



# Sudan: Steps Towards Reporting the Nation's Health

*"Health journalism does not stop at the borders of the" Covid-19 "pandemic, and it is not a seasonal stop. Rather, it is an inevitable path for every country wishing to establish a new phase for its future." - H R Venkatesh*

Health journalism has not been a priority for the media in Sudan partly because most news organizations do not recruit specialized health journalists, and partly because they do not provide training and resources to support coverage of health issues. In general, stories about health in the Sudanese media tend to be superficial and lacking relevant research and analysis.

However, the impact of COVID-19 has changed the editorial priorities of Sudanese media outlets and now health issues focusing on the consequences of the pandemic are in high demand

The absence or lack of interest in health journalism is not a Sudanese phenomenon. Many Arab countries have followed a similar reluctance to dedicate resources to the coverage of health issues. Even the press in some developed countries had to acknowledge that they did not have experienced health journalists that were capable of covering all the complicated issues involved in the pandemic.

## What is Health Journalism?

Here is a simple and concise definition: "Health journalism is a specialist form of journalism that deals with health issues, health behaviours and sheds light on the most prominent medical breakthroughs. It aims to increase health awareness among the community through providing accurate information, advice, and guidance."

As with other kinds of journalism, covering health issues demands that professional guidelines are observed like accuracy, integrity, and credibility. This is especially true during the pandemic which has witnessed so many harmful rumours, misinformation, and even disinformation.



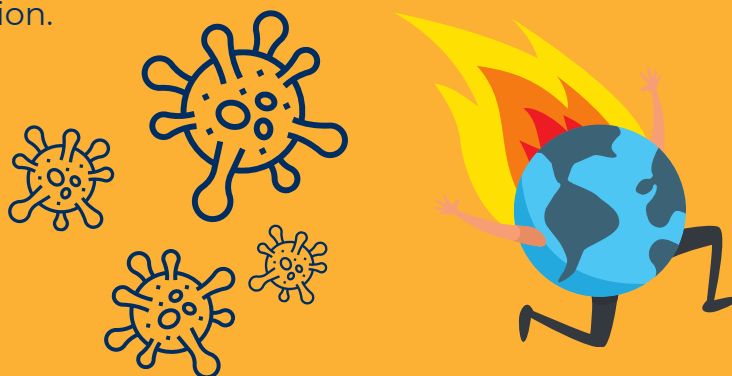
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## Data and social media content

Be wary of using scientific or medical information found on social media. It must be verified by reliable sources with the proper health expertise. Even if data, numbers, and statistics may be accurate, they can still be presented in misleading ways, so it is critical to confirm the source of the information, and the data collection methodology. Reliable and relevant data is the basis for scientific-based decision making.

## Do not sensationalize

Do not sensationalize this public health crisis, but by the same token do not minimize the risks and impacts. It is important to present accurate information in simple language that your audience can understand so as not to mislead them. Professional ethics require that you present information in a balanced and objective manner rather than a dramatic and overblown fashion that can cause undue alarm. Your job is to provide the information in a such a way so that people can make decisions based on the reliable and accurate information.



## Trusted sources

Get your information from relevant and reliable experts on the topic. Make it very clear who the source of the information is in order to show it is credible.

Provide additional reliable and verified sources so your audience can search for more information on the topic. Journalists must not only obtain information from reliable sources, they must confirm that their sources are reliable.



## Be careful with adjectives

Stick to the cold hard facts. Do not sensationalize your writing with terms like 'miracle cures' or 'game-changer'.

## Do no harm

Journalists should do no harm. What we publish or broadcast may be hurtful, but we should be aware of the impact of our words and images on the lives of others.



## Clear language

Scientific terminology is often confusing or not easy to fully understand.

Journalists should use simple language so that readers of all levels can easily comprehend what is being discussed.

Journalists need to present complex health issues in a way that audiences can understand them. One tip for journalists is to ask the expert to explain the issue as if they are talking to a young child.



## Beware of key opinion leaders

Basically, we tend to believe “the experts.” The longer their résumés, the more credibility we attach to their statements. Moreover, our relation to medical doctors is determined by a phenomenon known as the The White-Coat Effect. The pharmaceutical industry relies on this in its marketing strategies where Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) play a crucial role.

Journalists covering health issues should show reality as it is, without adding or subtracting anything from the story. Scientists, doctors, and epidemiologists are continually learning more and more about COVID-19 so the details included in reports need to be updated and checked on a regular basis.

KOLs are industry designated doctors and scientists whose biographies and affiliations are perceived as prestigious. They are often, at the same time, consultants for industry and the government. Companies engage them in every step of a product life cycle, and journalists tend to turn to them for quotes and advice, as they are considered “experts in the field.”

KOLs populate the boards of medical societies, write guidelines, teach in medical schools, and give training in Continuing Medical Education systems. Exposing conflicts of interest is worthwhile and a source of many good stories. Financial interests are not the only area to investigate; reputation, status, titles, and recognition play a role, too.



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## Marginalized and vulnerable groups

Historically, pandemics have been accompanied by waves of racism and hatred. Marginalized and vulnerable communities, such as women, children, refugees, and internally displaced people are often the target of rumours and misinformation. Therefore, journalists have to provide balanced and unbiased coverage that respects the privacy and dignity of all people.



## Reiterate that migrant workers are not a health risk and migration does not cause COVID-19

As a journalist, you can counter the narrative that migrant workers are bringing COVID-19, and returnees are a risk to communities. Many have endured verbal and physical assaults, and at times, institutional exclusion from the receiving society. Even those who were fortunate enough to have been able to return to their own countries of origin still face stigma, discrimination, and exclusion even from their own countrymen and women.

In order not to worsen an already tenuous situation, you have a moral and social responsibility of doing no harm in your reporting.

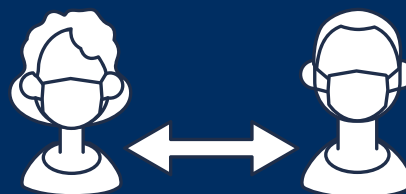
You can advocate for their health to be protected. According to the World Health Organization all countries have an obligation to protect and promote the right to health for all people on their territory, without discrimination, and this includes migrants regardless of their status. According to the WHO, stigma can drive people to hide their illnesses to avoid discrimination, preventing them from seeking immediate health care.

## Learn from the past

Although the dominant narrative in 2020 suggests that the world is facing a new and unprecedented medical emergency, lessons have been learned from hundreds of years of medicine, health care, and epidemiology. Get to know more about routines and protocols in health care: How are patients with respiratory diseases normally treated in intensive care units? Is it standard to use mechanical ventilation with elderly people? How often and for how long do complications from other viral infections affect a patient after hospital discharge? Don't fall for the hype.

## Taking it from another angle

From under the rubble of sadness, anxiety, and fear in times of the pandemic, journalists can also address health crises in a different more positive manner. Shed light on success stories and experiences of how patients have overcome disease or learned to live with an illness. Journalists can investigate more positive human-interest angles of the story and spotlight humane details even amid feelings of fear and sadness.



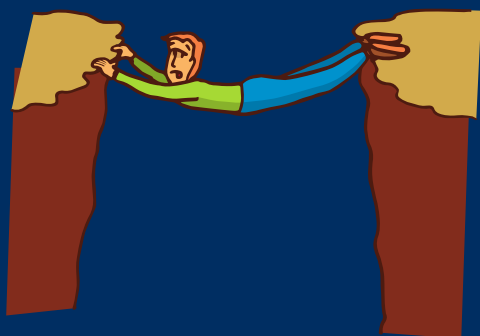
## Journalist safety

Journalists covering health-related stories need to be careful and follow all preventative measures. To reduce the risk of exposure to a COVID-19 infection, you should continue to conduct interviews via phone or the Internet instead of face-to-face. Also, whenever possible, use only what you bring with you such as your own cup, pen, papers, napkins. Wear a face mask, regularly wash or sanitize your hands, and leave a distance of not less than two meters between you and your colleagues at work.



## Bridging the gap and correcting misinformation

Sudan has a great need for specialized media coverage of health issues. The relationship between journalists and health institutions in Sudan needs to improve in order to correct attitudes and misconceptions that exists between reporters and health care professionals. As a journalist covering this pandemic you should make every effort to bridge the gap between media outlets and health institutions. Your role as a journalist does not end when you shut your laptop at 5pm. Make sure anything you share or like on social media includes verified and reliable information, even on your personal accounts. Don't be tempted to forward articles or information from unreliable or unverified sources.



## JOURNALISM — SPECIALS —

[How to report COVID-19 vaccines \(who.int\)](#)

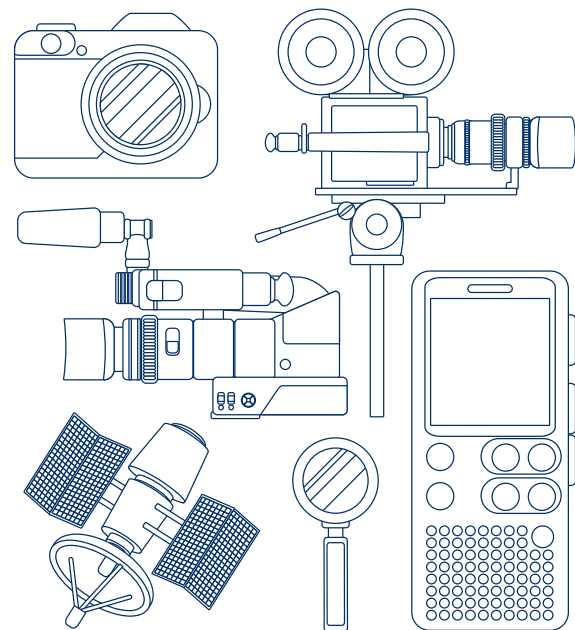
[Preparing professional media reports on COVID-19 vaccines](#)

[Health Journalism after corona is not the same as before](#)

[Safety alert: Media coverage of the Coronavirus outbreak](#)

[Health Journalism in Times of Corona](#)

[COVID-19 Response Resource Centre](#)



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for support and further information.*