



# Internews' Strategic Approach to COVID-19

## Information Saves Lives

### Overview

Internews launched our new five-year strategy in February 2020, just a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly altered the entire world. Our strategy has become more relevant than ever — COVID has amplified and escalated all of the challenges that we face in our mission to build healthy information environments around the world. The solutions and strengths we bring to this work are as needed as ever.

The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly transforming the information and media systems of every society it touches. The [WHO situation report](#) described the “infodemic” surrounding the outbreak as “an over-abundance of information — some accurate and some not — that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”

Our COVID-19 response is rooted in the knowledge that information can literally save lives. Journalists, civil society leaders and other communicators are working hard to serve as essential intermediaries between the government, public health experts and the public to stem the infodemic. **But many governments are making this difficult, misleading the public, detaining and arresting those who seek to hold power to account, concealing information, and using the crisis as justification to suspend human rights, elections, and checks on their power.**

Internews is ready to respond. We have a network of more than **750 active** partners that we've been working with **across five regions**, in over **120 countries**, for nearly **40 years** in more than **100 languages**. Our partners and allies include media outlets, internet freedom advocates, fact checkers, media literacy trainers, social media influencers, information researchers, artists, lawyers, technologists and others. We are able to elevate local voices to the global stage, and to address global challenges at the community level. Many excellent organizations are tackling this infodemic in a vast variety of ways, but few have the understanding of the local context, in the local language, with the direct and trusted access to local information partners across so many countries in the world.



## **The Challenges: Greatly amplified by COVID-19**

**People need clear, evidence-based information they can understand and act upon to stay safe.** Too often, governments and public health officials give conflicting, confusing, or incomplete guidance. People want to know if it is safe to go to work, if they can send their children to school, where food supplies are available and what to do if they're showing symptoms. Even the most trusted sources do not have all the answers, and information changes regularly. Excellent global sources of epidemiological information and journalism are not enough to help people make wise decisions. They need to be translated, put into local context, and routed around censors and other barriers. While there is an abundance of information globally, people need "News You Can Use" — news from local sources in their own languages to help understand what this epidemic means for them, their families and their immediate communities.

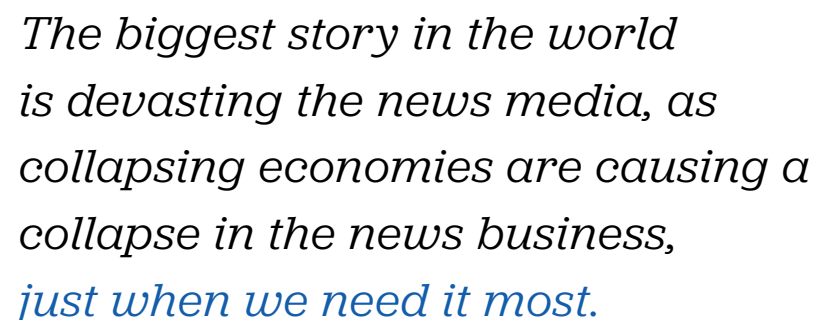
**Misinformation and disinformation are flooding all information environments.** The spread of COVID-19 and the risks it poses to communities is compounded by the lack of accurate and up-to-date information amidst the proliferation of rumors, myths and misinformation that exacerbate fear, panic, stigma, and mistrust, contributing to further mistrust of the health system and health workers, to mistrust of all information surrounding the outbreak, and to mistrust of preventative behaviors that can save lives. There is evidence that

malign actors are purposefully sowing disinformation. People's distrust in corrupt or unaccountable governments helps misinformation and rumors to spread wildly.

**Authoritarians exploit fear to silence dissent and accountability.** We are seeing a dramatic increase in crackdowns against freedom of expression in the face of COVID-19, often under the guise of combatting misinformation and rumours. Civic space is rapidly closing around the world and the online space in particular is under assault, with governments censoring information online; rapidly expanding surveillance technologies and policies under the guise of contact-tracing; and exploiting confusion to achieve geopolitical gains. Multiple actors, from governments to hospitals and civil society organizations, are falling victim to digital attacks such as malware, ransomware, and phishing attacks. Find the latest in these trackers: [ICNL's COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](#) or [Privacy International's Global Response Tracker](#).

**Journalists and Activists Face Compounded Security Risks:** While repressive regimes have been increasingly cracking down on information providers over the past decade, COVID-19 is adding to these risks. Journalists work in an environment of fear as they cover COVID-19 without adequate safety protection gear and in the midst of intimidation from authorities and gangs. From Haiti to Iran, they've been barred from practicing journalism, suspended from social media, assaulted by the public, attacked by police and even family members of journalists have faced reprisals.

**The media market is collapsing.** The biggest story in the world is devastating the news media, as collapsing economies are causing a collapse in the news business, just when we need it most. COVID-19 has been called an "extinction event" for local news, as advertising disappears and media around the world are shuttering. Even successful national news outlets are feeling the pinch from reduced advertising revenue. The pain at the local level, however, is extreme. Local advertising — the last thin lifeline for many local outlets — has been cut in half overnight. And it is the local news outlets who provide the most contextually important information for local communities.



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# The Internews Approach

The Internews approach to addressing COVID-19 is deeply rooted in our new strategy, which calls for building the five elements of a healthy information environment. These are:



1. Good, accurate, evidence-based information;
2. That everyone can access safely;
3. That consumers know how to critically assess;
4. That is valued by communities and sustained by business models that work; and
5. Where governments and businesses are accountable for keeping it that way.

Internews' global reach, deep local knowledge, diverse but integrated technical focus and well-honed technological ability to operate remotely means it can activate its network to address the pandemic in multiple locations and in many languages simultaneously; and scale up and adapt effective response models, including in spaces where freedom of expression is already limited and under increased pressure.

Based on our existing engagements in a country and our ability to do rapid ecosystem assessments, our work in helping address the impact of COVID-19 can entail the following elements:

## 1. Good, Accurate Evidence-based Information

The science around the pandemic is complex and evolving. All journalists and content creators everywhere need support to report that science accurately, responsibly, safely, and in a way that helps their audiences take appropriate action. In addition, they need to cover the way their communities and governments are responding, and they need to do so with: increasing inability to move and travel; increasing threats of censor, harassment and detention; rapidly dwindling resources; and, the personal stress and individual health and safety concerns facing everyone.

### **INTERNEWS OFFERS:**

**Health and humanitarian reporting and information skills.** While there is a plethora of news coverage at the national and global level, there is less at the local level in local languages, and not enough that focusses on the concrete information communities need. Our global bench of health journalism advisors are available to mentor, train and support journalists, journalist associations, media outlets and information providers in diverse regions and multiple languages. Our experts don't just offer webinars; they

are ready to roll-up their sleeves and provide journalists and media outlets something much harder to obtain — a peer to bounce ideas off, think through approaches to a story, or simply help reduce anxiety in how to cover a very challenging topic. We provide basic education on key scientific facts about the coronavirus, available data, sources, fact checking, and related advice on how to cover COVID and related subjects.

#### **Help to partners to contextualize information for their communities.**

Beyond basic information, we bring our proven methodologies in “Communicating with Communities” and “Community Engagement” which ensures that communities are part of the conversation and have a voice — even in times of limited face-to-face interactions — to raise what information is most urgently needed.

**Transition to remote news techniques.** When face-to-face news gathering is no longer possible due to curfews, government restrictions, lack of protective equipment and disappearing resources, reporters remain committed to providing life-saving information to their communities. We provide training on how to run remote newsrooms, tools and techniques to use for remote reporting, and help on the ways to address all the associated managerial challenges of this new way of working.

**Other activities Internews offers:** Core journalism training, digital security training for content creators, training in verifying and curating User Generated Content, anti-hate speech training, data-journalism, investigative journalism, journalist-led fact checking, journalists security, gender considerations in COVID-19 coverage, research into and analysis of digital rights violations and emerging digital safety threats in different environments.

## **2. Information that everyone can access safely**

Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care, but on ready access to accurate information about how to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s community. Attempts by governments to restrict access to the internet, block social media platforms, apps and services, or surveil those searching for information denies people access to information that is critical to managing this pandemic and saving lives. These aggressive tactics not only limit health information — but ALL information — under the guise of public health and security.

We recognise that there will be groups and communities who are particularly vulnerable, marginalised and widely underserved, for whom in the best of times, information is already difficult to access. During this pandemic, access inequality is greatly exacerbated, as the ability for people to share information face-to-face, in local languages, or through trusted

community networks is cut off, and the ability to pay for or have access to cell phones or other communication devices is severely constrained.

We work to ensure that access is available, affordable, in local languages, by trusted sources, uncensored and safe for everyone — and particularly for the most vulnerable.

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**Access strategies:** Through expert assistance — as well as investment in infrastructure where needed — Internews can help ensure that relevant local language content lives on multiple and redundant platforms, such as community radio, posters and infographics, messaging apps, mobile SMS, and other media, and we can connect that content into community feedback mechanisms.

**Anti-censorship tools:** In environments where information is deliberately being repressed, or where people or groups feel particularly at risk seeking information, we offer deep expertise in building, localizing, and training on anti-censorship technologies, from pluggable transports to VPNs.

**Safety training and advice for the digital space:** We have deep institutional expertise and multiple technology programs aimed at creating, localizing, analysing, and training on digital safety tools aimed at helping people safely access information, particularly as online spaces close around them and threats may be increasing. Internews provides specific expertise in supporting digital safety for individuals from marginalized and disenfranchised populations, and those operating in minority languages, as well as the specific safety needs of women online.

PHOTO BY ENGIN AKYURT ON UNSPLASH



### 3. Information that consumers know how to critically assess

To overcome rumors, misinformation, and distrust, Internews works to provide people with access to two-way streams of information through which they can engage in dialogue with other affected populations and with available health services, local officials, and other sources of information that they trust. Internews works with our local partner media outlets and content creators to offer people trusted channels through which to receive the verified and timely information that comes from our fact-checking partners and networks. This approach goes **beyond the assumption that facts are all that is needed**: through social and conventional media, the facts are contextualized, localized, discussed, debated and illustrated with lively and relatable human stories. Most importantly, audiences are given the opportunity to air their doubts, queries, and concerns that can be highly revealing of localized attitudes and responses to the COVID-19 situation.

We seek to ensure that the deluge of information available from the supply side is accurate and evidence-based, but we also work to ensure that people who access, share and engage with it are resilient to false information and engage with credible sources. The by-product of this is increased trust, which has been in deficit and must be strengthened during times of crisis.

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**Rumour tracking.** The Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology is a process to collect community data (questions, concerns or rumours heard) in a semi-structured way to allow any topics to surface without leading the discussion towards a desired outcome. All Rumour Tracking projects involve a feedback loop: the data is collected, analysed to understand the fears and hopes behind those rumours, and then actionable information that addresses the concerns is shared back with the community. Rumour Tracking bulletins, radio programs, door-to-door community health workers, social media channels and when possible, community gatherings or listener's clubs, are used to answer community questions, concerns and beliefs about the nature, spread, prevention and treatment of COVID-19 in the preferred languages of community. See our [Rumor Tracking Methodology](#).

**Media and digital literacy.** People have a torrent of information to sort through to make critical decisions to keep themselves safe. Bad actors are intentionally seeding the information ecosystem with disinformation and propaganda to serve their own interests, leaving information-seekers vulnerable to manipulation. Internews has developed innovative methods to inure citizens to attempts to manipulate them into misguided decisions and behaviors, by putting better information in front of the public in formats and through intermediaries they trust. During an epidemic, where objective facts about the disease and the risk it presents can be established clearly, Internews focuses on finding vulnerable populations and meeting them where they are, be it on social media, private messaging groups, influential peers or community leaders.

**Citizen-led fact-checking networks and platforms.** During a pandemic, the value of fact-checked and verified information rises along with the stakes. Many people seeking information beyond an ideological or identity lens are willing to seek verified facts and disseminate them to peers. This is why it is critical to have fact-checkers, who verify the claims made by those in power for an information-seeking public. While fact-checking rarely converts those who are highly susceptible to misinformation, vetted and verified claims are an important element of a healthy information ecosystem, where those seeking to amplify facts must outsource their research to trusted third parties.

#### **4. Information that is valued by its community and sustained by business models that work.**

In order to deliver the high-quality information and accountability mechanisms described above, our partners need to stay afloat. To survive, media outlets must take urgent action, at least to assess their ability to endure this crisis. Those that learn, adapt and innovate most effectively now will be most likely to succeed in the long term. Anticipating a global recession of uncertain length and depth, outlets urgently need help to focus now on total financial management, caring for their workforce, building their audiences and strengthening their brands. The need to combat misinformation about the pandemic creates opportunities for reputable, accurate media to deliver empowering local information and capture new audiences. This is especially relevant in markets where the accuracy of government data is most uncertain.

We are one of the few organisations already set up to channel funding directly to partners, and with the expertise to help them plan for and mitigate the worse financial impacts of COVID-19.

##### **INTERNEWS OFFERS:**

**Media Survival Grants for immediate needs,** due to the radical changes in newsroom settings and operational environment. This can include staff, infrastructure and facilities of key outlets, communication equipment and internet plans for remote work, subscriptions for tools for online production and collaboration, funds to rent cars/hire drivers, funds for extra cleaning services, security services, etc. In some cases, we have sought permission from our funders to repurpose grant funding into operation support. Internews continues to fundraise for our [Information Saves Lives Rapid Response Fund](#) which has already supported more than 20 outlets around the world.

**Crisis consultations by media business mentors.** Our experts can help outlets to refocus from long-term viability to short-term survivability, by planning for the rapid reduction in income while maximizing audience



engagement. They provide consulting on controlling costs, forecasting, maximizing revenue, building financial reserves, bringing events online and increasing subscriptions, donation and programmatic and native ad revenue.

**Development of audience engagement, retention and monetization strategies.** Media outlets have an opportunity to build on the trust they are creating through the provision of credible, evidence-based information to their audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our business advisors can help them reach new audiences, increase audience engagement and measure and strengthen brand loyalty in an effort to remain sustainable in the long term. We can continue to pilot and experiment with building alternative monetization mechanisms. Even if the markets are down, media can take the opportunity to build up their audiences and secure their trust, enabling them to pivot from advertising to audience-generated revenue.

**Strategies to transition to digital.** When traditional or legacy media becomes challenging for economic reasons, or the inability to move around, we can assist with rapid switch from print to web and further — to mobile, including associated operational and tech costs for mobile apps, website redesigns, etc.

## **5. Governments and businesses that are accountable for sustaining healthy information environments.**

Across the world, we see governments increasing surveillance, control and even attacks on freedom of expression by way of response to COVID-19, sometimes, but not always, presented as a means of containing the epidemic. Extraordinary new measures of surveillance and control are emerging across the globe in the name of the crisis. Time is likely to prove that in many environments, the pandemic established a pretext for seizing control over expression, assembly, and personal information that will live far longer than the health crisis itself and that will further entrench global backslides in democratic norms.

Internews, directly and through its partners, dedicates itself to protecting and promoting strong legal and regulatory environments for free expression, and an accessible, secure, open internet. We place a particular focus on the impact of emerging digital rights, cybersecurity, and data protection laws. Our advocacy and media partners dedicate themselves to holding governments accountable and informing the public about governmental or corporate decisions that will impact free expression and safety on the ground. And we work with leading global technology companies to make their products safer and more responsive to individuals, journalists, and human rights defenders who face specific needs or threats. We also partner with them to promote high quality, credible information on their platforms, improved fact checking tools for information providers, and stronger mechanisms for removing disinformation and act against malign interference.

**INTERNEWS OFFERS:**

**Leadership on a Global Change Agenda.** Internews continues work with a variety of consortia and partners, such as the Global Network Initiative, the Global Forum for Media Development, the World Economic Forum, and others to advocate for greater governmental and platform accountability and the protection of media freedoms during this time. We uniquely bring local voices and experiences to these efforts.

**A pre-existing relationship with major technology companies – Google, Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, Vodafone, Orange, and other global Telcos,** in particular. These relationships enable us to raise safety issues quickly, expedite flagging of bad information, amplify good information, and engage in confidential discussions to understand obstacles that companies may be facing in specific environments, where Internews or its partners could play a role in helping identify solutions to safety and information needs.

**Legal and advocacy support to CSOs, journalists and content producers** – particularly at the local level – to fight off the effects of new and increasingly restrictive measures introduced by governments to close the space for freedom of expression; arrest, harass and detain journalists; and control flow of information on COVID-19. We also have rapid response funding available for civil society organizations operating in closing spaces.

**Systemic responses to Internet security, access and policy.** We design and implement programs in digital rights, internet policy, the promotion of legal and enabling environments for freedom of expression, and in-depth research into closing spaces. Where an individual program might be tackling one aspect of this problem, Internews as a whole is well-positioned to help analyse the bigger picture and develop more comprehensive solutions to local challenges.

Internews' strong operational basis, distributed global structure, and longstanding role as a leading implementer and designer of strong information security practices has allowed the organization to pivot to remote working conditions wherever those are feasible. Internews knows how to get results while working remotely, with countries that we can't reach and communities that are dispersed. Entire program units have worked remotely with high-risk groups and countries for over a decade, developing systems for oversight, operations, partner relations and activity facilitation that are invaluable now. And because we have always been focused on supporting local capacity and tailoring what we do to each partner, we can transition seamlessly into remote mentoring and direct one-on-one support.

## Our Strengths: Even more valuable during COVID-19



**Internews has long brought information solutions to the world's most pressing issues.** Global populations increasingly confront acute crises and complex, long-term development and humanitarian challenges related to critical issues such as climate and environmental crises, conflicts, public health epidemics, natural disasters, forced migration, and severe economic inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrates how these issues are multilayered, increasingly interconnected, and often reach across borders, affecting neighboring and regional populations. Internews is one of the only global organizations specializing in information that spans the humanitarian-development spectrum, reaching people who are vulnerable to the compounding effects of the wide variety of global threats caused by the pandemic. This focus sets us apart and greatly expands the potential impact of our activities.



**We build lasting partnerships and alliances,** that strengthen and promote local organizations. We have a network of more than 750 active partners that we've been working with across five regions, in over 120 countries, for nearly 40 years in more than 100 languages. The strength of our partners is key to our ability to respond to COVID-19 and to ensure communities get the information they need, from sources they trust, in languages they understand. Our agility means that we can support our partners remotely with the expertise, funding and peer-to-peer relationships that allow them to keep working to provide life-saving information, even when Internews staff is no longer in country. The thousands of experts, advocates, and leaders who trust Internews form a foundation for global reach, diverse expertise, real-time information, field insights, and alliances that we can elevate to the global conversation around the pandemic, raising up the needs and concerns of information providers on the front lines.



**We are agile. We are able to work where information is most under threat and where it is most urgently needed.** From remote regions across Afghanistan to communities devastated by earthquakes and tsunamis to some of the most heavily censored countries in the world, our agility is our strength. We have specific experience in emergency response to multiple humanitarian and health crises over the last 15 years from Tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes (Indonesia, Aceh, Nepal, Pakistan, Haiti, Puerto Rico) to refugee crises (Mediterranean, South Sudan, Bangladesh) and Ebola epidemics (Liberia, Guinea and DRC). This strength allows us to respond quickly to emerging opportunities and reach the most information-poor and vulnerable people in support of our mission. We have invested in digital security, physical security, rapid response and humanitarian systems, and lightweight logistical approaches to enable this work. In many cases, we are one of the few media and information organizations that can maintain operations in dangerous, challenging, or closing spaces. This builds our reputation as a trustworthy “get-it-done” partner. This strength has meant that Internews has been able to keep all of our

programs operating across the globe, fully shifting to remote operations within the first weeks of the pandemic. We've also quickly and efficiently adapted our core programs to address COVID, working hand-in-hand with our funders to innovate, pilot and adapt to ensure communities get accurate evidence-based, life-saving information.



**We listen. We design and implement our programs through deep engagement with local communities.** Every crisis and every community is different — and the global COVID-19 pandemic impacts each community in unique ways. Only by communicating directly with communities can we improve our situational understanding and tailor response efforts more efficiently to the local context. Sharing information with the community and listening to their feedback makes response programming more effective by better meeting people's expressed needs.

In an information climate as complex as that surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak — and when face-to-face interactions are severely limited — local media has a vital role to play in communicating with communities, providing timely, accurate and trustworthy information, as well as channels for gathering and addressing feedback from vulnerable people. Internews is well placed to address the current COVID-19 outbreak as we are deeply connected to local media partners around the world, and are pioneers in the global development of Communicating with Communities approaches. This is a unique niche Internews fills by working with and deeply listening to our local partners, analysing local information ecosystems, and incorporating the concerns, ideas and needs of the community into our program design. And the relationships we have built with over 750 partners just since 2019 is even more critical now, when social distancing and travel restrictions limit the types of in-person engagement that communities. Read more about the [CwC approach](#), [feedback mechanisms](#) and [ecosystem assessments](#).

## Responsive programming

Internews' project staff and partners immediately adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. As one of the first truly global news stories, people everywhere are seeking basic information on how to survive and persevere in this crisis. Our work provides it. Here are a few of the dozens of examples.

In **Myanmar** partner Marnagar, a hyper local ethnic media outlet, is hosting a [daily live, interactive show](#) on Facebook. The host plays educational COVID-19 messages, video news, and music, and welcomes audience participation.

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, Internews has nurtured a local civic activist and social media influencer who goes by **Civilia**, who was one of the first to cover the pandemic for her country. She reaches young people on [Facebook](#) and on [community radio](#) and connects them to sound health advice and news they can use in a series called "Special: COVID-19."

Our **global Earth Journalism Network** has commissioned a series of stories on wildlife markets that will be published across Asia in light of the coronavirus which likely emerged from this trade, and on the ramifications of China's consideration of restrictions.

In **India**, where we helped build a national network of hundreds of fact checkers and verification specialists, their work has become more important than ever. One, Data Leads, is conducting a fact-checking initiative called [First Check](#), which brings in a network of medical professionals across Asia to debunk health-related misinformation around COVID-19.

Everywhere that we work, we're helping our partner newsrooms and non-profits learn how to better do their jobs online and under lockdowns. See more on the needs we're fulfilling [on our web site](#).



## Organizational Investments & Global Projects

**Global knowledge sharing:** We have a team of Humanitarian and Health Technical Advisers with extensive expertise in health reporting and Humanitarian Information Services. These advisers are already working with WHO, IFRC and others to put out webinars and other resources to media on a region by region basis, and to inform and support new information networks that are springing up in response to COVID (like an Africa-wide WhatsApp group for journalists).

**Information Saves Lives:** The Internews *Information Saves Lives* Rapid Response Fund [was started](#) on March 26, 2020 with \$100,000 in unrestricted funding from Internews, and is a global appeal to attract additional funding to directly support media outlets, organizations and individuals who are working to provide local language journalism and other forms of public information related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts. We received more than 200 applications in 3 days from 58 countries. As of April 22, we have awarded 25 grants to media outlets and journalist in 19 countries.

**Health Media Mentors:** Internews has mobilized more than a dozen health journalists from all five regions where we work to serve as Health Media Mentors to our media partners and others who are working so hard to push out accurate information on what COVID means for their audiences, and to counter the tide of rumor and misinformation that looks different in every country every day. These mentors will provide tips, tools and remote mentoring to Internews staff, projects and partners, as well as smaller working groups for journalists at the frontlines of COVID coverage to ensure that they are connected to fact checking networks and other resources that can inform their work.

**Health Journalism Network:** All of the media outlets and journalists that reach out to us for financial and mentoring support will be given the opportunity to join our new Global Health Journalists Network through which Internews will channel future support for public health reporting beyond COVID. The Network will include the many journalists and reporting networks that Internews has already trained and supported over 15 years to report on HIV, Ebola, SARS and H1N1 as well as maternal child health and sexual and reproductive health issues. The Network will not only provide trainings, fellowships and networking opportunities, but will provide the means for health journalists to help each other with their work on specialized areas of health reporting.

**DFID-supported Southeast Asia Response:** Internews is currently funded by DFID as part of the H2H consortium countering misinformation and monitoring social media in Southeast Asia, disseminating factual information and the latest research to the general public and the scientific community, and working with the main response agencies to create content helpful and accessible to the broader community. The H2H Network has funded four independent international organizations focused on communication and information to assist the global response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) epidemic. These organizations are: Internews, BBC Media Action, Evidence Aid and Translators Without Borders. The project is currently funded through May 2020 and focuses especially on Thailand, and may expand to serve other regions.



Internews, an international nonprofit organization, empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account.