

Report on

Telecasting of Covid-19 related news-bulletins on private TV channels: An eye-opening evaluation

**School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne
Department of Health Promotion, Faculty of Applied Sciences
University of Rajarata
Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna
International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka
University of Coventry, United Kingdom
Government Medical Officers' Association, SL**

Report on

Telecasting of Covid-19 related news-bulletins on private TV channels: An eye-opening evaluation

Produced Collaboratively by,

- School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne
- Department of Health Promotion, Faculty of Applied Sciences University of Rajarata, Sri Lanka
- Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka
- International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka
- University of Coventry, United Kingdom

Team

Principal contributor

Dr Amila Chandrasiri: Research Fellow, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Post Graduate Trainee – Community Medicine, Freelance journalist and TV presenter

For correspondence – amilachan@yahoo.com

Contributors

Dr Manoj Fernando : Senior Lecturer, Department of Health Promotion, Faculty of Applied Sciences, University of Rajarata

Dr Buddhika Mahesh : Research Fellow, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Post Graduate Trainee – Community Medicine

Dr Surajith Gunsekara : Senior Lecturer and Head, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Mr Samitha Udayanga: Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Mr Upul Sanjeev Wijepala : Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Ms Dinesha Kankanamage - Asst. Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Dr Samantha Ananda, Asst. Secretary, Government Medical Officers' Association

Dr Haritha Aluthge, Chief Editor, Government Medical Officers' Association

Dr Iranga Madushan – Post Graduate Trainee in Community Medicine, Freelance TV presenter

Mr Damith Rajakulathunga – Lecturer and Head, Department of Physiotherapy, International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka

Ms Judy Fernando - Lecturer, School of Nursing, International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka

Ms Lakshmini Wijeyrathna - Post Graduate student in Global Health Care Management, University of Coventry, United Kingdom

Data Collectors

Ms Kasunya Warnakulasuriya - Undergraduate student, International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka

Ms Chathurya Perera - Undergraduate student, International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka

Ms Chamathi Akmini - Undergraduate student, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Ms Chamila Lakmini - Undergraduate student, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Ms Manasha Hansani - Undergraduate student, Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna

Contents

Executive summary	1
Introduction and Aim.....	2
Methods	3
Results	4
Domain 1: Reporting epidemiology	4
Domain 2: Reporting and promoting preventive measures.....	6
Domain 3: Delivering information on detection and treatment.....	8
Domain 4: Information on law enforcement and quarantine	9
Domain 5: Reporting mental health issues and available social support.....	10
Domain 6: General perspectives	11
References.....	13

The Report on “Telecasting of Covid-19 related news-bulletins on private TV channels: an eye-opening evaluation”

Executive summary

The contribution of journalists done by bringing the information-gap of the public in the Covid-19 pandemic is highly appreciated. It is well-accepted that while good journalism renders favorable impacts, while the sub-optimum reporting may be associated with harm. This report is prepared based on the findings of a study which included a quantitate as well as qualitative evaluations of new-bulletins of leading private Sinhalese television channels over 12 days in relation to the Covid-19 related reporting. The assessments were done based on operational variables in recommended global and local guidelines. The key findings and recommendations have been presented under six main domains.

Introduction and Aim

Good journalism must include “informing and education” as two key domains(1). Journalists are regarded as among the global front-liners in Covid-19 epidemic, as “information saves lives”(2). Public awareness plays a crucial role in the response against the Covid-19 pandemic as the main responsibility of containment of the disease lies with people, in which Sri Lanka is no exception. Hence, news bulletins in Sri Lankan TV channels make a significant impact on shaping public opinion and awareness on Covid-19 by disseminating information regarding situations, risks, and personal protective actions to inhibit the disease spread. Though more air time has been allocated for Covid-19 related discussions and programs, news bulletins are subjected to the most amount of public attention. This is evident as higher viewer ratings are reported during news telecasts rather than other programs. Furthermore higher You-Tube views for news telecasts have been noted.

Demarcating perspectives like; “interesting to public” versus “public interest”; false information versus quick dissemination of news; “right to know” versus confidentiality, have created journalism challenging in this period(3). Despite the potential utility of news telecasts in strengthening the public health response, some reporting-instances which are insufficient-in-news value, ethically-incongruent, and inconsistent are also noted in relation to certain aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic(4, 5). Ensuring ethical and balanced reporting is essential in health-risk communication. The adequate and consistent risk communication facilitates the delivery of effective health safety instructions, critical content interpretability and recall. It also has favorable impacts on individual- and community-level responses to information.

The aim of this report is to present the findings of a study conducted to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the Covid-19 related content in Sinhalese news-bulletins telecasted on private TV channels and to make recommendations to improve the “sufficiency, congruence and consistency of content while ensuring ethical-reporting”. The findings and recommendations will be useful in advocating media to make a more strengthened and focused contribution in public health response through their news-telecasts. This was prepared as a collaborative effort by a group of experts from School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne; Department of Sociology, University of Ruhuna; Department of Health Promotion, University of Rajarata and International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka.

Methods

This observational infoveillance study was consisted of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of Covid-19 related content included in Sinhalese prime time news-bulletins of selected private TV channels in Sri Lanka over a period of 12 days starting from 28th October, 2020. Based on the viewer ratings, the three leading channels were chosen.

Under the quantitative analysis; inclusion, adequacy and accuracy of five key themes of Covid-19 related public-awareness were assessed. For this, a checklist was prepared based on international and local guidelines. They were broadly categorized into health and non-health related topics. Health related categories were consisted of; reporting epidemiology, reporting preventive/protective measures, reporting detection and treatment information, reporting information on home quarantine, reporting mental health issues and stigma. In addition to that; enforcement of law, social support, ethics in reporting and balanced reporting were assessed under non-health themes.

Four raters assessed news bulletins. Two raters (Masters-Undergraduate in Health Sciences degree) assessed health related topics while two raters (Sociology-Undergraduates) assessed the components came under non health topics. Selected channels were divided among the raters for the assessments. Principal investigator provided orientation to the data collectors and list of operational definitions of variables were given to ensure consistency of data collection. Continuous supervision was done to ensure the quality of data. The reliability of the assessments were verified. Qualitative content analysis was done by applying inductive manual coding approach to key themes generated related to public and professional opinions about Covid-19 and practices of public.

The findings were presented along with recommendations under six main domains: Reporting epidemiology; reporting and promoting preventive measures; delivering information on detection and treatment; information on law enforcement and quarantine; reporting mental health issues and available social support and general perspectives.

Results

The key findings of both the quantitative and qualitative components have been summarized below with accompanying recommendations.

Domain 1: Reporting epidemiology (Figure 1)

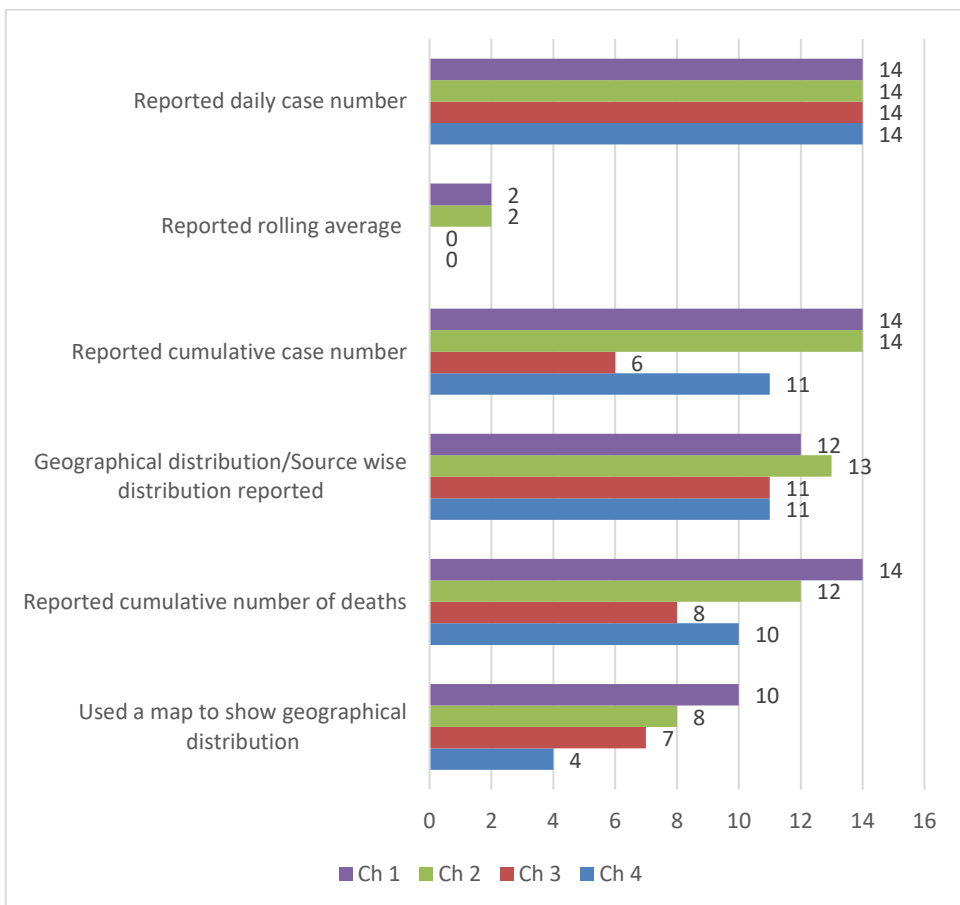


Figure 1: Frequency distribution of reporting related to epidemiological perspectives

Key finding: While some aspects are well-covered in general, several epidemiological perspectives are needed to be included in the reporting.

Related recommendations:

1. It would be better to mention about the daily average over last 2 weeks (rolling average). in addition to daily figures. It will enable better interpretations on the trends and is used in other settings as well on biweekly or weekly basis(6, 7).
2. Recommends to provide more precise information about the public locations of positive cases. This will help in alerting those who have been potentially exposed. However, portraying the affected individuals or the personal households must be avoided.
3. Delivery of a daily statement by an officially designated officer (as used in many other settings) according to a standard format will increase the accountability and ensure consistency across media channels(8). Key information including daily case number, deaths, new measures can be announced.

Domain 2: Reporting and promoting preventive measures

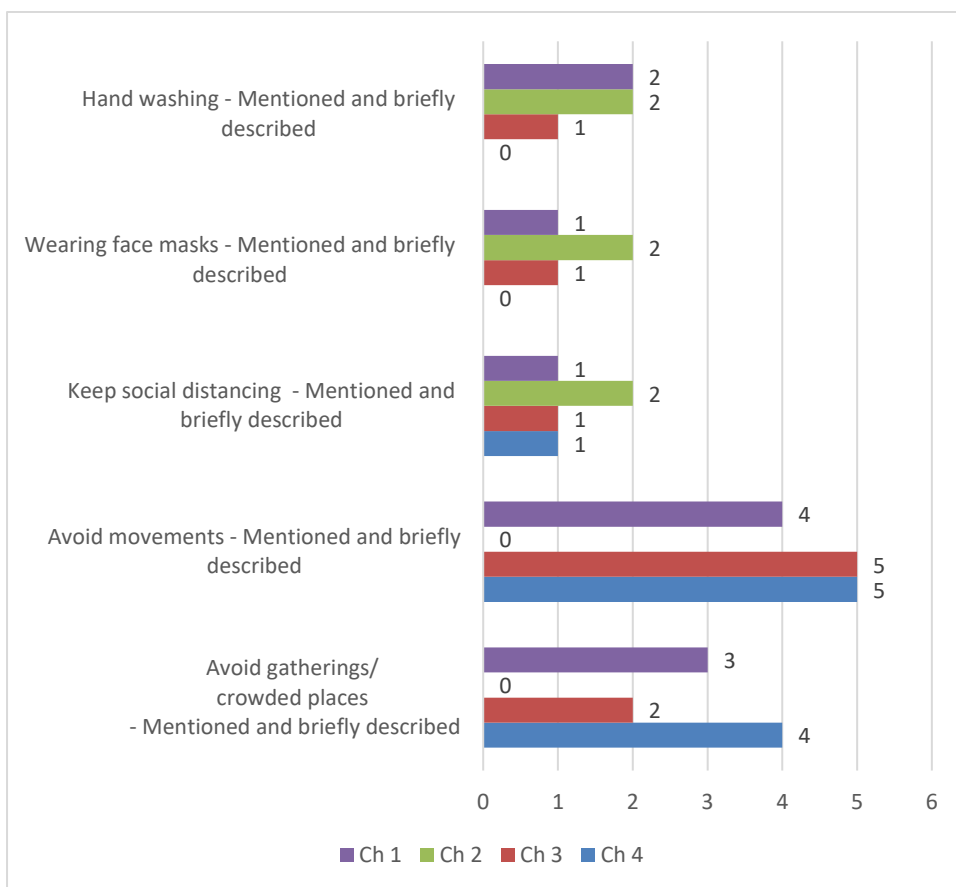


Figure 2: Frequency distribution of reporting related to promotion of preventive measures

Key finding: The overall emphasis on the preventive measures is not enough

Related recommendations:

1. It is recommended to telecast verbal and graphical messages related to the preventive measures. Showing short animated video clips of 15-20 seconds in between commercial breaks would be helpful. The content of these clips must be culturally appropriate. These clips must be disseminated through YouTube and social media publishing as well. As a significant proportion view online news and follow news alert apps, need to include into these as

well. Themes and appeals of the messages should focus on promoting both self-benefit and altruism. The potential role of media in relation to this domain is well recognized worldwide(9).

2. Need to develop similar clips for certain key issues like maintaining proper mental wellbeing, protecting vulnerable groups etc.
3. Need to have Tamil versions as well and they should be telecasted in Tamil medium channels
4. To promote healthy behavioral practices among children, creating a cartoon character (either as a new character or use an already popular character) and displaying the practice would be helpful. Celebrities (cinema, music or sports) can be involved in making promotional clips (as appeals). These strategies have been currently practiced in many other settings(10, 11).

Domain 3: Delivering information on detection and treatment

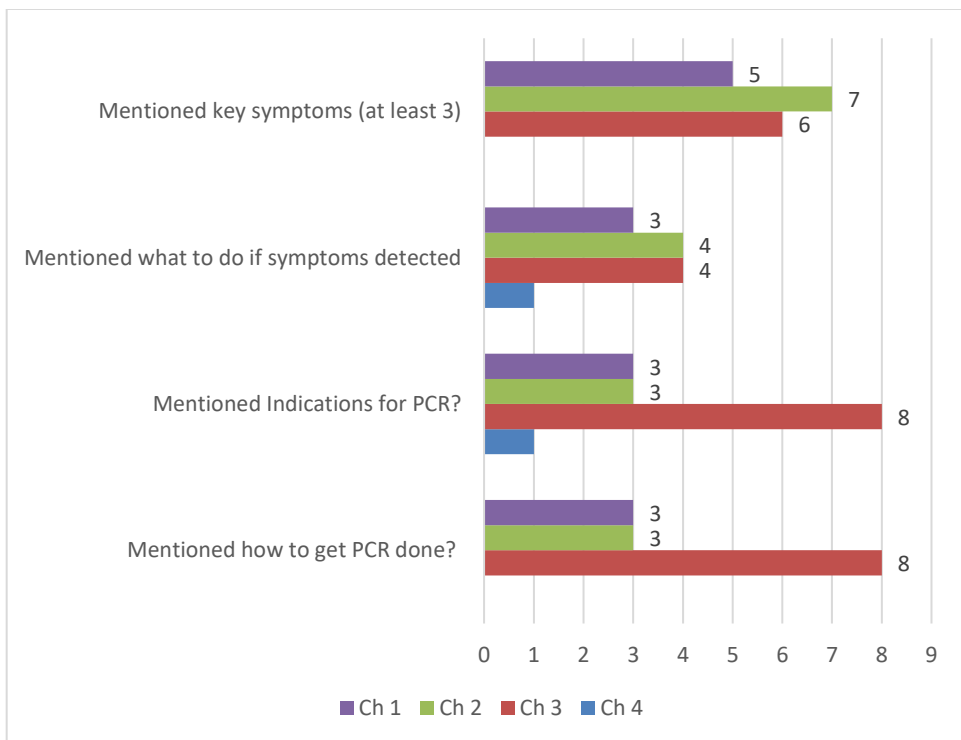


Figure 3: Frequency distribution of the reporting related to delivery of information on detection and treatment

Key finding: Information on detection and treatment is insufficiently conveyed.

Related recommendations

1. Showing 15-20 sec short animated video clips in between commercial breaks will be helpful. These must be culturally appropriate and can be used for YouTube and social media publishing as well

Domain 4: Information on law enforcement and quarantine

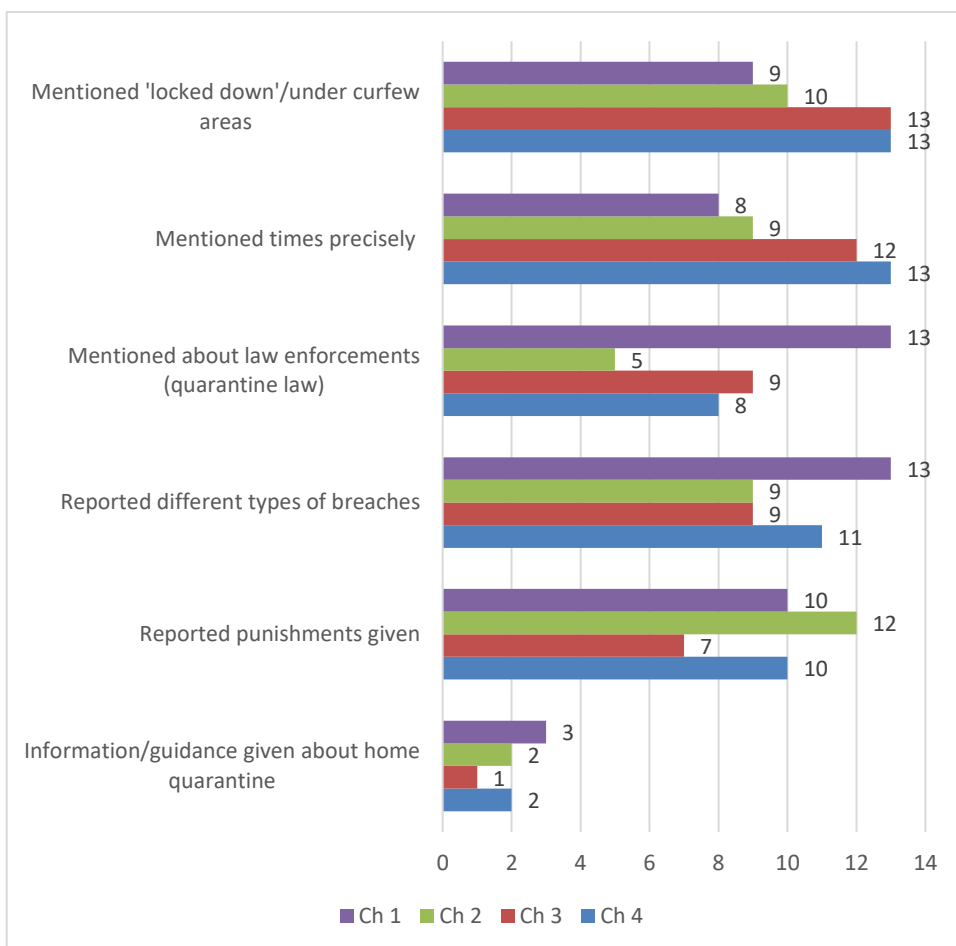


Figure 4: Frequency distribution on the reporting information on law enforcement and quarantine

Key finding/s: Lack of information delivered about home quarantine while many other aspects are covered well in general.

Related recommendations

1. Need to promote home-quarantine as this will motivate people to follow the law.
2. Telecasting short animated video clips of 15-20 seconds in between commercial breaks would be helpful.

Domain 5: Reporting mental health issues and available social support

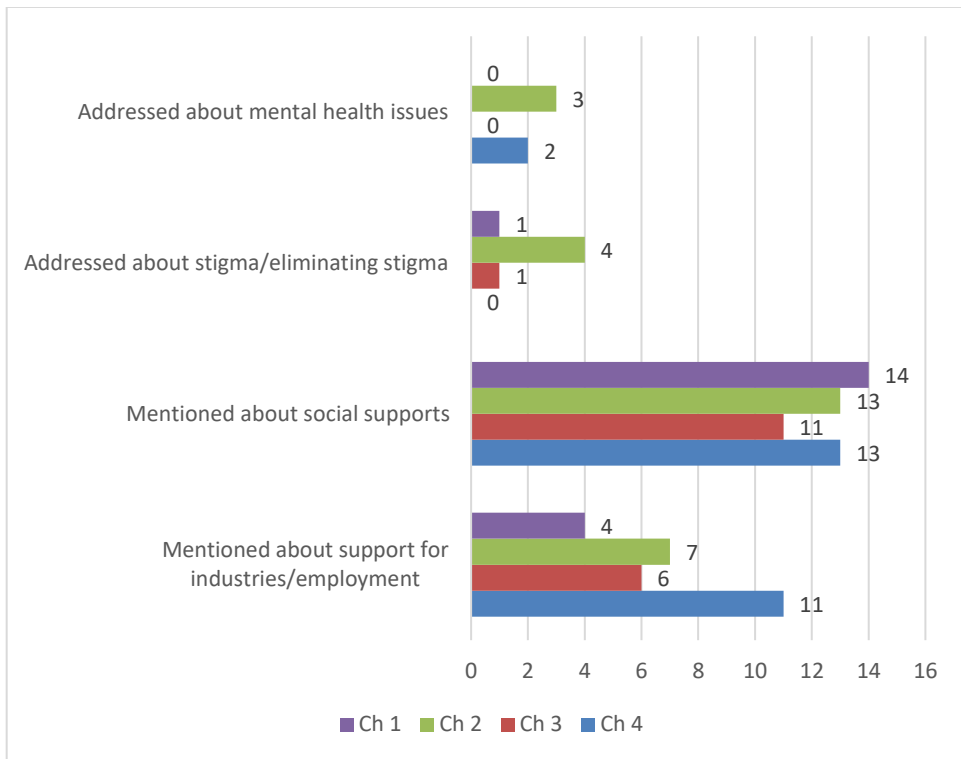


Figure 5: Frequency distribution on the reporting mental health issues and available social support

Key findings: Lack of content related to mental health issues and stigma.

Related recommendations:

1. Recommends to focus more on promoting mental wellbeing and in reduction of stigma.

Domain 6: General perspectives

Key finding/s:

- Except for a few cases, most of the information have been communicated are authentic and accurate. Accuracy has been achieved referring to Government's spokesperson, Ministry of Health and State Media.
- Too much of reporting about minor and isolated events (like detecting a patient from particular area, lock down a particular village). This consumes a larger time in news.
- Accountability was assured most of the times
- Lack of consistency shown by for health staff in both curative and preventive sectors
- Improving relationship among community members while establishing the trust, cooperation and networks cannot be seen in the news telecasts often. Enabling mutual dialogue and understanding cannot be achieved due to the point of view included in most news items.
- Few of conflicting situations were noted between local media reporters and hospital officials when they attempt to enter hospital. This created very unpleasant situations which can demotivated hard working health staff. It is apparent that these situations were caused due to misunderstandings and poor communications.
- Currently circulating Covid-19 related education/awareness material seem not getting satisfactory viewership.
- Certain incidents of negative reporting were noted which can created negative impacts. Eg. Reporting about a death during a vaccine trial even before confirming the causality of death. This might create negative impression.
- Showing resisting people and their negative reactions about quarantine, PCR testing and providing treatment may trigger negative attitudes and general resistance among public. Certain incidents of negative reporting were noted which can created negative impacts. E.g. Reporting about a death during a vaccine trial even before confirming the causality of death. This might create negative impressions.

Recommendations

1. Should minimize the reporting of isolated events which would create unnecessary panic and unrest among public.
2. Social-media oriented strategies are highly recommended to promote the Covid-19 related education/awareness material (actually it is better to make these go viral). Benefits of well-regulated social media involvement in Covid-19 response, has been regarded as vital (12).
3. Providing a crash training for peripheral health professionals on interacting with media in line with the Departmental regulations. This can be delivered as a series of webinars
4. Issuing guidance for local correspondents of media in accessing and obtaining information from hospitals.
5. Problems which can be resolved easily by discussions between the stakeholders should not be exaggerated and communicated to the public as these would unnecessarily divert focus of attentions and opportunities of collaborations.
6. Avoid non-technical political arguments related to COVID 19 within the news telecasts
7. Recommends highlighting more about positive public reactions for quarantine and in other activities of Covid-19 response.
8. More precise and inclusive guidelines must be immediately issued in relation to reporting of Covid-19 related information. The rights of the patients/suspected-patients/exposed-people must be well-preserved. Absolute de-identification of the personal details must be mandatorily practiced unless in special circumstances as decided by the designated authority.

References

- [1] Chris Frost. Reporting the pandemic ethically: Ethical Journalism Network; 2020 [Available from: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/reporting-the-pandemic-ethically>].
- [2] UNESCO Myanmar Office, Myanmar Press Council. Guidelines for Journalists Covering COVID-19. 2020.
- [3] Yusof ANM, Muuti MZ, Ariffin LA, Tan MKM. Sharing Information on COVID-19: the ethical challenges in the Malaysian setting. *Asian Bioeth Rev.* 2020;1-13.
- [4] Director General of Government Information. More positive and responsible reporting of Covid-19 outbreak. Department of Government Information; 2020 Oct 11.
- [5] Mheidly N, Fares J. Leveraging media and health communication strategies to overcome the COVID-19 infodemic. *J Public Health Policy.* 2020.
- [6] Department of Health and Human Services- State Government of Victoria- Australia. Coronavirus (COVID-19) case averages for easing restrictions 2020 [Available from: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/averages-easing-restrictions-covid-19>].
- [7] GOV.UK. Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK 2020 [Available from: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/cases>].
- [8] Department of Health & Human Services SGoV, Australia. Media releases 2020 [Available from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/media-centre/MediaReleases?ps=1000&s=relevance&i=&df=&dt=>].
- [9] Anwar A, Malik M, Raees V, Anwar A. Role of Mass Media and Public Health Communications in the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Cureus.* 2020;12(9):e10453.
- [10] The Conversation. Comics and cartoons are a powerful way to teach kids about COVID-19 2020 [Available from: <https://theconversation.com/comics-and-cartoons-are-a-powerful-way-to-teach-kids-about-covid-19-137910>].
- [11] U.S.News. Mexico Turns to Cartoon Character for Coronavirus Education 2020 [Available from: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-03-21/mexico-turns-to-cartoon-character-for-coronavirus-education>].
- [12] Gonzalez-Padilla DA, Tortolero-Blanco L. Social media influence in the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Int Braz J Urol.* 2020;46(suppl.1):120-4.

