Communicating Health Uncertainty: How Australia’s only National Broadsheet Newspaper Reported the Emerging COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The news media play an important role in communicating health topics to the public (Hallin & Briggs, 2015, Media, Culture & Society, vol. 37, pp. 85–100). Often journalists are the first to raise the alarm about the safety of vaccines, medicines and pathogen outbreaks including emerging infectious diseases (Joffe, 2011, Public Understanding of Science, vol. 20, pp. 446–460). But the news media have also been accused of distorting, exaggerating or amplifying risks which can lead to fear-mongering and public panic (Klemm et al., 2016). This paper examines how the only national broadsheet newspaper of Australia, The Australian, reported the COVID-19 pandemic from its first media appearance in January 2020 with a focus also on 2 days in February and March 2020. These timeframes coincided with significant coronavirus milestones for Australia, such as the first COVID-19 infection; the first deaths; and the World Health Organisation’s declaration of a global pandemic. This paper found that The Australian coverage was not hyped but measured, with heavy reliance on analysis of the economic fallout of COVID-19. It also found evidence the conservative newspaper used war metaphors to convey the fight against the coronavirus.

Keywords
Health news, pandemic reporting, emerging infectious diseases, medical journalism

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, a number of infectious diseases including acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Swine flu, Ebola and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), have alarmed both the public and policymakers, long before a novel coronavirus made its appearance in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, from where it rapidly spread globally (WHO, 2020a). Often, the public’s first knowledge of Emerging Infectious Diseases (EID) comes from the media (Sell et al., 2017). In 2012, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognized the importance of news media in disseminating accurate information to the public at a time when new EID of zoonotic origin steadily increased in incidence, with the potential to cause a large number of human deaths. According to Thinley (2012, p. 3), journalists play a fundamental role in creating awareness about a new health threat, but erroneous reports can wreak havoc and panic. The work of trained journalists is even more vital during a global health emergency, such as COVID-19, when misinformation on social media by amateur communicators can spread as quickly as the virus itself, with misleading or false claims presenting ‘a serious risk to public health and public action’ (Brennen et al., 2020, p. 2).

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused ongoing deadly havoc over ten months with more than 1,400,000 deaths to date, and almost 60 million confirmed cases worldwide (WHO, 2020b). Further, world economies have been impacted adversely with businesses, industries and supply chains severely disrupted because of lockdowns to contain the virus, the loss of economic output described in the trillions of dollars (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020, p. 46). According to Goodell (2020, p. 3) COVID-19 ‘is creating economic destruction on an unprecedented scale.’ The way we work and play has also been significantly affected, and a cause for increased anxiety and distress (Polizzi et al., 2020, p. 59). In terms of a significant risk story with news values such as unexpectedness, prominence, human interest, timeliness and impact (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017), involving a dramatic and deadly global health story, the detection of COVID-19 has had all the ingredients to make headlines for months. Ungar (2008, p. 473) pointed out, ‘the media tend to focus on stories that devolve around the novel and dramatic issues, which they present in inflammatory ways’. Journalists have long been considered ‘the public’s main source of science information and interpretation’ and the link between experts who assess risks and the public’s own risk perceptions (Duhé & Cho, 2009, p. 130).

Previous Reporting of Contagion Outbreaks

Journalists are considered key communicators during an emerging health crisis, but during the previous pandemic -swine flu (H1N1) detected in Mexico- the news media were accused of scaremongering as well as being factual and reassuring (Klemm et al., 2016, p. 15). The news media’s chronicling of past health scares has been examined by others with conflicting results. Nerlich and
Koteyko (2012) found news reporting of H1N1 to be affected by hyperbole and ‘Armageddon headlines’ (p. 713). Others regarded the pandemic as ‘milder than the common flu’ (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013, p. 436), ‘less serious than first thought’ (Davis et al., 2014, p. 501) and ‘much ado about nothing’ (Klemm et al., 2016, p. 1). Yet, Hilton and Hunt (2011) found little evidence of media ‘over-hyping’ the 2009 Swine flu outbreak. In an Australian context, Fogarty et al. (2011) also established TV news coverage of H1N1 to be ‘generally non-alarmist and reassuring’ (p. 5). But Holland and Blood (2013) pointed out the public considered the media manipulative during the Swine ‘flu pandemic’. This, they suggested, was because print and TV media were asking news consumers ‘to view the risk as more serious than it actually was’ (p. 529). During other EID such as AIDS, attribution of blame to ‘marginalized and/or powerful groups’ is commonly the public response which can run parallel to the news media’s pattern of reporting (Joffe, 2011, p. 447).

In 2005, avian influenza, SARS (H5N1), which originated in China (Duhé & Cho, 2009, p. 127) was also expected ‘to ignite a lethal pandemic’ (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 430). Ungar (2008) found news media discourses of a “monster pandemic” that might totally eclipse the Spanish flu’ (p. 481). He concluded that ‘both mortality and spread—new outbreaks that enlarge the range of the virus—drive newspaper coverage’ (Ungar, 2008, p. 494). Others found that news reporting of recent pandemics also made comparative reference to the 1918 Spanish ‘flu, considered the deadliest pandemic of all, with an estimated 100 million deaths worldwide (Wilson et al., 2020). Abeysinghe and White (2010) regarded media and government reporting of H5N1 in Australia as framed symbolically. The ‘collective memory’ and spectre of such historic devastation, resulted in the concept of a threat being exaggerated, with The Australian reporting at the time that ‘H5N1 [bird flu] is considered the biggest disease threat to humanity’ (Abeyesinghe & White, 2010, p. 376). Use of the language of invasion, war and combat were used ‘to illustrate the geographical progress of infection and heighten notions of threat and attack’ (p. 376). According to Joffe (2011, p. 447), the media play ‘a crucial role in heightening awareness of EID...in the absence of an event: the danger that might occur provides the drama as do the related scientific controversies and breakthroughs’. News reports can heighten public fear, exaggerate claims or can reassure. The use of combat metaphors and comparisons with deadly historic ‘plagues’ can also augment risk perception.

### Conceptual Framework

How journalists present a significant health threat, therefore, determines how the public views it and is influenced by it (Bubela et al., 2009). Reporters use both news values to initially assess the validity of a potential science-based story (Badenschier & Wormer, 2012), and frames to determine its salience, as well as its understanding by the public (Entman, 1993; Iyengar,1994; Scheufele, 2006). Applied to health news and how it is depicted, this affects how the public views disease and illness (Beaudoin, 2007; Coleman et al., 2011). Entman et al.
(2009, p. 180) observed that in the analysis of framing used in news texts, ‘metaphors, actors and messages’ help determine the salience of an issue.

In examining the reporting of previous EID, some (such as Holland & Blood, 2013; Joffe, 2011; Ungar, 1998; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013) have determined three stages in framing a pandemic by news media which provides some useful guidance in examining early news reports of COVID-19 by *The Australian*. The first stage immediately after the initial outbreak is characterized by ‘sounding the alarm’ (Ungar, 2008, p. 472), framed by national plans of combat in securing border protections in anticipation of the virus arrival, and/or ‘impending doom’ (Holland & Blood, 2013, p. 524), much uncertainty and worst-case scenarios. Often the media is guided by expert, government and health sources with selected frames considered ‘the outcome of negotiation processes’ between them (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013, p. 439). During the second preparatory stage of an EID outbreak, called ‘mixed messages’, news media coverage tends to include conflicting signals but becomes less alarming and more reassuring ‘as fear of an uncontrollable global epidemic spread’ (Ungar, 2008, p. 472). During this stage, media frames include the preparedness of the medical system and staff to cope with the threat, quarantining protocols and national plans to combat the virus (Ungar, 2008, p. 484–486). The final stage of ‘crisis and containment’ or ‘hot crisis’ (Ungar, 1998) can revert to more alarming messages and to the ‘distancing-blame-stigma’ frames used in the reporting of EID (Joffe, 2011, p. 452) or the rhetoric of ‘othering’ (Washer, 2004). This includes marginalizing certain groups in society as scapegoats for the EID, either because the virus originated elsewhere (and therefore a country and its peoples can be blamed), or because they ‘are so different to us’ (Washer, 2004, p. 2570). Compared with previous EID mentioned, such as bird flu and swine flu, COVID-19 has already embodied the worst-case scenario template, much anticipated in previous years when a deadly epidemic to rival the Spanish flu was constantly on the radar, and considered epidemiologically inevitable (Abeyesinghe & White, 2010). Others such as Wilkins (2005, p. 248) have suggested that journalism’s role during a health threat assumes the ‘same normative standards as other social institutions when combating disease: minimize harm.’

**Methodology**

*The Australian* newspaper was selected as it is the country’s only national broadsheet. Using the database NewsBank, a total of 6,721 stories were found using the words ‘Coronavirus’ or ‘coronavirus’ or ‘COVID-19’. This search yielded 1,557 articles over four, weekly timeframes (between 1 January and 31 March 2020). This was redacted again to what was thought to be a more manageable size by focussing only on the early reporting of COVID-19 during a three-week period (Monday to Saturday) in the first three months of 2020 (20–25 January; 24–29 February; 9–14 March). The process yielded a total of 430 usable articles (after duplicates and irrelevant articles were eliminated). However, this research was intended as a small, exploratory study. The focus of the analysis was
therefore further reduced by examining one week in January (20–25) when the first news reports on the ‘Chinese’ virus appeared, and two Saturdays, one on 29 February and another on 14 March, the day when usually longer articles and more analysis are published. These could be described as ‘three temporal “snapshots” of newspaper coverage’ (Washer, 2006, p. 459) used to detect fluctuations in the context and content. The arrival of the virus also coincided with Australia experiencing a season of ferocious, deadly bushfires across the continent, similarly described as ‘unprecedented’ (Bowman & Bradstock, 2020).

29 February and 14 March 2020

By end of February, more was known about the transmissibility of the virus and the severity of the disease (WHO, 2020c), and by this stage, Australia already had 23 confirmed cases. The day examined (29 February) was chosen because it provided a sufficient time lapse of four weeks after reports emerged in January, and therefore an opportunity to compare chronicling of the disease’s global rapid progression and overall effects. In March 2020 Australia had recorded its first death from the virus, and on 11 March WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020e). The following day, the Australian Government unveiled its first stimulus package worth $17.6 billion to prop up the ailing Australian economy (Morrison & Frydenberg, 2020). During this period there were also emerging concerns about the disintegrating global markets and supply chains increasing fears of COVID-19’s impact on world economies, as well as the potential strain on healthcare systems, locally and internationally. 14 March, therefore, provided an in-depth review of a tumultuous week.

The focus of this early period of news reporting provides an opportunity to reflect on the progression of timely debates on the virus. The analysis was guided by others who had identified the early stage of pandemic reporting such as ‘sounding the alarm’, as well as the following two subsequent stages which others (Holland & Blood, 2013; Ungar, 2008) have identified as ‘mixed messages’ and the third as ‘hot crisis and containment’ (Ungar, 2008), and whether these could also be detected in follow-up reports published in the two days of focus in February and March 2020.

In the current study, a total of 44 articles were identified in January over six days (20–25 January), 53 news stories on 29 February, and 153 on 14 March with a total of 250 pertinent news stories on COVID-19. After removing duplicates, irrelevant or passing reference to the novel coronavirus, the final sample was reduced to 22 items during January; 35 on 29 February, and 52 on March 14, with a total of 109 usable articles for analysis. The period selected enabled the tracking of reporting foci and any changes over three timeframes, ranging from 4 to 2 weeks apart. The scrutiny of data and processes undertaken for analysis was guided by the sampling methodology of others, such as Washer (2004, p. 2564), who examined the initial coverage of SARS in UK Sunday newspapers over four weeks (selecting five days in this timeframe), deriving a final sample of 74 articles. Duhé and Cho (2009, p. 132) examined TV news coverage of avian flu
(H5N1) in the US over a decade (1997–2006) using a final sample of 169 evening TV news stories. Sandell et al. (2013) examined the news coverage of the 2009 H1N1 (Swine flu) pandemic in both Australia and Sweden with a total sample of 81 articles published on weekends during the period 1 June to 31 October 2009.

The Australian COVID-19 news reports in the current study were then categorized into seven thematic categories: (a) economy/finance; (b) politics; (c) medical/health; (d) virus details/impact; (e) international focus; (f) sport and (g) othering. The discourse used in each article was also analysed to establish ‘metaphors, actors and messages’ suggested by Entman et al. (2009, p. 180). The framing of a pandemic into three stages suggested by Ungar (2008) was also considered. Others who have also examined the news media’s coverage of EID developed coding categories to facilitate the analysis of media texts. For example, Stephenson and Jamieson (2009) identified 38 different themes, including the economy; characteristics of the virus; and pharmaceuticals. Washer (2004, p. 2565) used 24 categories such as ‘graphic descriptions’ and ‘killer/deadly’, while Kilgo et al. (2019) employed five (blame, praise, general risk, solution, speculation) categories to analyze news coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis in the US.

Main Findings and Discussion

20–25 January: Sounding the Alarm—Stage 1

During this period, WHO had only just given the first alert about the novel coronavirus (WHO, 2020a). Most articles found were economic or finance-related followed by those with an international focus and then ‘othering’. The first page one story published by The Australian on the novel coronavirus outbreak was entitled ‘Fears of China virus pandemic hit home’ on 22 January. This article focussed on the plight of a Brisbane man placed in quarantine after returning by plane from Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak. Elite medical, academic and government sources were quoted and their credentials were reinforced, such as ‘expert in emerging viruses’ who described the virus as a ‘perfect storm’. Metaphors related to natural but fearful occurrences can heighten a sense of risk (Abeyesinghe & White, 2010, p. 376). Border officials and health authorities were ‘on alert’ and prepared to ‘isolate people at airports’ if they displayed symptoms. There is a sense of urgency and gravity in raising the alarm about a deadly new health threat, by including there is ‘no vaccine available’ and ‘no specific treatment other than supportive care’ (Taylor et al., 2020). But there are also reassuring comments included by the Federal Education Minister to placate readers’ fears regarding the return of Chinese students to Australia:

We have faced health scares before and will put all necessary steps in place to ensure everything is done to keep Australians disease-free.

The reassurances to assuage mass fear and highlight swift Government responses to a new global health threat which may eventuate in a pandemic are atypical of
the first stage of EID reporting and more common in the second ‘mixed messages’ phase, but these can overlap given the uncertain trajectory of a new health threat for both decision-makers and journalists alike. Ungar (2008, p. 480) also pointed out that the three stages of pandemic news reporting ‘are not demarcated by firm dates or fixed communication content’.

At this emerging stage the virus had not yet been named and so initial news reports during January under focus, referred to the virus as the ‘China’ virus, ‘Chinese killer virus’ or even ‘Wuhan virus’. This could be viewed as ‘othering’ where metaphors were used to shift blame to others, which can influence readers ‘to sidestep responsibility for changing their own behaviour’ (Bouchoucha et al., 2019, p. 27). As Joffe (2011, p. 458) pointed out, in the ‘alerting the public’ stage of a major impending health scare, people tend to distance themselves from the disease and stigmatize those who are viewed as having ‘intensified its spread’. Although these adjectives were used in initial reports to denote provenance, they may have inadvertently contributed to placing blame on China. This was the case in the origin of COVID-19 and previous EID such as SARS. According to Wu et al. (2017, p. 22), trade and travel spread infectious diseases, and as the world’s largest trading nation, China has facilitated the movement of pathogens around the world. Others, such as Washer (2004, p. 2566), also noted during the coverage of SARS that Chinese officials had underestimated infection rates, were secretive, and that ‘traditional Chinese reticence’ was widely criticized by the contemporary media.

As aforementioned, the majority of articles during this period had an economic focus, especially on stock market reactions to the deadly new virus. Other articles forecasted areas which would become significant issues of focus later, such as the major economic repercussions of the virus on sectors such as tourism and aviation, with comparisons made to previous contagions:

Just as SARS followed the September 11 terror attacks that crippled the travel industry, the coronavirus epidemic has come in the wake of a global economic downturn and months of devastating bushfires already taking a toll on tourism. (Ironside, 2020)

Correlation with previous EID is usually made in emerging reports to give a ready reckoner for readers to assess the severity of a new health threat and compare it with previous deadly ones (Blakely, 2003). The Spanish flu was rarely mentioned in news reports during the timeframes selected, as the collective memory of catastrophic mortality (Abeysinghe & White, 2010). SARS was used instead to highlight how the 2020 coronavirus was mutating ‘into a more virulent disease’ and how more quickly it spread than SARS did in 2003 (Higgins & Ore, 2020; Hodge, 2020). News articles listed what border protection methods were being implemented such as screening passenger arrivals with temperature scanners—symptoms which were also listed in full. There were also warnings about the ‘deadly new strain of coronavirus mutating into a more virulent disease that can be transmitted through airborne droplets from coughing and sneezing’ (Higgins, 2020).

These news examples are consistent with the first preparatory phase of reporting a pandemic, that is, providing details of the virus, how to protect oneself and
informing the public what measures the government is taking to contain it (Dudo et al., 2007). During this period, there’s a rhetorical undercurrent of endangerment (Ungar, 2008, p. 474), and a sense of impending dread, clouded with uncertainty. In this first stage, the virus was already reported as mutating into an even more virulent form. This ‘mutation-contagion package’ (Ungar, 2008, p. 484) is typically a feature of the second stage of reporting, not the first when the alarm is initially raised. Others who have analysed pandemic reporting have suggested viruses of zoonotic origin could mutate and create new strains deadly to humans (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 431). These fears have been anticipated in previous EID, so early warning systems, in this case, could be part of the arsenal of the ‘worst-case scenario’ reporting template.

The news focus during the week of scrutiny in January 2020 tracked how the virus was affecting the local economy, how people could protect themselves, details about the virus (and global rates of transmission and mortality), and its spread to other Asian countries. Ironically, positive stories also appeared at this time about the buoyant stock market with titles such as ‘Surging shares immune to the killer virus’ (Rogers, 2020). Articles provided details about draconian methods Chinese authorities were taking to contain the virus, such as the use of SWAT teams and the military to prevent anyone from leaving Wuhan, and the compulsory wearing of face masks in public. A discrepancy was portrayed between the ‘official’ death toll (13) and the actual toll (600) considered an ‘understatement’ by ‘international observers’. These details could reinforce readers’ perceptions about the Chinese Communist Party’s obfuscation regarding the outbreak and transmission rates:

China under Mr Xi has become strongly allergic to the release of information seen as damaging to the state. Some international scientists believe the number of people afflicted by the latest virus is much higher than has been admitted officially so far. The world is watching, fearfully. (Editorial, 2020, January 25)

Surprisingly, the first article on vaccine development also appeared in January to combat ‘nCoV-2019’, the first time we hear the novel coronavirus’s new epithet (Loftus & McKay, 2020). Overall, the week’s emerging reports were characterized by a sense of foreboding and uncertainty, typical of the first stage of outbreak reporting (Ungar, 2008). Unlike other contagions which never eventuated into full-blown threats, yet, were exaggerated by the news media at the time (Stephenson & Jamieson, 2009), this period demonstrates a comprehensive focus on all aspects of the unfolding health drama with both alarming and reassuring aspects.

February 29, 2020: Mixed messages—Stage 2

The same categories used in January were applied in February and March. There were only oblique references to ‘othering’ found in two articles (already coded in other categories). These again referred to the opaqueness of Chinese authorities regarding transmission/infection rates and details of the virus’s origin, which as a
result could give readers—already disposed to such views—an impression of China’s untrustworthiness. Another medically-focussed article reported briefly on a case of overt racism—when ‘parents refused to let doctors and nurses of Asian appearance treat their children’ at the Royal Children’s hospital in Melbourne. According to Ungar (2008) ‘othering’ can occur within days of reporting a major health threat (p. 475) when a sense of rampant and swift spread of disease is on the horizon.

On this day, stories focussed on how businesses were coping with draconian restrictions in place including lockdowns, social distancing protocols with the employed forced to work from home to contain the spread of COVID-19. Again, the majority of articles focussed on the economic fallout of the virus and most of the scrutiny on business and financial matters was negative: how supply chains were severely disrupted affecting stocks and industries; panic selling in ‘wild’ markets; how many sectors were struggling—already foreshadowed in January—especially aviation and tourism. But during this time, more analysis—often comprehensive and lengthy—was given on the virus’s rampage through local and international communities amid predictions of a looming pandemic. Again, a comparison to SARS was made but this only served to heighten the alarming, deadlier problem of coronavirus as deaths (almost 3,000 at the time, WHO, 2020d) far exceeded the total of 774 people killed during the 2003 SARS epidemic.

Other articles on occasion written by respected medical sources focussed on reassuring messages of government preparedness with competent systems in place to cope with the spectre of a global pandemic:

People can be reassured that we have a very strong health system in Australia… Because of our swift and proactive actions, we have, so far, successfully contained this virus… With the international spread of this virus, we need to be realistic. It is almost inevitable that we will see more cases of COVID-19 in Australia in the coming weeks, along with the potential for community transmission in this country. (Murphy, 2020)

These examples are features of the ‘mixed messages’ stage of pandemic reporting when news switches from ‘worst-case scenarios’ to reassuring rhetoric which serve to highlight that systems in place will cope with the health threat and emphasis is placed on the ‘battle-ready’ skills of medical systems and authorities to cope (Ungar, 1998). Others, such as Stephenson and Jamieson (2009, p. 525), have referred to this as a form of ‘nation-building’ which ‘positions health as central to national security’.

Negative aspects of the health system, such as the cancellation of elective and non-essential surgery ‘in an effort to manage an already thin national nursing workforce’ were also highlighted (Lynch, 2020). Uncertainty about a ‘chronic nursing shortage’ for the ‘sick, old and the immunosuppressed’ in hospitals and aged care homes, reinforced the view that this stage of EID reporting may also have content that highlights both praise and blame. Ungar (2008, pp. 480, 486) pointed out that the three stages of pandemic news reporting could be fluid with overlap between them and contradictory narratives could be a feature. In this case, the reporting examined on this day appears to be characterized by both the ‘all’s
OK’ messages, with the contrasting ‘we’re not coping’ narratives—contradictions which indicate the fluidity of reporting during an EID—that can manifest during the second stage or even during ‘containment’ in the final stage of pandemic reporting (Ungar, 2008, p. 486).

Vaccine development was also revisited on this day, originally foreshadowed in January as a hopeful mitigation plan to prevent COVID-19 (Lynch, 2020). Although health-related stories mostly focussed on ways people could take responsibility for preventing infections (washing hands; social distancing etc.), scientific progress and the slow path to recovery were lauded. Updated vaccine stories about strategies to permanently ward off disease features as a leitmotif in the time frames selected for analysis, offering some hope in grim times. Others examined the Prime Minister’s ‘resurrection strategy’ after mismanaging the bushfire catastrophe with the title ‘Show strength in crisis’ (Kelly, 2020) as the virus spread quicker than the fires.

The 2020 Olympic games scheduled in Tokyo, were ‘facing their greatest threat’ since their cancellation during World War 2, and a loss of half a billion dollars in tourism revenue to Japan. A report called the Olympics a ‘giant petri dish’:

> If you had to design a vector to spread a highly contagious disease, you would imagine an environment that squeezes hundreds of thousands of people into crowded spaces and sends them back home after two weeks of mingling with strangers. The Olympics are that environment. (Cohen & Robinson, 2020)

The February news articles reinforced the second stage of EID reporting characterized by benevolent reassurances regarding Government preparedness with systems in place to cope with the threat. However, it was another example of confusing messages typical of this stage, where, on one hand, journalists report uplifting news to the public from elite health and government sources, and on the other, a menacing undercurrent of the ‘worst-case scenario’ narratives—characteristic of the first stage of pandemic panic reporting—persist.

**March 14: Containment ‘Hot’ Crisis—Stage 3**

The same framing categories used for 20–25 January and 29 February were applied to 14 March. By then, COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic (WHO, 2020e), and was therefore no longer a theoretical threat. Unsurprisingly, stories about the virus had increased exponentially over the three timeframes examined: from 22 articles during a week in January to 35 on 29 February to 52 on 14 March, an increase of almost two and a half times. Again, the main focus on the 14 March was the economic/financial fallout of COVID-19, followed by internationally focussed articles.

A page 1 story on this day again updated the progress of a vaccine in development at the University of Queensland entitled optimistically ‘Corona code cracked, now to cure’ (Walker, 2020). Scientific progress on a workable vaccine was a regular focus in the timeframes selected indicating faith in science as a
potential saviour in the battle against the virus. While this story provided hope, others on 14 March highlighted the negative. Reports were published on how health authorities were ‘racing to control’ COVID-19:

…or face a life-or-death challenge: flatten the rate of infection or face a situation where hospital doctors will need to make agonizing decisions about who to save and who to let go. (Norington & Robinson, 2020)

Metaphors of battle were used such as ‘War cabinet to tackle infection curve’ as a Federal Minister tested positive for the virus, mass gatherings (such as sports matches) were banned, COVID-19 infections ‘surge’ and the effect on the economy considered ‘significant’ (Chambers et al., 2020). A sense of the gravity of the situation was illustrated by the following, critical of the Federal Government:

The problem… is that when delivering mass messages to national audiences the goal of stifling panic can risk underplaying what is ahead of us. (Van Onselen, 2020)

Stories showcased the worst aspects of the COVID-19 fall-out with airlines ‘facing a crash landing’; threats of a world-wide recession; and the global financial system sorely tested by the virus. A story on two world leaders’ handling of COVID-19, one in China, the other in the US, revealed another glimpse of the former as China’s deadly ‘reflex to cover up bad news’ was illustrated:

The false information released by the relevant departments—claiming the disease was controllable and would not spread from human to human—left hundreds of doctors and nurses in the dark, doing all they could to treat patients without knowing about the epidemic. (Glasgow, 2020)

In the reporting of EID, fearful doomsday scenarios are often depicted in pandemic coverage by news media which can have ‘unintended consequences’ (Ungar, 2008, p. 485). Stories during this period chronicled panic buying, empty supermarket shelves and major shortfalls in sanitary items such as toilet paper, the preparedness/failures of the health system and criticism of political leadership navigating an unprecedented health crisis. Further, by 14 March, a reiteration of apocalyptic devastation elsewhere, economic and political deficiencies at home, and local panicked human behaviours, this day encapsulated the predominant fears already detected in the previous two timeframes selected, but with more despondency. March 14 demonstrated aspects of the ‘hot crisis’ stage of pandemic reporting (Ungar, 2008) when infections were spreading rapidly, the Australian death toll was increasing and national plans of ‘defence’ and containment against COVID-19 had been enacted. Analytical reports continued to scrutinize Australia’s capacity to cope with this microscopic threat finding cracks in both the health system and political leadership. But despite the chaos, there was no evidence of ‘overhyping’, or deliberate ‘scaremongering’ using hyperbole and exaggeration. Instead, there were signs of a ‘mediating mixed messages’ discourse (Ungar, 2008, p. 492), which contains both reassurances and blunt appraisals during a deadly epidemic.
Conclusion

The news media have a responsibility to provide the latest, accurate and balanced health information not only for the public but also for medical, government and scientific communities who may not yet know the latest news on a rapidly unfolding health crisis. Questions arise on whether the media help or hinder understanding during a pandemic. In the analysis presented here, *The Australian* chronicled the journey of the novel coronavirus from its first appearance in China, to the unbridled havoc it wrought on all facets of society, in Australia and globally. Using seven frames on all three time periods selected, *The Australian* reported with restraint on an unprecedented international health crisis that had been anticipated for decades. The arrival of this virus ticked all the boxes concerning news values, used to assess the worth of a potential news story: COVID-19 was particularly sudden, impactful and deadly. Although business/finance was a large area of focus, attention was given also to international and local events, strategies enacted, infections, deaths, medical research and political/medical decisions by elites on how to best contain the spread of the virus. *The Australian* has demonstrated it has already published elements of the three stages of a pandemic during the early timeframes selected, with blurring occurring between them, given the repercussions are still unfolding and resolution of the EID has not occurred yet at the time of writing. There was also evidence that military metaphors were used on occasion to describe the ongoing battle against the virus on all fronts (political, economic and health). The progress of science in finding solutions to eliminate the virus (such as vaccine research) was framed positively.

There was also ample evidence of journalists who were minimizing harm when reporting on this unprecedented EID, in a similar fashion suggested by Wilkins (2005, p. 248). These included presenting detailed information about the health threat to the public, decision-makers and the scientific community alike; being the conduit between the public and those in power; and monitoring ‘how well institutions have responded to particular events, both in the short and long term’. If this is the case, these are the established parameters of watchdog vigilance expected of a broadsheet publication. Hyperbole can, however, slip through the net as happened when *The Australian* published an exaggeration regarding bird flu in 2005: ‘H5N1 is considered the biggest disease threat to humanity’ (Abeyasinghe & White, 2010, p. 376). The current study showed that during a veritable global health emergency with unprecedented consequences, *The Australian* has reported the emergent stages of EID in an analytical, factual way without resorting to hype or hysteria, in what appears to be a continually evolving health crisis. Because of this, further research needs to be conducted to explore subsequent and sustained reporting on COVID-19 by the broadsheet since 14 March 2020. This would determine whether the three stages of EID news reporting shift focus in the long haul of a protracted contagion, already declared a pandemic almost nine months ago, at the time of writing. At this stage, it remains unclear whether COVID-19 will replace historical contagions as a collective reminder of devastating mortality for future generations. But it has already assumed the mantle of an enduring EID which has quickly spread globally with indomitable force yet to be quelled.
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