

Eurosurveillance, Volume 14, Issue 30, 30 July 2009

Rapid communications

How the media reported the first days of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009: results of EU-wide media analysis

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Citation style for this article: Duncan B. How the media reported the first days of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009: results of EU-wide media analysis. Euro Surveill.

2009;14(30):pii=19286. Available online:

<http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=19286>

Date of submission: 13 July 2009

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) commissioned an in-depth review of European media coverage of the opening days of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009. A total of 3,979 articles were collected from 31 European countries in the period 27 April until 3 May 2009. National and international public health authorities were by far the leading source of information on the new virus. They were identified as the main source of information in 75% of the articles analysed. 94% of the articles were either neutral, relaying factual information (70%), or expressing support for the authorities' handling of the situation (24%). These results seem to vindicate the communication strategy adopted by the public health authorities.

Introduction

One of the key principles of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Outbreak Communication Guidelines is that public health authorities need to "*announce early*" – i.e. engage with the media proactively as soon as they become aware of a major public health event, such as the emergence of a new virus [1]. The rationale for this advice is that, in the modern era of 24 hour media and instant international communication, news travel fast. No major development stays secret for long. Unless the authorities rapidly establish themselves as the main source of reliable information, the media will report rumours and speculation.

On Monday 27 April the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) placed an order with its media monitoring contractor to collect and analyse articles in the European media relating to the new influenza virus that had just emerged in North America. The aim of the study was to capture a Europe-wide picture of how the media reported the opening days of the new pandemic. WHO, and national public health authorities, largely acted in accordance with the Outbreak Communication Guidelines. Therefore the study can also cast light on the effectiveness of the "*announce early*" strategy.

Methods

Articles were collected by the contractor's offices across Europe from the top three national newspapers and the website of the main broadcaster in each country. A total of 124 sources were monitored. The 31 countries surveyed were the 27 European Union (EU) Member States plus the four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). TV and radio were not included in the survey due to the high cost of monitoring these media.

The search was performed for media articles that either mentioned the term "swine flu" or which were about the emergence of a new type of influenza in the United States and Mexico. The articles were to be analysed in terms of the main source of information being reported in the story: was it from international or national authorities; was it from academic experts or non-governmental organisations? In addition, if the source quoted was a national authority, was it the authority of the country of the media report or another country? Which spokespeople were being most widely

quoted in the media?

The messages featured in the story were also evaluated to see whether articles were supportive, critical or neutral concerning the actions of the authorities.

The contractor used was an international media monitoring company. The same company has been conducting Europe-wide monitoring and analysis of the impact of ECDC's media activities since 2006, so their analysts have some familiarity with infectious disease issues.

In early 2009 ECDC used this contractor to conduct an analysis of all health-related stories published in the media of 33 European countries (27 EU Member States plus Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey) between 15 January and 15 February. Some of the data from this study is used for comparative purposes in this article.

Results

For the week 27 April – 3 May 2009, a total of 3,979 articles that mentioned the new influenza A(H1N1)v virus were identified (Table 1). Of these articles, 3,463 were from media in the EU 27 countries. To put this figure in perspective, an earlier survey of all health-related stories found a total of 2,824 articles in the EU 27 media during a period of one month (15 January – 15 February 2009).

Table 1. Articles related to pandemic (H1N1) 2009 published from 27 April to 3 May 2009, breakdown by country (n=3,979)

The highest number of articles (842) was recorded on 27 April, the day WHO raised the level of influenza pandemic alert to phase 4 (Figure 1). There was a smaller, though still large, peak of the number of media articles on 30 April (717 articles). This appears to be linked to WHO's announcement of pandemic alert phase 5 at 22:00 Central European Time on 29 April: many of the European media reports about this were published on 30 April. Media interest dropped considerably after 30 April.

Figure 1. Articles related to pandemic (H1N1) 2009 published in 31 European countries, by date of publication from 27 April to 3 May 2009 (n=3,979)

National and international public health authorities were by far the leading source of information on the new virus. They were identified as the main source of information in 75% of the articles analysed (Figure 2). WHO was the main source of information in nearly a third of articles (28%).

Figure 2. Institutions/organisations mentioned in relation to pandemic (H1N1) 2009, articles published in 31 European countries, 27 April to 3 May 2009

70% of the articles surveyed were found to be factual accounts of the situation. A further 24% of the articles were supportive of the actions taken by the authorities (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Tone of coverage related to pandemic (H1N1) 2009, articles published in 31 European countries, 27 April to 3 May 2009

During the week surveyed, the most widely quoted spokesperson in the European media was the Mexican Minister of Health, José Ángel Córdoba (Table).

Table 2. Prominent spokespeople mentioned in articles on pandemic (H1N1) 2009, published in 31 European countries, 27 April to 3 May 2009

Discussion

The dominance of public health authorities as sources of information (75% of articles) appears to vindicate the strategy of announcing early. The fact that 70% of articles were factual would seem to show that if the media are provided with authoritative and reliable information they will report it in a balanced way. And, indeed, they will give it greater prominence than rumours or speculation. The low number of articles critical of the authorities (6%) seems to indicate that they succeeded in establishing a relationship of trust with the media. The fact that the critical articles were almost evenly split between commentators saying the authorities were not doing enough, and commentators saying they were doing too much may be an indication that they got the response about right.

It is interesting to note the high prominence of the Mexican and United States health authorities as sources of information in Europe during the period surveyed (10% and 6% of articles (Figure 2). This emphasises the international nature of news relating to the pandemic. Comments made by spokespeople from WHO and by the European Commissioner for Health, Androulla Vassiliou, were also widely reported.

Many more articles were found in the United Kingdom than in other countries, although the number of sources analysed was equal. This is consistent with the findings of the earlier study of 15 January – 15 February which showed greater interest by the main United Kingdom national media in health-related stories than national media in other countries.

Conclusion

Proactive engagement with the media by international and national public health authorities resulted in factual, non-alarmist reporting of the first stages of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009.

References

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