mails, write-ups etc) | 30 | 599 | 629 | 2.4% | 32.6% | 20.4% |
| Column (opinion) | 158 | 147 | 305 | 12.7% | 8.0% | 9.9% |
| Editorial | 86 | 148 | 234 | 6.9% | 8.1% | 7.6% |
| Teaser | 1 | 55 | 56 | 0.1% | 3.0% | 1.8% |
| Other | 3 | 6 | 9 | 0.2% | 0.3% | 0.3% |
| Grand Total | 1249 | 1835 | 3084 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

*Table 1*

There was no significant difference in the volume of Covid-related Editorials published in the two newspapers, differing only by 1.2% (MM 6.9, n=86; TNIE 8.1, n=148). However, the number of Columns published by MM was higher by 4.6% in comparison with TNIE. In general, the columns placed an overall thrust on economic impact, societal or cultural impact, infrastructural challenges, disease management, government scrutiny, and international affairs. These headlines from the sample period depict this: 'Covid 19: The us-them polemics and placebos', 'Will Covid lead to a more privatized healthcare in India?', 'അകത്തിരിക്കാം ഉഷാറോടെ' (Stay in, with vigour), 'കോവിഡ് കുട്ടികളോടു ചെയ്തത്' (What Covid has done to the kids).

Editorials, too, emphasised societal or cultural impact, economic impact, Covid-19 regulations, infrastructural challenges, international affairs, and government scrutiny. For instance, Editorials carried headlines such as: 'Covid lockdown: Saving lives and livelihood', 'Kerala's Covid defense is falling part', 'വൈദ്യുതി ബിൽ കൊണ്ട് മുറിവേറ്റവർ' (Those who injured by the electricity bill), and 'കോവിഡ് അനന്തര കേരളത്തിനുവേണ്ടി' (For a post-Covid Kerala).

Teasers figured minimally in the total content we analysed. MM barely made use of Teasers on its frontpage, carrying only 0.1% (n=1) of its content, while Teasers comprised 3% (n=55) of the content in TNIE.

# Geographic focus

MM and TNIE differed significantly in terms of the geographic focus of the articles. However, overall, national and regional articles were the primary focus of the newspapers. 45.7% (n=1,410) of the coverage was dedicated to articles with a national focus, while 42.2% (n=1,302) of the articles were centered on matters in Kerala. Only 9.5% (n=294) of the articles discussed international subjects, with the remaining 2.5% (n=78) having no defined geographic focus.

In the case of TNIE, 57.7% (n=1,059) of analysed content focused on national issues. In contrast, only 28.1% (n=351) of MM's articles showed a national focus. It exhibited a strong state-level emphasis instead, with 62.4% (n=780) of its articles drawing on news from within Kerala. Only 28.4% (n=522) of TNIE's articles – 34% lower – concentrated on news directly related to Kerala.

Across the national, regional, and international categories, News reports accounted for the greatest number of stories. Among articles with national focus, 21.34% (n=658) were News reports. This is followed by Reader content, at 14.88% (n=459), Editorials at 4.25% (n=131), and Columns at 4.15% (n=128). The proportion of state News reports was higher, at 34.44% (n=1,062). The second largest article type with state focus, though, was Columns, which showed a slightly higher percentage at 2.72% (n=84) than Editorials (2.63%, n=81). Reader content with regional focus stood at 2.30% (n=71), significantly lower than 14.88% (n=459) of the same type of content with a national focus. A total of 9.53% (n=294) of the content analysed had an international focus; here, 4.09% (n=126) were News reports. The second largest type of article with an international focus was Columns (2.04%, n=63), while Editorials accounted for just 0.65% (n=20).

Articles that did not significantly evidence a clear geographical affinity were coded as No defined geographic focus. Here, the Reader content at 1.26% (n=39) formed the largest section. This was followed by Columns at 0.97% (n=30). Significantly, the thematic focus of this category, often informational, offered general applicability beyond regions. For instance, Column themes included the relevance of maintaining health and hygiene, social distancing, masking, mental health issues, and mitigation efforts during the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, MM led state-focussed News reports at 48.8% (n=609) against 24.7% (n=453) in TNIE.  6.5% (n=81) of MM's columns focussed on issues in Kerala in comparison to 0.2% (n=3) in TNIE. This trend continued in reverse in the case of Columns with national focus: 5.2% (n=96) in TNIE, compared to MM's 2.6% (n=32).

| Geographic focus of article | Type of article | Malayala Manorama | New Indian Express | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| National | News report | 24.1% | 19.5% | 21.34% |
| | Reader content (mails, write-ups etc) | 0.2% | 24.9% | 14.88% |
| | Editorial | 1.3% | 6.3% | 4.25% |
| | Column (opinion) | 2.6% | 5.2% | 4.15% |
| | Teaser | | 1.7% | 1.04% |
| | Interview | | 0.1% | 0.03% |
| | Other | | 0.1% | 0.03% |
| National Total | | 28.1% | 57.7% | 45.72% |
| Kerala (regional) | News report | 48.8% | 24.7% | 34.44% |
| | Column (opinion) | 6.5% | 0.2% | 2.72% |
| | Editorial | 5.4% | 0.7% | 2.63% |
| | Reader content (mails, write-ups etc) | 1.5% | 2.8% | 2.30% |
| | Other | 0.2% | 0.1% | 0.10% |
| | Teaser | 0.1% | | 0.03% |
| Kerala (regional) Total | | 62.4% | 28.4% | 42.22% |
| International | News report | 4.7% | 3.7% | 4.09% |
| | Column (opinion) | 2.2% | 2.0% | 2.04% |
| | Reader content (mails, write-ups etc) | 0.1% | 3.2% | 1.95% |
| | Teaser | | 1.2% | 0.71% |
| | Editorial | 0.2% | 1.0% | 0.65% |
| | Other | | 0.2% | 0.10% |
| International Total | | 7.1% | 11.2% | 9.53% |
| No defined geographic focus | Reader content (mails, write-ups etc) | 0.6% | 1.7% | 1.26% |
| | Column (opinion) | 1.4% | 0.7% | 0.97% |
| | News report | 0.2% | 0.2% | 0.16% |
| | Editorial | | 0.1% | 0.06% |
| | Other | 0.1% | | 0.03% |
| | Teaser | | 0.1% | 0.03% |
| No defined focus Total | | 2.32% | 2.67% | 2.53% |
| Grand Total | | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% |

*Table 2*

A similar trend was also visible in the Editorial, where regional focus was led by MM (5.4%, n=68) against TNIE's 0.7% (n=13); and national focus featured significantly more in TNIE (6.3%, n=115) when compared to MM (1.3%, n=16)

Overall, in line with its vernacular profile, MM maintained a state focus in its pandemic reporting, while TNIE, influenced by its inter-state audiences, displayed a national focus across all categories of content that we analysed.

കോവിഡ് 19

6 പേർക്കു കൂടി

# കേരളത്തിൽ ആദ്യ മരണം

കോവിഡ് ചികിത്സയിലായിരുന്ന 69 വയസ്സുകാരൻ കൊച്ചിയിൽ മരിച്ചു

വന്നത് ദുബായിൽനിന്ന്; ഭാര്യയും ടാക്സി ഡ്രൈവറും ചികിത്സയിൽ

മനോരമ ലേഖകൻ

കൊച്ചി • ലോകമാകെ ഭീതിവിതച്ച കോവിഡ് മഹാമാരിയുടെ മരണപ്പട്ടികയിൽ കേരളവും. കോവിഡ് സ്ഥിരീകരിക്കുകയും ചികിത്സയിലായിരുന്ന മട്ടാഞ്ചേരി ചുള്ളിക്കൽ പി.സി. അഗസ്റ്റിൻ റോഡ് സൂരസിദ്ധൻസിയിൽ യാക്കൂബ് ഹുസൈൻ സേട്ടാണ് (69) ഇന്നലെ രാവിലെ 8നു മരിച്ചത്. ന്യുമോണിയ ബാധിച്ചിരുന്നു. ഹൃദ്രോഗത്തിനും രക്തസമ്മർദത്തിനും ചികിത്സയിലായിരുന്ന ഇദ്ദേഹത്തിനു നേരത്തേ ബൈപാസ് ശസ്ത്രക്രിയ നടത്തിയിട്ടുണ്ട്. കബറടക്കം മട്ടാഞ്ചേരി കച്ചി മനഫി മസ്ജിദിൽ ആരോഗ്യ മാർഗരേഖ പ്രകാരം നടത്തി.



യാക്കൂബ് ഹുസൈൻ

ദുബായിൽനിന്ന് 16ന് എത്തിയ യാക്കൂബ് വീട്ടിൽ നിരീക്ഷണത്തിലായിരുന്നു. കോവിഡ് സ്ഥിരീകരിച്ചതോടെ 22ന് മെഡിക്കൽ കോളജ് ആശുപത്രിയിലാക്കി. യാക്കൂബിന്റെ ഭാര്യയും നെടുമ്പാശേരിയിൽ നിന്നു വീട്ടിലെത്തിച്ച ടാക്സി ഡ്രൈവറും രോഗം സ്ഥിരീകരിച്ചു ചികിത്സയിലാണ്. ഇവരുടെ നിലതൃപ്തികരമാണ്. ഫ്ലാറ്റിലെ 10 കുടുംബങ്ങളിലെ 42 പേർ, ടാക്സി ഡ്രൈവറുമായി ഇടപഴകിയ 64 പേർ, ദുബായ്- കൊച്ചി വിമാനത്തിലെ 148 യാത്രക്കാർ എന്നിവർ ഇപ്പോൾ വീടുകളിൽ നിരീക്ഷണത്തിലാണ്. ഇതിൽ 83 പേർ എറണാകുളം ജില്ലക്കാരാണ്.

## ഭാര്യ കണ്ടത് വിഡിയോ കോളിൽ

കൊച്ചി • യാക്കൂബ് ഹുസൈൻ സേട്ടിന്റെ കബറടക്കം കർശനമായ സുരക്ഷാ മാനദണ്ഡങ്ങൾ പാലിച്ചാണു നടത്തിയത്. അടുത്ത ബന്ധുക്കളായ 5 പേർ, 5 സന്നദ്ധ പ്രവർത്തകർ, ജില്ല ഭരണകൂടം, ആരോഗ്യ വകുപ്പ്, നഗരസഭ എന്നിവയുടെ 5 പ്രതിനിധികൾ എന്നിവരാണു ചടങ്ങിൽ പങ്കെടുത്തത്. ബന്ധുക്കളെ മൃതദേഹം നേരിട്ടു കാണിച്ചില്ല. പകരം, വിഡിയോ കോളിലൂടെ ഭാര്യയെയും മക്കളെയും കാണിച്ചു. ആശുപത്രിയിൽ തന്നെ ജനാസ നമസ്കാരം നടത്തിയ ശേഷം മൃതദേഹം മൂന്നു പാളികളുള്ള ബാഗിൽ പൊതിഞ്ഞു. ബന്ധുക്കൾക്കു വിട്ടു നൽകാതെ മസ്ജിദിലെത്തിച്ചു.

ആരെയും മസ്ജിദിനു സമീപത്തേക്കു പ്രവേശിപ്പിച്ചില്ല. 2 ഡോക്ടർമാരുടെ സാന്നിധ്യത്തിൽ സുരക്ഷ മാനദണ്ഡങ്ങളെല്ലാം ഉറപ്പു വരുത്തിയ ശേഷമാണു കബറടക്കംപൂർത്തിയാക്കിയത്.

ദുബായിൽ 'സേഫ്റ്റി ഫോർ അസ്' എന്ന സ്ഥാപനം നടത്തുകയായിരുന്നു യാക്കൂബ്. ഭാര്യ: റസീന ബായി. മക്കൾ: ഇബ്തിഷാം, ഇസ്മയിൽ, സഫിയ, ഹസൻ, ഹുസൈൻ. മരുമക്കൾ: അസ്ഹർ,ഹഷിദ്, സന.

*MM on 29 March 2020, reporting morbidity rates after first Covid death in Kerala*

## News themes

To understand the nuances within the coverage, we coded for the type of pandemic response present in the news content. Through an iterative process, we arrived at seven categories (sub-themes) of response, and coded to quantify these. The seven sub-themes related to: Covid-19 regulations and recommendations, Infrastructural challenges, Restrictions on travel and movement, Frontline workers, Track, and trace, Public announcements/information dissemination, and Support and helpline information.

Further, in addition to these response categories, we looked for other

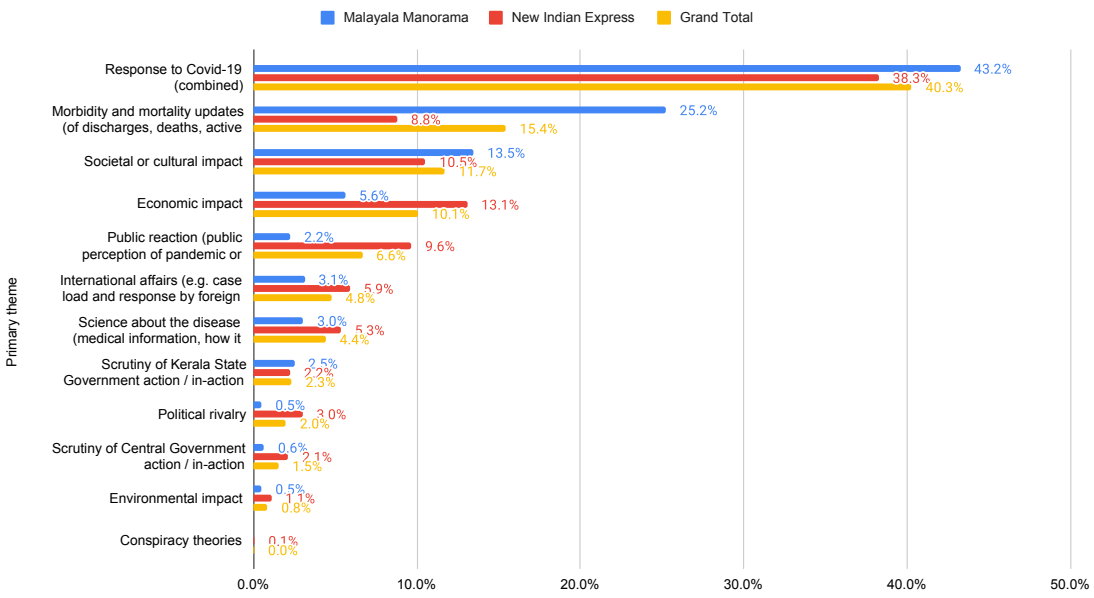



*Figure 4*

themes present, identifying and coding for 11 more: Morbidity and mortality updates, Societal or cultural impact, Economic impact, Public reaction, International affairs, Science about the disease, Scrutiny of Kerala State Government action/in-action, Scrutiny of Central Government action/in-action, Environmental impact, Political rivalry, and Conspiracy theories. As multiple themes were present in many of the news articles, we coded for all themes, separately identifying the primary theme to understand the dominant framing of the news story, as well as coding for other, secondary themes present in the story.

## Dominant primary themes

The dominant primary theme in both the newspapers across the sample period were the governmental response to the pandemic. 40.3% (n=1,242) of the content, thus, related to this theme (Table 3).

Of this, 20.8% (n=641) was accounted for by Covid-19 regulations and recommendations, 8% (n=248) by Infrastructure challenges, 6.5% (n=199) by Restrictions on travel and movement, 3.5% (n=108) by Frontline workers, 1.1% (n=34) by Public announcement/information dissemination, 0.3% (n=8) by Track and trace, and 0.1% (n=4) by Support and helpline information.

| Primary theme | Malayala Manorama | New Indian Express | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Response total** | **43.2%** | **38.3%** | **40.3%** |
| *Response: Covid-19 regulations and recommendations (e.g., lockdown, distancing, wearing masks, screening, hygiene, sanitization etc)* | *21.9%* | *20.1%* | *20.8%* |
| *Response: infrastructure challenges (healthcare, education, law and order etc)* | *8.2%* | *8.0%* | *8.0%* |
| *Response: restrictions on travel and movement (including migrant / immigration issues)* | *8.2%* | *5.3%* | *6.5%* |
| *Response: frontline workers* | *2.7%* | *4.0%* | *3.5%* |
| *Response: public announcements / information dissemination* | *2.2%* | *0.4%* | *1.1%* |
| *Response: track and trace* | | *0.4%* | *0.3%* |
| *Response: support and helpline information* | *0.2%* | *0.1%* | *0.1%* |
| **Morbidity and mortality updates (of discharges, deaths, active cases etc)** | **25.2%** | **8.8%** | **15.4%** |
| **Societal or cultural impact** | **13.5%** | **10.5%** | **11.7%** |
| **Economic impact** | **5.6%** | **13.1%** | **10.1%** |
| **Public reaction (public perception of pandemic or related issues)** | **2.2%** | **9.6%** | **6.6%** |
| **International affairs (e.g., case load and response by foreign states)** | **3.1%** | **5.9%** | **4.8%** |
| **Science about the disease (medical information, how it spreads, potential vaccines, clinical trials etc)** | **3.0%** | **5.3%** | **4.4%** |
| **Scrutiny of Kerala State Government action / in-action** | **2.5%** | **2.2%** | **2.3%** |
| **Political rivalry** | **0.5%** | **3.0%** | **2.0%** |
| **Scrutiny of Central Government action / in-action** | **0.6%** | **2.1%** | **1.5%** |
| **Environmental impact** | **0.5%** | **1.1%** | **0.8%** |
| **Conspiracy theories** | | **0.1%** | **0.0%** |
| **Grand Total** | **100.0%** | **100.0%** | **100.0%** |

*Table 3*

The second largest theme was Morbidity and mortality updates, which accounted for 15.4% (n=476) of all analysed articles. Societal or cultural impact was the third leading category with 11.7% (n=361) of articles, followed by Economic impact at 10.1% (n=310).

## Themes that received little attention

On the other side of the spectrum were several themes that received little attention. Scrutiny of Kerala State Government action/in-action and Scrutiny of Central Government action/inaction were sparsely covered by the newspapers. Only a combined 3.8% (n=119) of articles

were primarily framed around these, and such reportage typically highlighted issues surrounding the availability of screening centers, disaster mitigation funds, corruption allegations, economic issues, etc. A few headlines exemplify this trend: 'Two new cases. Is our screening adequate?', 'When leaders set bad examples', 'സാലറി കട്ട് ഉത്തരവ് വന്നു; തിരിച്ചു നൽകും എന്ന് പറയാതെ' (Salary cut order out; no mention of refund), 'സ്പ്രിൻക്ലർ കരാർ ചട്ടങ്ങൾ പാലിക്കാതെ നടപ്പാക്കിയതോ?' (Was the Sprinklr Agreement implemented without legal compliance?).

Further, articles with the primary theme of Political rivalry were particularly low, at just 2.0% (n=61). The headlines carried by the publications included 'ശമ്പളം പിടിക്കരുത് എന്ന കേന്ദ്ര നിർദേശം അറിയില്ല: മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി' (Unaware of the central directive on salary cut: CM), 'Chief Minister stooping to CPM cyber goondas' level, says Chennithala', 'Mamata hits out at Centre, writes to PM', 'അപകീർത്തി പെടുത്തുന്നത് സൽപ്പേര് കിട്ടരുതെന്നു കരുതുന്നവർ: മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി' (Defamation by those who can't bear the applause: CM).

This low volume of criticism is interesting to note in a state such as Kerala, which has an exceptionally healthy public sphere supported by a robust news media and highly politicised, vocal news audiences. At play here, it would appear, is the rallying-around-the-flag effect, the tendency of communities to become more favourable to political leadership in times of crises. Such a congregation around governmental policies is particularly prevalent in the initial period[9] of the crises, and several journalists spoke of self-censorship on their parts, giving further credence to this.

Two other themes that fared low are worth noting: Environmental impact only accounted for 0.8% (n=26), while Conspiracy theories, which in other national contexts featured fairly high, received only 0.1% (n=1) of the analysed coverage (see section below for a breakup).

Overall, stories on governmental regulations and restrictions, and

9 Support for politicians-in-power is high at the height of uncertainty about the situation. This declines once the crisis is normalised; more critical voices emerge and political ideologies come to fore as the crisis reduces in intensity and the affected communities get used to the situation (which seems to have been the case in Kerala, too). For an overview of this dynamics, see Johansson, B., Hopmann, D.N. and Shehata, A., 2021. When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: when the COVID-19 pandemic becomes "normalized". *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(sup1), pp.321-334, DOI: 10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742

updates on mortality and morbidity overwhelmed the coverage of other themes. Such reportage, while important to raise community awareness, can distort the crisis narrative, as they become the dominant perspective of the pandemic at the cost of other nuances.

## MM and TNIE: comparison of themes

We examined the two newspapers side by side, looking more closely at the type of responses presented in the articles.

## Response

MM devoted a slightly higher proportion of its coverage to Response themes overall than TNIE (43.2% vs 38.3% respectively), and also in all sub-themes except Frontline workers and Track and trace (Table 3 and Figure 5). For Frontline workers MM devoted 2.7% (n=34) compared with TNIE that devoted 4% (n=74), and whilst TNIE featured 0.4% (n=8) of articles with Track and trace, MM did not have this as a primary theme for any of their articles.

In both newspapers, Covid-19 regulations and recommendations was the highest Response sub-theme, showing a proportion of their respective overall volumes: 21.9% (n=273) in MM and 20.1% (n=368) in TNIE. Infrastructure challenges, which included shortcomings in healthcare, education and law and order, came next (MM: 8.2% n=102; TNIE: 8%, n=146), followed by Restrictions on travel and movement. Similar to the previous sub-theme, MM published a higher proportion of its coverage in Restriction on travel and movement, too: 8.2% (n=102), against TNIE's 5.3% (n=97). This included stories such as '16 Keralite students held up in Chinese airport', 'Now, India imposes travel ban from Europe, Britain', 'Mega repatriation plan chalked out', 'Grappling with the exodus of migrants', 'പ്രവാസികളെ ഇപ്പോൾ എത്തിക്കാൻ ആവില്ല: കോടതിയിൽ നിലപാട് ആവർത്തിച്ചു കേന്ദ്രം', 'വന്ദേ ഭാരത് മിഷൻ: ജൂലൈ 3 മുതൽ നാലാം ഘട്ടം' (Vande Bharat Mission: Phase IV from July 3), and 'അതിർത്തി അടച്ച് തമിഴ്നാട്' (Tamil Nadu shuts borders) – all of which primarily dealt with the plight of expatriates and migrant labourers, repatriation flights, and travel restrictions implemented by various districts of Kerala, other states and nations. MM published 2.2% of articles (n=27) on Public

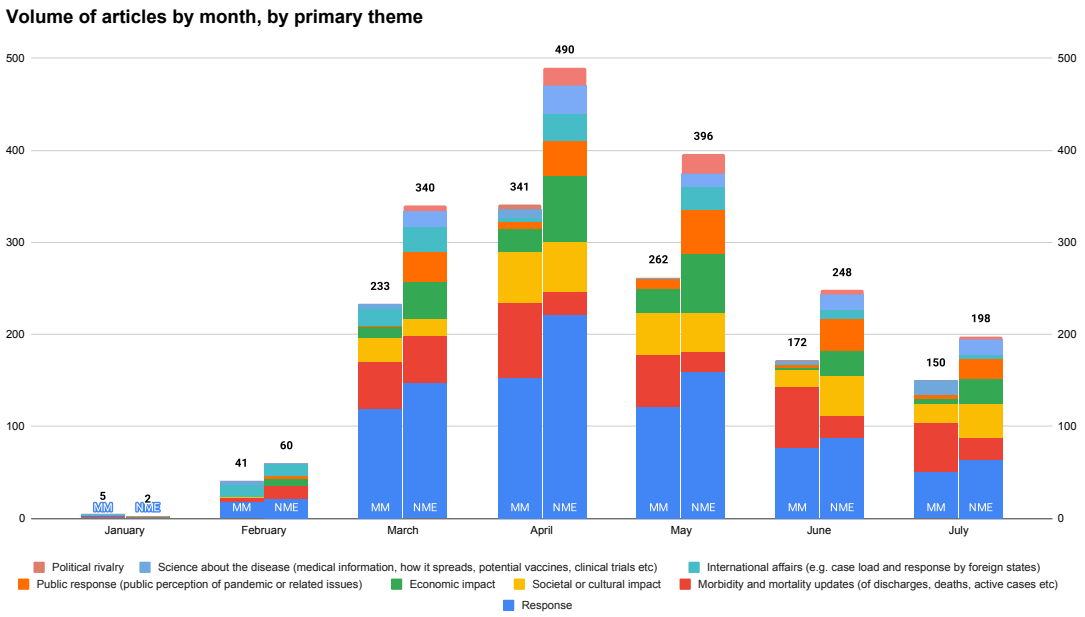



*Figure 5*

announcement/information dissemination, against the 0.4% (n=7) in TNIE. Articles in MM framed around the theme placed particular emphasis on information useful to the daily life of Kerala readers. For instance, 'വാഹന, ആരോഗ്യ ഇൻഷുറൻസ് കാലാവധി നീട്ടി' (Auto, health insurance term extended), 'റേഷൻ കട സമയം മാറ്റി' (Ration shop timings changed), 'പോലീസ് പാസ് ഓൺലൈനിൽ' (Police passes available online), and 'സത്യവാങ്മൂലം ഇതാ, മുറിച്ചെടുത്തു ഉപയോഗിക്കൂ' (Affidavit attached, tear off and use).

## Morbidity and mortality

Morbidity and mortality updates, the second most dominant primary theme after Response, presented details of hospital discharges, deaths, and active caseload, and accounted for 25.2% (n=315) of the coverage in MM, substantially higher than the 8.8% (n=161) in TNIE. MM consistently covered the increasing caseload and Covid-19 deaths in Kerala as exemplified by the following headlines: '4 പേർക്ക് കൂടി' (4 more cases), 'കേരളത്തിൽ 8 പേർക്ക് കൂടി; അഞ്ചു പേരും കോഴിക്കോട്' (8 more case in Kerala; 5 from Kozhikode), '10 പേർക്ക് കൂടി കോവിഡ്' (10 more infected with Covid), '75 പേർക്ക് കൂടി കോവിഡ്; രോഗമുക്തർ 90' (75 more cases; 90 recoveries), '83 പേർക്ക് കൂടി കോവിഡ്, 62

പേർക്ക് രോഗമുക്തി' (83 more infected, 62 recoveries), '121 പേർക്ക് കോവിഡ്; ഒരു മരണം കൂടി' (121 more cases; one more death), '131 പേർക്ക് കൂടി കോവിഡ്; മരിച്ചയാൾക്കും സ്ഥിതീകരിച്ചു' (131 more infected; the deceased confirmed positive). This focus is attributable to the newspaper's readership in Kerala, and the relevance and associated news values[10] that such numbers have for them.

TNIE, for its part, refrained from such a pattern. Stories on mortality or caseload updates often possessed an additional element and went beyond events in the state. For example: '3 die of Covid, 94 more test positive; CM denies rumours of fudging data', 'Maharashtra, Delhi stare at Covid explosion', 'Virus panic continues as toll hits 722', 'Covid-free, Kasargod breathes easy but can't lower its guard', and '27 recover; 7 new cases; Kerala curve starts to flatten'.

## Societal impact, science, and political rivalry

Societal or cultural impact was the next prominent theme in the news coverage and accounted for 13.5% (n=168) in MM. It was 3% lower in TNIE (10.5%, n=193). Economic impact was the fourth most prominent theme overall, but it was the second most prominent theme in TNIE - even higher than its reporting of morbidity and mortality rates. Economic impact accounted for 13.1% (n=240) in TNIE, while it figured at 5.6% (n=70) in MM, some 7.5% less than TNIE.

Notably, most articles in TNIE framed around Economic impact dealt with Covid-19 and the national economy. For example, these articles talked about 'Virus could dent Economy, admits RBI', 'India may have to spend 6.2% of GDP to manage Covid: ICMR', 'Triple whammy for economy in a deep negative pit', 'Measures to revive growth during unlock 1.0', and 'Covid crisis an opportunity to build a self-reliant India'.

In the case of MM, coverage on Economic impact was largely confined to the regional economy. A few headlines during the sample period exemplifies this: 'സഹായഹസ്തമില്ലാതെ റബ്ബർ കർഷകർ' (Rubber farmers without any help), 'സാലറി ചാലഞ്ച് ഉത്തരവ് ഈ ആഴ്ച' (Salary challenge notification this week), 'മടങ്ങുന്ന പ്രവാസികളിൽ

10 Harcup, T. and O'Neill, D., 2017. What is news? Galtung and Ruge revisited (again). *Journalism Studies*, 18(12), pp.1470-1488, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193

തൊഴിൽ നഷ്ടമായവർ 56,114' (56,114 lost jobs among returning expatriates), and 'കോവിഡ് നൽകുന്ന കൃഷിപാഠങ്ങൾ' (Agricultural lessons taught by Covid)

Coverage of Science about the disease differed by 2.3% between TNIE (5.3%, n=98) and MM (3.0%, n=38). Both publications covered topics including vaccine and drugs, cure and prevention, symptoms and transmission, and treatment methods.

Political rivalry, too, showed some comparative difference, with MM reporting a low percentage at 0.5% (n=6), against 3.0% (n=55) in TNIE. TNIE's articles around Political rivalry was a reflection of such sentiments at the national level, largely against the Central government, amid the pandemic. Headlines include: 'Politics in Maha amid pandemic', 'Bengal pulled up', and 'Sparks fly as Shah raps Didi on migrant trains'. In the case of MM, instances of state politics were reported, and articles mainly focused on the friction between the Centre and State Governments, and the ruling and opposition political parties of Kerala. Among the headlines were: 'കേന്ദ്ര നിർദേശം ലഭിച്ചിട്ടില്ല: മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി' (No central directive received: CM), 'ദുരന്തനിവാരണ നിധി: കേരളം അവഗണിക്കപ്പെട്ടോ? കണക്കുകൾ കള്ളം പറയില്ല' (Disaster Management Fund: Has Kerala been neglected? The numbers do not lie) and 'അപകീർത്തി പെടുത്തുന്നത് സൽപ്പേര് കിട്ടരുതെന്നു കരുതുന്നവർ: മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി' (Defamation by those who can't bear the applause: CM).

## Less prominent themes: holding power to account, environment

As indicated earlier, the categories related to holding power to account – Scrutiny of Central Government action/inaction and Scrutiny of State Government action/inaction – scored low in percentage values in both newspapers. Scrutiny of Kerala State Government action/inaction was the primary theme only in 2.5% (n=31) of articles in MM, and 2.2% (n=41) in TNIE across the sample period. The Sprinklr row[11] that resulted in criticism against the government for the alleged

11 See Explained: What is the Sprinklr row Kerala govt's Covid-19 response is embroiled in?, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-is-the-sprinklr-row-kerala-govts-covid-19-response-6371205/

mismanagement of data and breach of privacy of people under quarantine became the central topic for government scrutiny. A few examples of such articles that appeared in TNIE include: 'Data scam? Only probe can clear doubts', 'CM snubs media over Sprinklr row posers', 'Names changed but govt sites still under Sprinklr's control', and 'Can you guarantee secrecy of medical data? HC to govt'. MM also gave the issue coverage: 'സ്പ്രിൻക്ലർ കരാർ ചട്ടങ്ങൾ പാലിക്കാതെ നടപ്പാക്കിയതോ?' (Has the Sprinkler Agreement been implemented without legal compliance?), 'സ്പ്രിൻക്ലർ: ഉത്തരവാദിത്തമേറ്റ് ഐ ടി സെക്രട്ടറി' (Sprinkler: IT Secretary takes responsibility), 'ഒഴിഞ്ഞു മാറി മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി' (CM evades).

In the case of Scrutiny of Central Government action/inaction as a primary theme, TNIE featured more articles than MM (2.1%, n=39 vs 0.6%, n=8). TNIE covered various Central Government actions that faced criticism, including its pandemic management and economic decisions such as the expenditure for the Central Vista project and the Covid-19 economic package. Examples of headlines include: 'Centre should increase number of virus test centres in India', 'Union Govt should rethink Central Vista project', and 'Grossly insufficient booster dose to revive the economy'.

Articles framed around Environmental impact were limited across both publications. This was higher than only Conspiracy theories, with MM publishing 0.5% (n=6), against TNIE's marginally higher 1.1% (n=20). Headlines included: 'കോവിഡിന്റെ ക്ലൈമറ്റ് ആക്ഷൻ' (Covid's climate action), വൈറസിനെ ഉണർത്തുന്ന കാലാവസ്ഥാമാറ്റം (Climate change that awakens Covid), 'A silver lining amid dark corona clouds?', and 'Silent killer that accompanies Covid'.

Conspiracy theories were entirely absent as a primary theme on the newspages we analysed in MM, while TNIE carried 0.1% – one article headlined 'State government suspects conspiracy behind labourers' sudden protest'. The article was framed around the migrant labour protest in Kerala; the event was suspected to be a conspiracy against the Covid-19 vigilance in the state.

Notably, the positive impact of Covid-19 on the environment was widely acknowledged across the globe. Particularly India – home

to 22 of world's most polluted cities[12] – reported increased air quality as the lockdown brought 90% of the road transport to a standstill[13]. Similarly, news and social media across the world covered the prevalence of conspiracy theories, amidst the rampant misinformation surrounding Covid-19[14], with a significant number of people engaging, in one form or another, with such issues[15]. Despite this, interestingly, news of conspiracy theories did not play out on the newspages in Kerala that we analysed. This, possibly, owes much to the policy adopted by many journalists to publish only authenticated information, and to avoid panicking the public (see Information dissemination for evidence from interviews).

## Sourcing patterns

It is important to understand the various sources of information – governmental, medical, scientific, etc – cited in news stories, and the prominence they are accorded, as the voices in news articles contribute to the way news is perceived by audiences, and help establish the larger narrative surrounding the pandemic. Hence, to profile the sourcing patterns, we identified the range of sources used by journalists in their coverage. We coded for 24 categories: India Government, India: Ministry of Health, India: Ministry of AYUSH[16], Kerala Government, Kerala: Ministry of Health, Kerala: Department of AYUSH, Other local government, Opposition politician, Union health secretary, Health principal secretary, District medical officers, Other medical professionals (doctors, nurses, etc), Scientist/medical researcher, World Health Organization (WHO), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Other IGO/NGO, Indian Embassy, Foreign states, Public health centres, Kudumbashree, Accredited Social Health Activist

12 IQAir., 2021. World's most polluted cities 2020 (PM2.5). https://www.iqair.com/in-en/world-most-polluted-cities

13 Kinver, M., 2021. 'Then and now: Pandemic clears the air'. https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-57149747

14 Leach, A. ans Probyn, M., 2021. 'Researchers use AI – and witchcraft folklore – to map the coronavirus conspiracy theories that have sprung up'. https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/oct/26/why-people-believe-covid-conspiracy-theories-could-folklore-hold-the-answer

15 Moffitt, J.D., King, C. and Carley, K.M., 2021. Hunting Conspiracy Theories During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Social Media+ Society, 7(3), pp.1-17, DOI: 10.1177/20563051211043212

16 The Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa, and Homoeopathy abbreviated as AYUSH handles the indigenous alternate systems of Medicine in India.

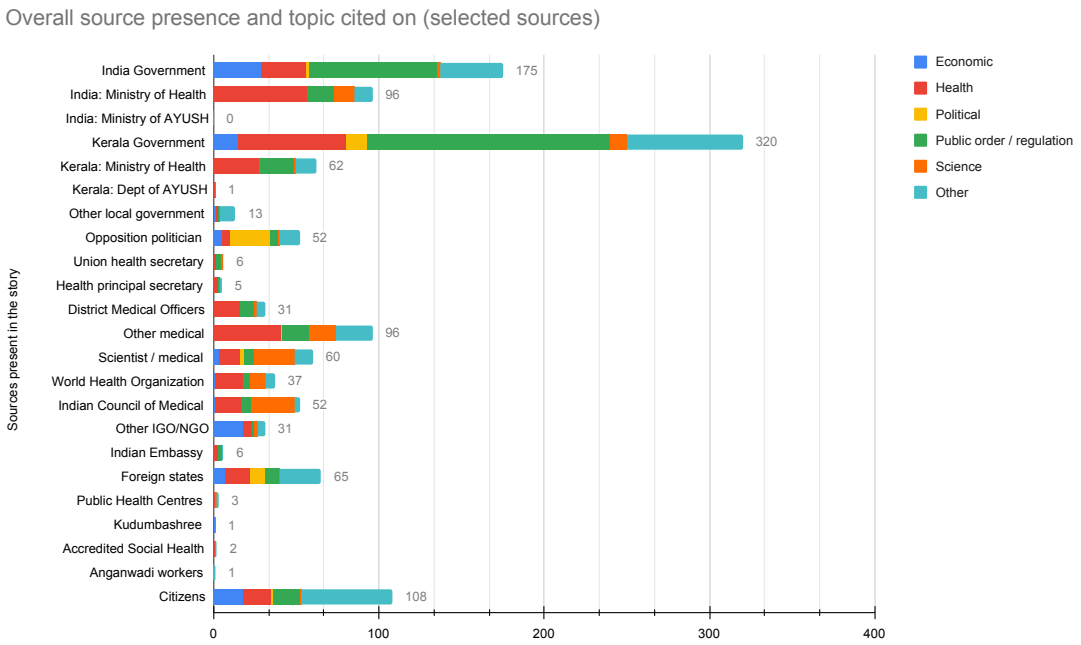



*Figure 6*

(ASHA), Anganwadi workers, Citizens, and Any other sources. We include the first 23 for our analysis in this section, filtering out Any other sources. This is because any other sources, though the single largest category, captures all ambiguous and uncategorised sources – in other words, it is not a single cohesive category, but a variety of sources.

Further, to provide more insights into the sourcing patterns, we identified and coded for the major topics on which the key sources were cited in each instance. These included Economic, Health, Political, Public order/regulation, Science, and Other. We coded both the presence of different sources, and also the broad topics they were given a voice on. Figure 6 provides a snapshot of our findings. It is important to note that this provides a slightly different snapshot to the primary themes, as it also reflects the role different sources play within the news report itself.

## Elite sourcing

Kerala Government was the most prominent source in both publications by volume, primarily cited in relation to Public order/ regulation and Health. Across the 320 stories in which journalists drew

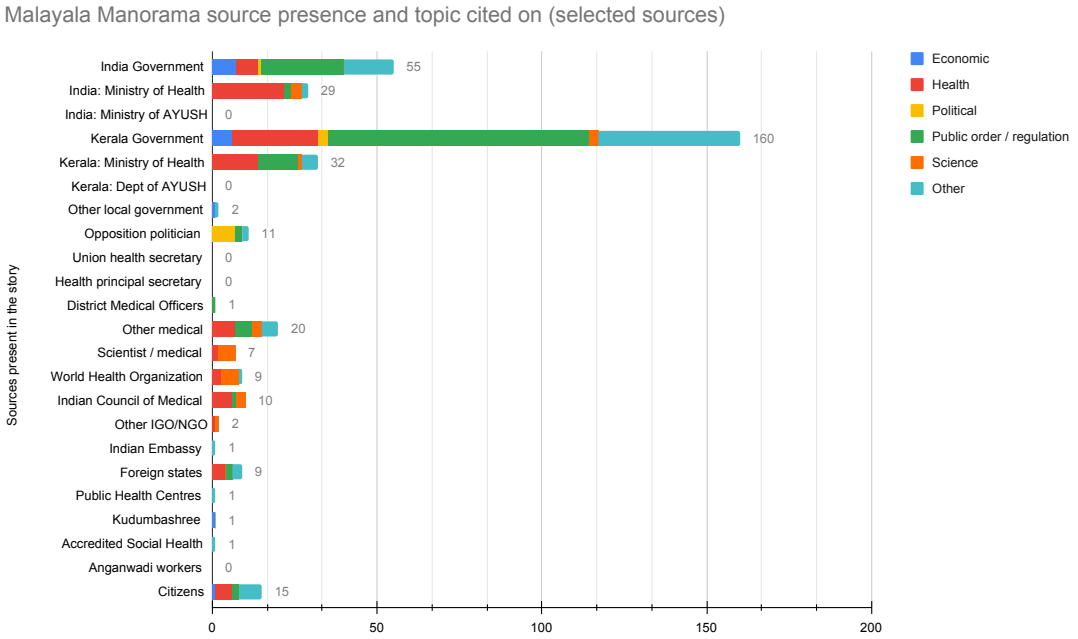



*Figure 7*

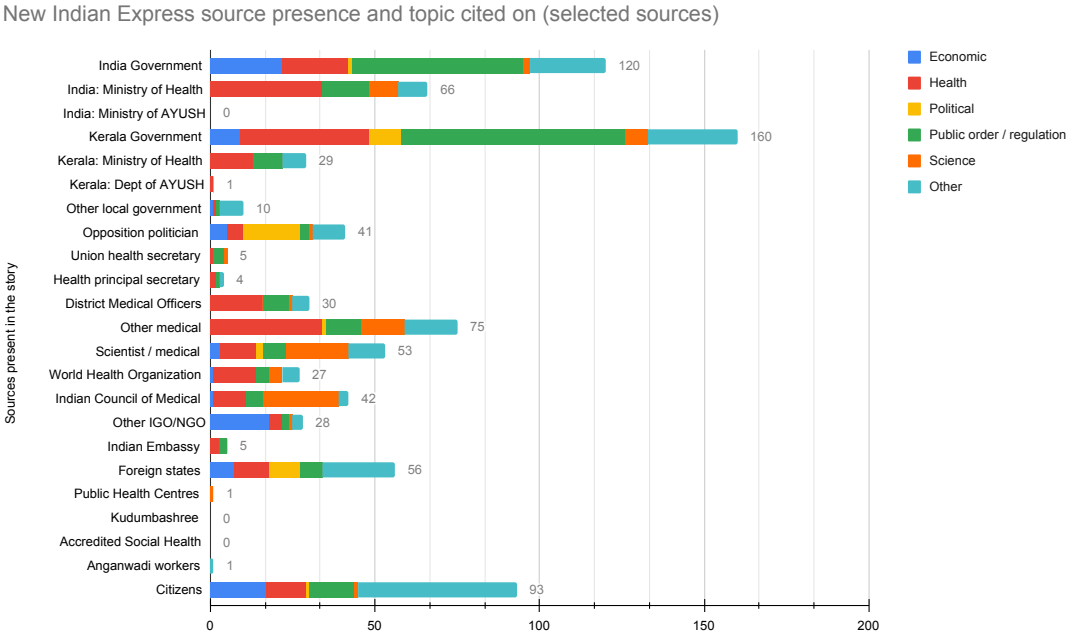



*Figure 8*

on state government sources in the coverage analysed, 147 related to Public order/regulation. The Public order/regulation citations often held a state focus and discussed Covid-19-induced lockdown, masking, social distancing, travel restrictions, restrictions on public gathering etc. Articles included, among others, such headlines as 'ഇന്നു ഞായർ ലോക്ക്ഡൗൺ' (Today is Sunday lockdown), 'ആരാധനാലയങ്ങളിൽ 100 പേർ' (100 people in places of worship), 'Kerala puts off decision despite 15 new +ve cases on Sunday alone', and 'Fear takes hold as Corona cases spiral'.

The Chief Minister of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan, was a major source that journalists cited. For example, an article ('Screening, quarantine: Protocol in place for NRKs') cites the CM as the news source on the regulations to be implemented for the Non-Resident Keralites: 'Announcing a protocol for repatriation of emigrants, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Sunday said his government will make extensive arrangements for screening of Keralites returning from abroad at four airports in the State. The returnees will require to undergo a 14-day home quarantine even if testing at airports reveal no Covid-19 symptoms.'

Articles that drew on government sources speaking on Health also discussed transmission rate, infection rates, mortality and active caseload updates, treatment plans, and other health issues induced by Covid-19. An article on the rate of child suicide in the state ('66 children died by suicide since lockdown started') quotes the CM as saying: "Sixty-six children took their own lives in the state since March 25, the day when the countrywide lockdown came into effect." Further examples of articles citing Kerala government sources on Health aspects include those headlined: 'Confirmed: Community transmission

21 ദിവസം
സമ്പൂർണ ലോക്ക്ഡൗൺ: പ്രധാനമന്ത്രി
ഇന്ത്യ മുഴുവൻ
വീടിനുള്ളിൽ
അവശ്യസാധനങ്ങൾ ഉറപ്പാക്കും; 21 ദിവസം ട്രെയിനുമില്ല
കോവിഡ് പ്രതിരോധത്തിന് 15,000 കോടി രൂപ
ബാങ്ക്, എടിഎം, ആശുപത്രി, പത്രമാധ്യമങ്ങൾ പ്രവർത്തിക്കും
കോ = കോളറ
റോ = റോഡ് പർ
നാ = നാ നികലേ
ശരിയായ വാർത്തകൾ അറിയാൻ
പത്രം, ടിവി
ഉറപ്പാക്കണമെന്ന്
കേന്ദ്രസർക്കാർ

*MM citing India Government sources on 25 March 2020*

*TNIE citing medical sources on 1 June 2020*

State enters 5th month of Covid fight; May witnesses 771 new cases and 7 deaths

# Kerala stares at community spread; monsoon major cause for concern

DILEEP V KUMAR @ T'Puram

IT was on January 30 that Kerala reported its first coronavirus case, a medical student who returned from Chinese city of Wuhan being the first patient. As the state's fight against Covid-19 enters fifth month, bigger challenges including the threat of community transmission await Kerala, especially since the inflow of returnees is set to continue.

With monsoon to set in, the Health Department is sure to come under added pressure.

The month of May was strenuous for Kerala as 771 positive cases and seven deaths were reported. Sixteen healthcare workers, three policemen, four prisoners and nine airline crew members contracted the virus during the month. The total confirmed cases rose to 1,269.

"The fact is that nobody knows what happens next. There are some projections, but they can't be revealed as they're based on mere assumptions. The state is well equipped to deal with any situation though," said an officer of the state rapid response cell for Covid-19.

The second wave began and cases spiked after NRKs who came back from abroad and other states started testing positive, but the officer said Kerala should not make a big issue out of the returnees' infection as the current facilities are more than enough to give them quality care. But, the officer added, it is a matter of concern when those in room quarantine violate the norms and mingle first with members in their families and then others in the society, leaving clusters of cases.

**KERALA CASE DIARY**

61 cases reported on Sunday

669 under treatment

590 have recovered so far

1,269 cases have been confirmed so far

10 deaths

YOUR NEWSPAPER IS TOTALLY SAFE

Dr A Sukumaran, who served as state epidemiologist, said: "Cases will continue to spike. Since people are now more aware and authorities concerned are intervening, incidents of local transmission might drop. But community transmission may happen though not become a threat."

Dr Anish T S of Community Medicine Department, Government Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram, said community transmission may happen anytime soon considering that there is a spurt in cases.

"As per predictions, cases will peak, but a real surge will happen in September/October. Lockdown is not the solution to check the virus spread. But then, we can't afford to get back to our normal societal behaviour. The key will be to follow a middle path," said Anish.

Kerala Government Medical Officers' Association general secretary Dr G S Vijayakrishnan said that with the Centre announcing the 'unlock' plan, extra vigil is needed to plug gaps that trigger events and in turn put pressure on the health system.

• More on P4

## Riyadh-returnee dies in Kozhikode, 10th victim in state

Kozhikode: The state recorded its 10th Covid-19 death on Sunday with a 55-year-old woman succumbing to the virus at the Kozhikode Government Medical College Hospital. A native of Mavoor, Sulaikha had returned from Riyadh on May 25. Suffering from high blood pressure, she was prone to seizures and was admitted to the MCH on May 28. She suffered a cardiac arrest by 7.05 pm. Despite all attempts, she could not be revived and breathed her last at 7.20 pm. Her husband has also tested positive.

**Exemption for patient: Health min seeks report**

T'Puram: Following reports of a shocking lapse allegedly on the part of authorities at the Government Medical College Hospital here, in which a person who had arrived from abroad was allowed to go home after his swab samples were collected, Health Minister K K Shailaja sought a report from MCH superintendent M S Sharmad.

in Kerala', 'Govt adds "home" to treatment plan', and '449 പേർക്കു കൂടി കോവിഡ്; 144 സമ്പർക്കരോഗികൾ' (449 more infected; 144 through contact).

India Government was the second prominent source for both publications and was cited most frequently on Public order/regulation, Economic, and Health topics. Of the 175 instances citing Indian government sources, 77 related to the topic of Public order/regulation, 29 to Economic, and 27 to Health. Sources on Public order/regulation typically included comments on national lockdowns, travel restrictions, expatriate issues, and other Covid-19 protocols, such as the establishment of hot spots and containment zones. In contrast, sources speaking on Economic concentrated on Covid-19 disaster management funds and on the stimulus packages by the Central Government to revive the national economy.

## Other sources

The third most prominent source was Citizens, which accounted for 108 citations across the two newspapers, with TNIE contributing 93 (largely

due to TNIE carrying a higher proportion of mails from readers).

Comparing the two newspapers, we found that after Kerala Government and India Government, the third most cited source in MM was Kerala: Ministry of Health (n=32) (Figure 7) Officials that journalists drew on under this category mainly included then State Minister of Health K K Shailaja, and typically, news articles presented information from the minister on changing treatment protocols, active caseloads, and significant milestones in Covid-19 management. Thus, headlines included: 'തിരവുവന്തപുരത്തു തുടങ്ങുന്നു വീട്ടിൽ ചികിത്സ' (Home treatment begins in Thiruvananthapuram), 'കൊറോണ സംസ്ഥാന ദുരന്തം അല്ല' (Corona is no longer a state disaster), 'ഇറ്റലിയിൽ കുടുങ്ങി എംഎൽഎയുടെ ഭാര്യയും' (Wife of an MLA stuck in Italy), and 'സ്വകാര്യ ആശുപത്രികളിലും ഇനി കോവിഡ് ചികിത്സ' (Covid patients will be treated in private hospitals too).

India: Ministry of Health (n=29) served as the fourth prominent source in MM articles (Figure 6). Across the 29 instances in which journalists drew on state government sources, 22 related to the topic of Health. Such articles presented the number of infections, mortality updates, transmissions, Covid-19 regulations and restrictions from a national standpoint. Other medical professionals (doctors, nurses.) (n=20) was the next major source that MM journalists drew on. They were cited against Health (n=7), Public order/regulation (n=5), Other (n=5) and Science (n=3). Of the total of 108 citations for Citizens, only 15 belonged in MM. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) (n=10), World Health Organization (WHO) (n=9), Foreign States (n=9) and Scientist/ medical researcher (n=7) were minimally drawn on by MM journalists.

TNIE, for its part, gave more prominence to Other medical professionals (doctors, nurses etc.) (n=75), followed by India: Ministry of Health (n=66) (Figure 8). The medical professionals were experts from across India, in line with the national profile of the publication. Medical sources from Kerala were also covered by TNIE journalists, with an emphasis on those who were part of prominent establishments such as government medical colleges and the government-constituted expert committee on Covid-19.

## What the sources spoke of

A closer look at the topics which key sources spoke about provides more insights. 28.1% (n=592) of the citations on the front and editorial pages concerned Public order/regulation about Covid-19, and 21.8% (n=459) was in relation to Health – yet only 6.8% (n=143) of the total citations in the content we analysed could be classified under the topic Science. Placed against the reliance on elite political sources that we evidenced earlier, this is noteworthy, indicating in Kerala a similar trend as witnessed in other crisis contexts, wherein even a health emergency is addressed primarily in terms of political regulations and concerns[17], and media narratives limit scientific issues and experts (see the interview data in Science sources below for potential reasons).

It is also interesting to analyse the range of topics that Opposition politicians spoke of in the first six months. As we have seen earlier, there is a notable dearth of articles that presented their perspectives. In the content we analysed, Opposition politicians were cited only on 52 instances – 2.4% of the total sources present across the front and editorial pages. Of these, 11 instances were in MM, and 41 in TNIE.

Not surprisingly, Political issues (n=24) was the topic on which Opposition politicians spoke of most. The then leader of Opposition, Ramesh Chennithala was a prominent source on Political issues. Headlines of articles citing him on Political issues include: 'Chennithala points the finger at CM over "biggest data scam"', 'Chennithala alleges token money goes to start up', and 'App for liquor queue second scam of covid season? Opposition is certain'. Despite Covid-19 being a health emergency, the number of articles featuring Opposition politicians discussing Health, thus, was minimal. A few headline examples of such sourcing instances include: 'India may soon get low-cost fool proof rapid test kits' and 'CM claimed he had won cup. Happy to see him realise it's a marathon, not 100M'.

After Political issues, the next most addressed topics by Opposition

17 In the UK, for instance, one could argue there was clear evidence of political narratives taking precedence over scientific arguments and concerns. For an empirically evidenced argument on a similar note in the Italian context, see A similar tendency, which undermines science, was prevalent in the media narratives of Italy as well. See Crabu, S., Giardullo, P., Sciandra, A. and Neresini, F., 2021. Politics overwhelms science in the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from the whole coverage of the Italian quality newspapers. *PLoS ONE*, 16(5), pp.1-19, DOI: 10.1371/journal.%20pone.0252034

politicians were Health (n=5), Economic (n=5), and Public order/ regulation (n=5). As noted earlier, it is pertinent to highlight that the political opposition received little space in news narratives. It is also interesting to note that when they *did* feature in the coverage, despite it being a health crisis, they spoke less on Health as a topic, and that references to science – similar to governmental sources – were absent from their discourse.

Overall, our analysis of the sourcing pattern indicates an overwhelming thrust on the government, with Covid regulations and public order remaining the primary area of discussion. The low volume of scientific and expert sources in the coverage, coupled with the very limited discussion by key sources – including by both political leadership and the Opposition – on scientific aspects seen in the news narratives is an area for redressal, both by journalists and the news actors involved.

# Disaster reporting: approach and preparedness

To provide deeper insights into the news coverage detailed above, we interviewed 12 journalists associated with the two newspapers and had reported on Covid-19. We were interested in understanding how the journalists approached the pandemic in their writings, their key priorities, and the type of guidelines and codes of reporting that they drew on to fulfil their democratic function. We were particularly interested in their own sense of preparedness and resilience, including any crisis reporting training they might have received.

## Information dissemination

Most journalists indicated their main priority during the pandemic was information dissemination, "keeping the public interest in mind". Reporters from MM and TNIE spoke of the overwhelming "panic in the society" about the virus in the initial phase, and stressed their main responsibility was disseminating information that could help calm the situation. This involved ensuring that the public were correctly informed about the health issues related to the pandemic, particularly how to protect themselves. As a senior

journalist pointed out:

> "The basic approach is to inform and create awareness. That is the main thing … You know, writing stories that give people information on how to go about it, how to protect themselves, and what could work and what cannot work."

Another journalist underlined how the "newness" of the pandemic made creating public awareness more challenging as well as all the more important. His key priority, thus, was to include "reader-centric information" that was "light" enough for the public to comprehend, and act on.

In this context, journalists from both MM and TNIE also stressed on two other points they considered priorities: one, to provide only facts, "true news"; and two, "not to scare people". A journalist summarised this thought succinctly:

> "We should not panic the people. We should give them correct and exact numbers. We can't cook a story. It should be reliable, people are reading it, and we are accountable for it. So, our major responsibility is to give true news."

## Scrutiny of governments

In the first six months, as evident from the content analysis findings, news coverage that scrutinised government responses to the pandemic was sparse, just 3.8% (n=119) overall of the 3,084 articles analysed across both newspapers. This is consistent with the news media's tendency to rally around the flag during national crises, evidenced in multiple studies in other national contexts[18], and our interviewees illuminated this trend, speaking of the government doing a "good job", and indicating that they had a responsibility to be supportive of the state efforts. Part of this role, as several journalists from both TNIE and MM indicated, was not only to seek out "positive stories", but to ensure that they were not quick to point the finger – and that, when they did criticise, their criticisms were "mild".

18 See, for instance, De Vries, C. E., B. N. Bakker, S. B. Hobolt, and K. Arceneaux., 2020. Crisis Signaling: How Italy's Coronavirus Lockdown Affected Incumbent Support in Other European Countries. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–17. DOI:10.1017/psrm.2021.6.

One journalist spoke of his reportorial scrutiny as "correctional stories", making it clear that his intention was not "to attack the government or [be] anti-establishment", and that he limited his work to pointing out problems so that the government could address them. He expanded:

> "Initially we focused on pro-administration or pro-government or pro-fighters. It is better to say pro-fighters. The responsibility of the media is to provide confidence and atmosphere for the people amidst the war."

Several journalists spoke of a level of self-censorship they exercised, arguably originating, at least in part, from the rally-around-the-flag effect. The way to deal with Covid-19 being "portrayed as a war," one journalist said, the news media became "very contained in its reporting", to support the government's efforts and to avoid panic. Another journalist of the same newspaper said how she consciously avoided stories of negativity and stayed away from "unnecessary exclusives", seeking out, instead, positive events.

> "Our reporting is mild. If it's more neutral and ethical, it can give people a relief. Instead of going for exclusives, that negativity, I concentrated personally more on positive stories. That is what I mainly did."

Besides the above, journalists were also constrained by a more pragmatic consideration: the lockdown and uncertainty brought about by Covid-19 had placed the news industry across the country in an extremely vulnerable position, with substantial reduction in commercial advertising and subscription revenues. A critical revenue source at this point for many news outlets was Covid-related advertisements and public messaging by the government. A senior journalist explained the situation thus: "You are getting advertisement from the government and only from the government ... We did not want to displease the government and spoil the only revenue option we had."

## Science sources

Seeking to understand the dearth of scientific and medical sources in the news coverage, as also the sparsity of science news, including environmental stories, seen in the content analysis, we queried journalists

on their approach to the topic. While several journalists acknowledged that it was important to, as one interviewee put it, to "bring the science aspects to the public", reporters said they also wanted to ensure that their stories were "light" and could be understood by their audiences. A journalist explained:

> "When you write science, it is of no use to write it in depth. We must write it in a way the readers would understand ... Even a fifth-class child might read newspaper in Kerala. A fifth-class child should understand it. This is my basic rule."

As the pandemic had drawn in journalists from other beats and specialisms to contribute to coverage, it is also possible that a significant section of the reporters was unused – if not uncomfortable – reporting on medical and scientific aspects. An experienced journalist spoke of this:

> "I don't know much about science, though I have studied science. So, you tend to speak to a lot of doctors, experts, politicians, social commentators – people who can analyse it. You're covering it as a whole. Very complex thing here, we are approaching it from all angles."

Two journalists who actively sought out scientific sources for their report also indicated they had to face backlashes from the readers when they presented information from researchers that went against the grain. One of them said his paper faced "severe criticism" when they published a story, sourced from researchers in the US, that indicated that Kerala had a high percentage of unidentified Covid patients – which turned out to be true. "Asymptomatic people were understood by the public society later," he said. "The criticism came before it was understood."

## Crisis journalism training

Multiple journalists indicated feeling a level of inadequacy in reporting the pandemic. While this is hardly surprising or in any way unique to journalists in the state, given the unprecedented nature of the health crisis, we probed respondents to get a sense of their crisis training and the importance they attached to capacity-building in this area.

Most journalists indicated they had received no training in crisis journalism, saying they had not come across such opportunities. One of the journalists typified the experience of several of our interviewees:

> "I don't think there is any journalism course that offers crisis journalism as a branch of study. It doesn't exist [here]. So, I don't think I have given much thought about it. We talk about financial journalism, defence and environment journalism – things like that. But not crisis journalism."

A reporter we interviewed added further context to this: despite holding journalism qualifications, the notion of crisis journalism was "new", and the journalist mainly looked at senior colleagues for guidance:

> "Crisis reporting is very difficult. It is a new thing also ... There is a lot more to improve. I think personally I could have talked to my senior reporters, so I will have a clearer idea on crisis reporting."

A smaller proportion of our interviewees, journalists with more than 15 years of experience, said they had received training run by international agencies. Few of their staff members, too, had accessed similar training, they said. This, however, was several years ago. The interviewees indicated they had not had the opportunity to undergo a refresher or skill-upgradation since the initial course.

A section of journalists, for their part, expressed mistrust about formal training for crisis journalism, saying that journalists were able to find their own way to cope with any situation. One journalist said "life is the training", adding that while he was aware crisis training was being offered by international organisations, he had not ever had an opportunity to attend. This notwithstanding, the majority of journalists acknowledged the need for capacity-building in this area, acknowledging that the pandemic – despite Kerala's experience in health and environmental crises since 2018 – caught them ill-prepared and constrained their news operations significantly. A journalist captured this sentiment and the need for training succinctly when he said: "Covid was not expected by us. If we got notification of Covid's arrival, we could have attended classes."

# Beyond the pandemic: building resilience

The news coverage of the pandemic in Kerala in the first six months was characterised by reports aimed at raising public awareness about Covid-19. As evidenced above, journalists saw their primary objective as updating the public about morbidity and health measures for containment. News outlets were particularly careful about authenticating the information they published, being considerate about the panic and anxiety that existed among their audiences. While this approach is commendable, and in line with the good practices advocated for journalism in times of crises, there were areas in which the news reportage stopped short of a nuanced and more productive approach.

News outlets appeared to find it difficult to balance their information dissemination role with the watchdog function expected of them: scrutiny of the health responses of the government – both state and central – were near-absent; and there was heavy reliance on elite sources, limiting the space given to scientific, medical, and alternate sources. Many journalists also rallied around the flag, arguably led by a sense of 'patriotism' in the 'war against the virus', economic pragmatism, or a combination thereof. Journalists also signalled the need for stronger crisis reporting skills and editorial strategies, underlining the lack of such training opportunities in the state.

These findings are not altogether surprising: research in India as well as in other national contexts show such issues common in many news outlets that function in 'disaster communities'. However, these challenges, unless mitigated effectively, are also known to impinge on the societal response and resilience to not just the ongoing crisis, but its preparedness for future scenarios.

It's important to highlight here that given the range of crises – from climate change to health, and terrorism to financial – that we face today, the demand for journalists to be 'crisis-agile' is more than ever. The requirement today, in other words, is not that news outlets be prepared for a pandemic or another health crisis – but they have the ability to function efficiently during *any* crisis.

## Areas for action

Based on the findings above, and drawing from previous research, we put forward the following recommendations to strengthen four key areas:

- **Develop operational contingency plans for dealing with crisis situations.** This could be developed at the news organisational level and include:
  - Identifying risk scenarios (ranging from unexpected, low-impact emergencies to bigger disasters or crises at state, national, and global levels) and operational solutions for dealing with each.
  - Consider, and plan for personal safety requirements of journalists on the frontline (e.g.: PPE), as well as infrastructural and logistical challenges that affect newsrooms during emergencies (e.g.: limitations or physical damage to buildings, restrictions on movement).
  - Model economic contingencies and develop plans for action that protect editorial independence, and, importantly, limit impact on news workers as much as possible.
- **Develop crisis-specific editorial strategy and reporting protocols.** Presence of such guidance and documentation would help strengthen news operations during crises, avoiding conventional ad hoc responses. Implemented by media houses, this could include:
  - Documenting and absorbing 'lessons learnt' from previous crises such as the pandemic or natural disasters.
  - Agreeing on areas for focussed reporting during different emergency situations, and how these might change as the crisis evolves (for instance, from response to relief phase).
  - Establishing routines for fact-checking and verifying information.
  - Adopting a practice of contextualised reporting, which goes beyond statistics and updates and builds a bigger picture that allows people to better comprehend the significance of new information.
  - Establishing protocols to periodically interrogate and report on crisis *prevention* measures of governments to help improve community preparedness and awareness of future scenarios.

- **Establish measures, checks and balances to ensure adequate scrutiny of public health responses in all phases of the crisis.** It is important for newsrooms to consider how best they can carry out their watchdog function, balancing it with their information dissemination role, during a crisis. Measures that could be adopted include:
  - Pro-actively assigning reportage that goes beyond morbidity and mortality updates, including in-depth, explanatory, and investigative reporting.
  - Implementing guidelines for source-diversity in daily news coverage, to balance conventional reliance on elite sourcing of news stories and provide space for meaningful alternate sources.
  - Undertaking pre-crisis cultivation of expert non-governmental sources for future scenarios.
  - Actively adopting a policy of *analytical* reporting (which interrogates, among others, information, research/science, and expectations of outcome) for major news emergency responses.
- **Facilitate continuing crisis training and capacity-building opportunities for journalists.** Better awareness of crisis reporting challenges and training to overcome them are critical for future preparedness and resilience. This could be undertaken by news outlets, educational institutions, industry bodies and journalism associations, and must be flexible programmes that allow journalists to address a variety of scenarios. Such programmes could include:
  - Training for the 'known unknowns', emergency or crisis scenarios the communities are particularly vulnerable to (e.g.: floods, landslides, health crisis).
  - Refresher courses or opportunities for upgrading skills to ensure that training is current and relevant.[19]
  - Embedding crisis education in journalism curricula, both in HE and professional institutions.

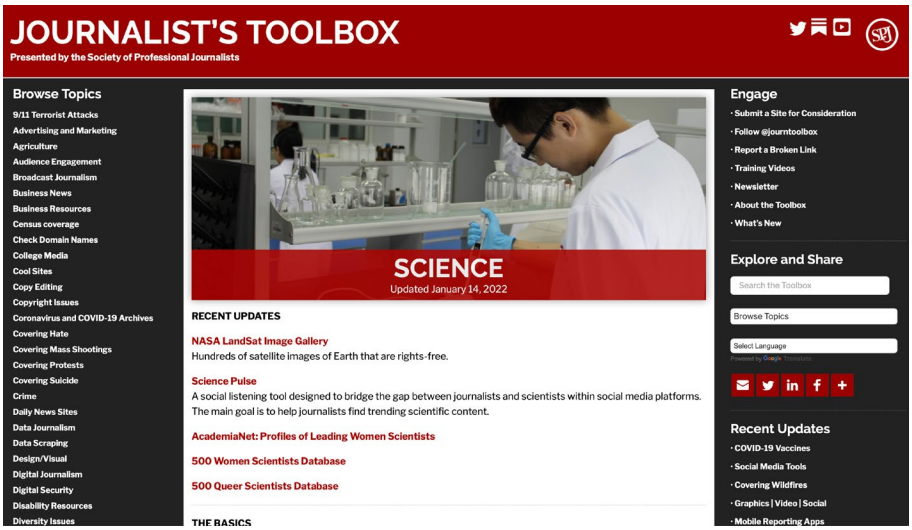
19 As the first and second authors have argued elsewhere, crisis resilience and preparedness cannot be achieved by one-off exercises and require continued application. See Sreedharan, C. and Thorsen, E., 2018. *Voices from Nepal: Lessons in Post-Disaster Journalism*, https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/31242/1/Voices%20from%20Nepal%202018.pdf

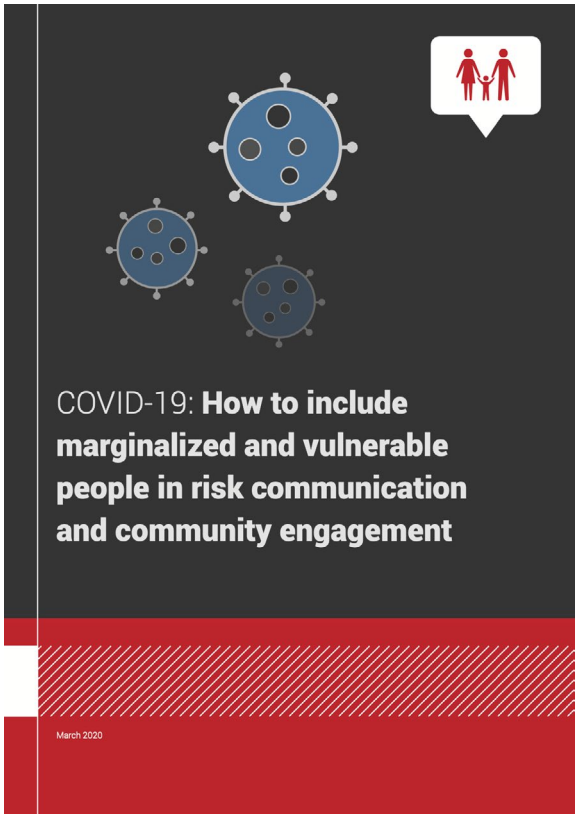
# Resources for journalists

## Guidelines for reporting crises, disasters, and emergencies

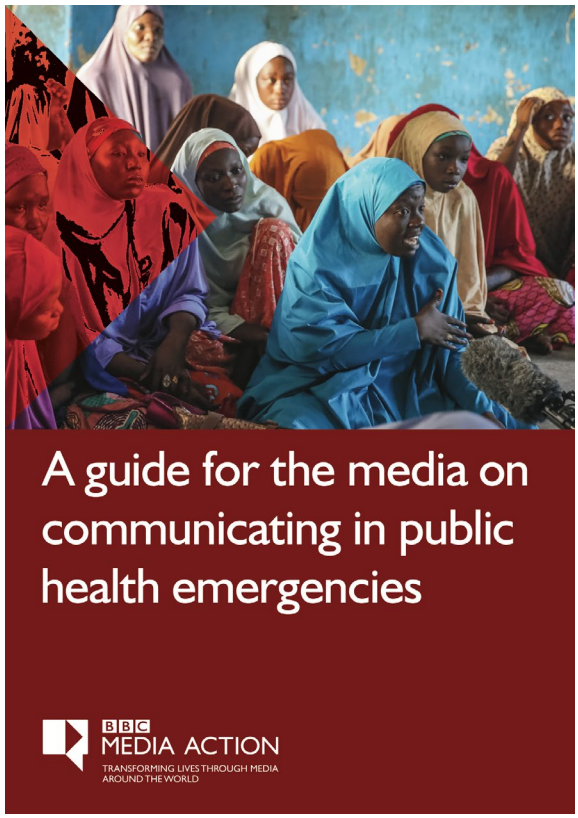
- **Covering COVID-19: Resources for journalists (International Center for Journalists)**
  https://www.icfj.org/our-work/covering-covid-19-resources-journalists

- **Science: Journalists' Toolbox**
  https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/2022/01/02/science_resources_1/

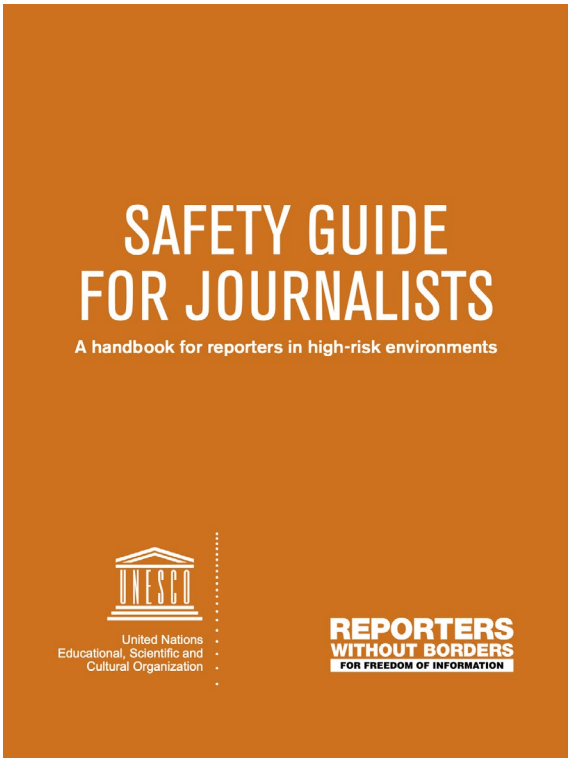




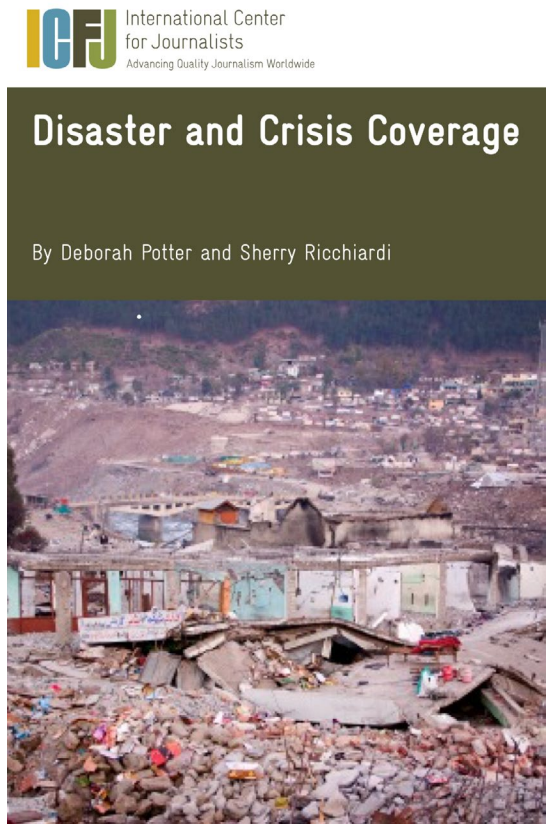

- **Covid-19: How to include marginalised and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement (Relief Web)**
  https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19_CommunityEngagement_130320.pdf



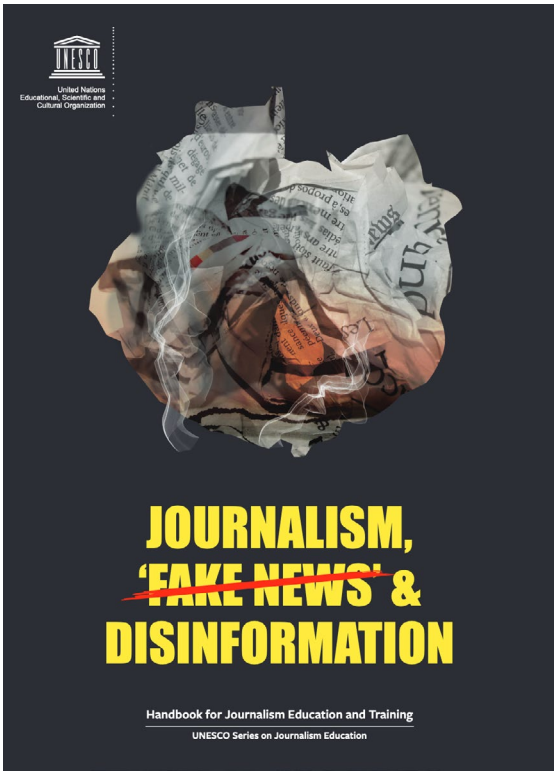

- **A guide for the media on communication public health emergencies (BBC)**
  http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/communicating-in-ublic-health-emergencies-english.pdf




- **Safety guide for journalists: a handbook for reporters in high-risk environments (Reporters Sans Frontieres)** https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/2015-rsf-safety-guide-for-journalists.pdf

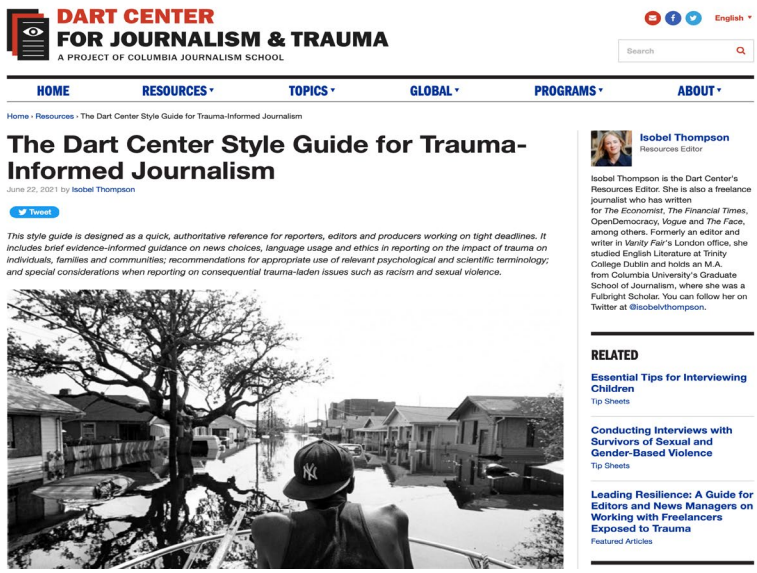



- **Disasters and crisis coverage (International Center for Journalists)** https://www.newslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Disaster-Coverage-Guide.

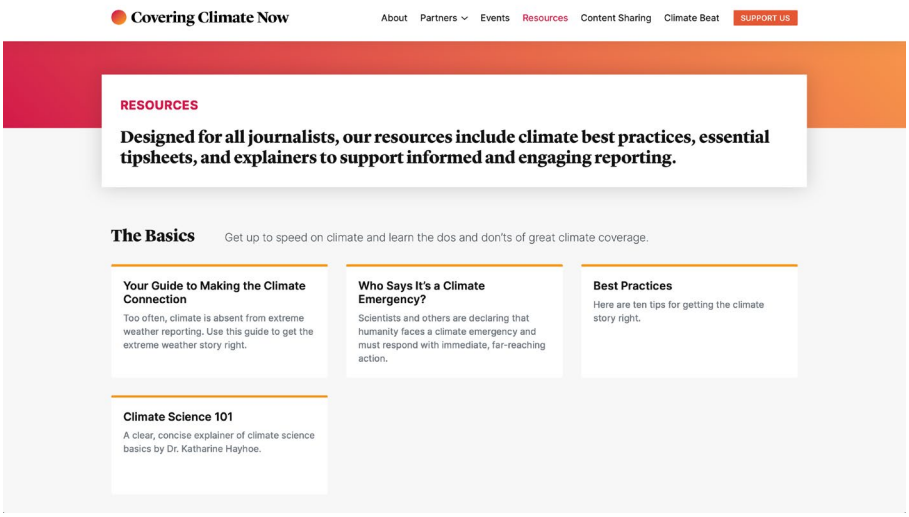



- **Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training (UNESCO)**
  https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews

- **The Dart Centre Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism (DART)**
  https://dartcenter.org/resources/dart-center-style-guide-trauma-informed-journalism



**A Climate Reporting Guidebook**
https://wan-ifra.org/events/global-esummit-journalism-and-the-climate-crisis/




**Covering climate now**
https://coveringclimatenow.org/resources/

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