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Striking a balance between informing and sensationalising: South Korean broadcasters and the MERS outbreak

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1. Introduction

Disasters happen. Terror attacks, earthquakes, epidemics, still frequently hit our societies and leave us reeling, despite our efforts to control and tame our surroundings.

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens, defined modern society as “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future, which generates the notion of risk,” (Giddens and Pierson 1998, p.209). Whereas Germany’s Ulrich Beck defined modern society as a *risikogesellschaft*, meaning "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself," (Beck 1992 :21). Both definitions make it clear that mankind cannot shield itself from a danger. All that changes is the nature of risk.

In recent years, there have been global fears over viruses. Outbreaks of MERS, SARS, or Influenza A are deadly and spread fast. It is one area where the media can play a life-saving role. Timely, accurate information, under the umbrella of risk communication or disaster communication, can help curb outbreaks and drive people to seek treatment early.

Disaster communication

In Disasters and Crisis Coverage, Deborah Potter and Sherry Ricchiardi defined disaster as “a critical event that alters the regular order of things.” Disaster communications is the act of providing and gathering information on such irregular orders and making it available to the general public.

So, what are the functions of the media in a disaster? There are several functions and definitions, but Michael Marcotte, a journalist, has suggested four roles. Firstly, media should answer the questions of what is happening where, who is affected, how things are changing, and why. Second, it relays critical information to and from affected parties. It should also be an early warning beacon, transmitting timely, reliable information that prevents harm. And lastly, it should be a community forum, giving citizens a way to come together, share concerns and support one another during difficult times.

In his article, How Should We Broadcast Disaster, South Korean media expert, Professor Lee Min Kyu, highlights three roles the media can play: preventing disaster where possible, minimising damage if disaster does strike, and helping communities rebuild in the aftermath.

Lee argues that the media does not always fulfil these roles. News stories do not provide essential information, they rely too much on anecdote and not enough on data. He also blames the race to break news for sensationalist reporting designed to create anxiety.

Study methods

Journalists have long grappled with questions over how to collect all the relevant information, and decide what is published when. This study looks at how journalists make these decisions when reporting on diseases.

The research focused on media coverage of the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) crisis in South Korea, in particular by the country's three major terrestrial television stations: KBS and MBC, both public broadcasters, and SBS, a commercial channel. Coverage of the MERS outbreak by these three television stations between May and July 2015 was examined. The author also interviewed eleven journalists and editors, via email and the messaging app 'Kakao talk' voice function, between 7th April to 7th June 2017. Other interviews were conducted in the UK, via events at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford.

The paper aimed to analyse the flow of information during an epidemic and to understand communications between the government, the media and the public on social media.

For the purpose of this paper the term 'media' is defined as legacy media - major print newspapers, television and radio stations. It does not include digital or online media.

Three main questions were posed:

1. Does the media exaggerate or misinform and why?
2. Does the media communicate government messages, or is it merely critical of public officials?
3. Does the media reflect public opinion?

In South Korea, journalists need to be registered via a 'kija-dan' (a press club) before they are authorised to communicate with government officials, or be informed of government schedules. In this study, many of those interviewed requested anonymity to maintain their access to official sources.

There are three national television networks in Korea and more than 100 newspapers. Most (over 80%) of households own a computer, of which around 95% are connected to the internet, according to the Korean Ministry of Information and Communication. Online news sites are rapidly growing in popularity.

2. Case Study: 2015 MERS outbreak

In May 2015, South Korea was hit by a massive, deadly outbreak of the MERS virus. It was a little known virus that started with the patient suffering symptoms of a common cold, but could kill within two weeks. The virus had first spread in Saudi Arabia, where 40 percent of those who contracted it died.

In South Korea 186 people were infected and 38 of those died within two months of falling ill. A lack of information about the nature of the illness, and about where the outbreaks were occurring, led to a widespread panic.

South Korea has excellent medical facilities. It is ranked second-best for medical infrastructure among OECD countries (2013) and is within the top ten globally for medical innovation, so it is important to examine what went wrong during the MERS outbreak.

[chart 1. MERS Casualties over the World]

Country	Infected	Deceased	Region
Saudi Arabia	1448	622	Middle East
S Korea	186	38	Asia
UAE	88	13	Middle East
Jordan	36	14	Middle East
Quatar	17	6	Middle East
Oman	9	3	Middle East
Iran	6	2	Middle East
Kuwait	5	2	Middle East
UK	4	3	Europe
France	2	1	Europe
Yemen	1	1	Middle East
Italy	1	0	Europe

The media was heavily criticised for its role in the crisis. Many felt media outlets had not provided the public with the information it needed and had even helped the government withhold information. Journalists and editors for their part argued that they acted correctly, and struck the necessary balance between maintaining order and providing relevant information. This study looks at whether they succeeded.

Image 1. The Korean government's guidelines on how to prevent the spread of the MERS virus, which included advice not to touch camels or drink their milk¹.



Media Behaviour

The media was slow to recognise the gravity of the MERS outbreak at first. Even after the first patient was diagnosed, it warranted little more than a news in brief or very short bulletin. MBC, KBS and SBS, had around five bulletins in the first week of the virus being diagnosed in South Korea. (See Chart 2) . It was clear that the virus was deadly, but media outlets appeared to be happy to trust the government, which argued that an outbreak was unlikely.

“...Nobody, not to mention authorities, I mean not a single professor or doctor knew anything about MERS at the time. As you know the virus [had] originated [from] and had only cases in Middle East. And the weather conditions of the virus were [...] very dry, desert, high heat areas which seemed to be something different from Seoul, and truly there [was] also belief in high standards of our medical technology. With no doubt, everybody was convinced by the authorities that this was a come-and-go situation, nothing to be too much worried about.” (G Reporter, News Agency, 10 year experience)

¹ Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2015

“...the countermeasures government had released were more than a joke. I mean, such steps like ‘don’t drink camels’ milk’ or ‘don’t ride on camels back’ were ridiculous. (See image 1) Think about it, I can’t even remember when was the last time I ever saw a camels at the zoo in S. Korea. Well, of course, this was all they could find in the manual at the time because there was only cases in the Middle East. It’s understandable they no other choice than translating those manuals. But that was the beginning of losing trust. Instantly there were thousands of parodies in the internet...” (J Reporter, CATV, 2 year experience)

Chart 2. Average number of bulletins reporting the MERS outbreak

	KBS	MBC	SBS	Tot. AVG
Week 1 20 May ~ 25 May	7	4	4	5
Week 2 26 May ~ 1 June	26	30	29	28
Week 3 2 June ~ 8 June	87	92	91	90
Week 4 9 June ~ 15 June	104	89	87	90
Week 5 16 June ~ 22 June	63	60	60	61
Week 6 23 June ~ 29 June	30	26	27	27
Week 7 30 June ~ 6 July	11	15	9	11

The media only began to ask more questions when the fourth person fell ill, on 26 May – two weeks after the initial case. The fourth MERS victim was a family member of the initial carrier. The government had stated that the MERS virus would be only carried through very close contact. The first patient had infected his wife, and someone who had shared a hospital room with him. This fourth person was his daughter, who seldom visited the patients's room.

At this point the media dropped the government line and began to report heavily on the epidemic. During the second week (from May 26), each of the three TV stations delivered an average of 28 bulletins each. (See Chart 2)

Most media reports still relied on government sources. Interviews were mainly studio-based, with authorities and experts from academic or medical fields. There was little reporting from the hospitals involved in treating patients, nor with those directly impacted by the virus.

In the third week of the outbreak, from the 2 June to 8 June, reporting intensified. The government had insisted there would be no spread of the infection from the initial patient's immediate circle. This was soon proved to be wrong and it became clear that there was a real risk of an epidemic. At this point the media issued more practical information, on topics such as how to spot symptoms, and what to do with a suspected infection. The three major broadcasters reported 90 bulletins each, on average, during that week.

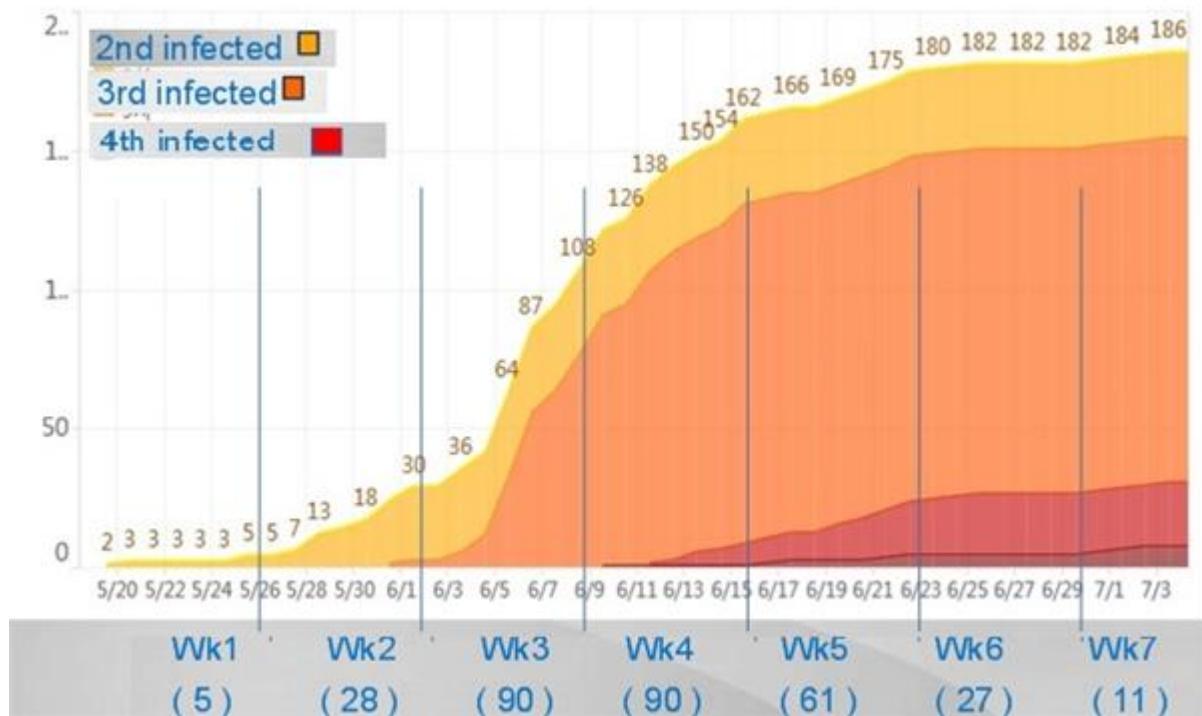
“The will to not create panic in the newsroom had crumbled. A lack of information from authorities and from medical scholars made it more difficult. There were some who did not like the media expanding MERS coverage ‘too much’ but the situation was too serious to be controlled.” (C Deputy Editor, Broadcast, 14 year experience).

The news reached a frenzy in the two weeks following 7 June when the government finally released all the names of those infected by the virus (See Chart 3). Five cities and provinces and 24 hospitals were named as locations where people were infected. Each television station covered the issue in at least ten bulletins a day and sometimes as many as 20.

“...everyday you wake up to find new numbers of infectees and hospitals and regions. We barely slept in those days. The news had to be updated fully 24 hours a day. New sources from the public came flooding in.” (H Reporter, News Agency, three years experience).

MERS victims also began to die during this period: the government prevaricated over the possible cause of death in a way that reduced trust in the authorities even further. The public felt in the end that social media was more reliable than legacy media.

Chart 3. Number of infected with average number of MERS Report²



Eventually, in week six, the number of people being infected began to fall. The number of TV bulletins on the subject also fell. The 186th victim turned out to be the last person to be infected.

“At the end of June we could see the virus now was under control. There was talk of reducing MERS reporting in editorial meetings. Bulletins on analysing, blaming, responsibility, finding countermeasures and following measures were being discussed..” (B Deputy Editor, Broadcast, 13 year experience).

Function and roles of the media

The media’s initial, light reporting of MERS focused on the basics: where it originated, how infection spread, and how fatal it was. It highlighted the fact that the virus first spread in the Middle East and was of little relevance to South Korea. In effect, they downplayed the threat.

“..News editors were more defensive and passive in covering the issue. We all had enough experience of being blamed for exaggerating the issue.” (E Editor, Broadcast, 18 year experience).

² Interactive graphics of MERS Status, KBS <https://dj.kbs.co.kr/resources/2015-06-09/>

“.... It was beginning of summer, it was season of outdoor activities. So we had a series of warning reports on bacteria such as colon bacillus in fountains, wild mites in the park, food poison in packed foods that were already in the schedule. Most reporters worked on those pre-planned stories first..” (K Reporter, CATV, 6 years experience).

But in the second week, the media intensified its coverage of the MERS virus. Reporters discovered that one person suspected of being infected had flown to China, proving suspicions that the government could not control the spread of the infection. The local media, not the government, also broke the news of the first fatality.

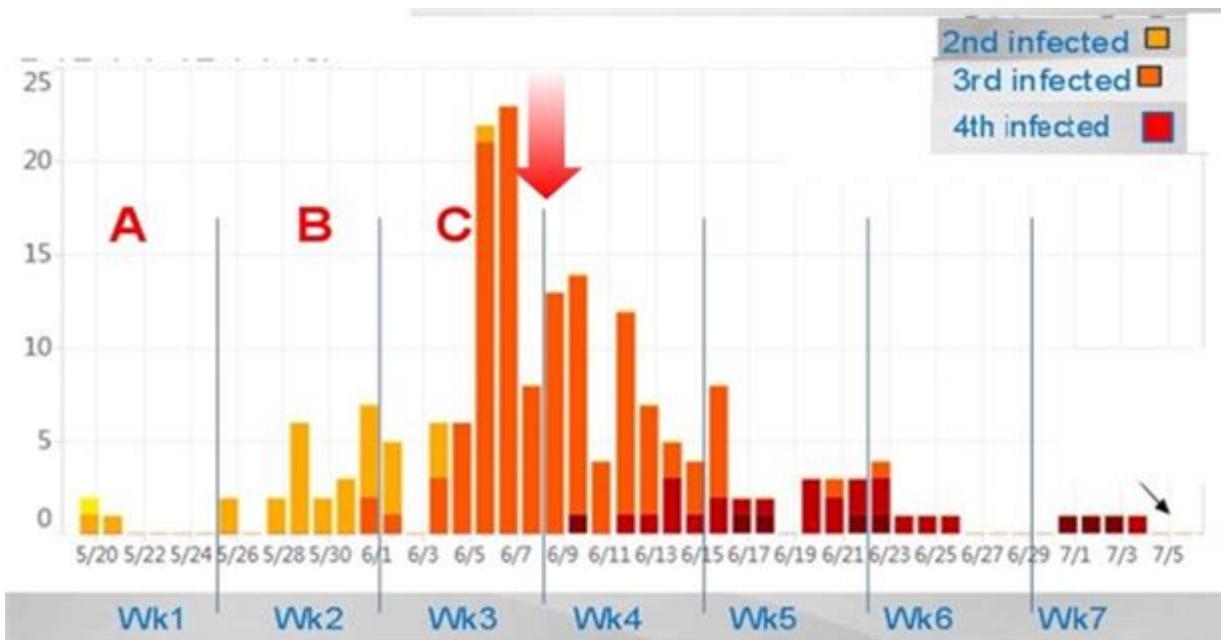
“...The media is very cautious in dealing with pandemics. Its experience in 2003 with SARS and with the 2009 H1N1-Influenza A, had led to this. There were some stories which would now be called fake news. Afterwards health journalists came up with guidelines to deal with this, but with this MERS situation, the media had to judge whether it had in fact been too slow off the mark.”(F Deputy Editor, News Agency, 17 years experience).

The media only really got going in the third week of the disaster. The government still would not release specific names of hospitals and areas affected by MERS.

The media struggled in the early weeks with the issue of anonymity. It was reluctant to name places where the virus was spreading. But local governments and cooperating health organisations started to leak details, often via their social media accounts. This led local media and news blogs to name infected hospitals and regions and eventually the bigger media organisations followed suit. Much of the information was wrong, but still spread rapidly.

chart 4. MERS infection rate³. (the arrow shows the date when the government and media publicised the names of infected regions and hospitals. After this date people avoided those areas and the number of new infections declined.)

³ Interactive graphic showing status of MERS, KBS <https://dj.kbs.co.kr/resources/2015-06-09/>



Trust between the media and the government splintered on June 4th, when the virus arrived in the capital Seoul, despite government assurances that they knew how to contain the outbreak.

“That was the time when chief editors began to pay more attention to what was going on in social media. Social media was part of the editors meeting in a way. And it gradually became clear that what the government was saying turned out to be false, while what social media said was true.” (F Deputy Editor, News Agency, 17 year experience).

By the 4th week, it appeared that journalists no longer prioritised fact checking and rumour verification. Media outlets often reported news directly sourced from social media. This led to a number of mistakes including, in one case, a false report that a doctor infected by MERS had died.

By Week 5, as the infection rate fell, the media moved to their final role in the news cycle, helping society rebuild.

Each station, starting with KBS on 24th July, SBS on the 25th and MBC at last on the 30th, ran with experts from professors, doctors and health organisations. Hospitals were shown not as the source of the virus but a place for healing and curing.

“The government had to publicise that it was back in control of the situation. The media also needed official comments on government plans and measures to prevent a repeat of such incidents. So the government quotes were back on the main stage, in the stories of good news.”(I Reporter, CATV, 10 year experience).

Public Interest

When the MERS virus first arrived in South Korea, people wanted to know more about it. But the official information and advice coming out was tailor-made to the Middle East: Koreans felt they were watching news designed for another country's audience. The government was slow to release details people wanted, of infected areas and the size of the outbreak. It eventually recognised it had mishandled the episode and the health minister issued a public apology.

Image 2: Minister of Health Moon Hyung-pyo offering his apology for mishandling MERS disaster, 31 May 2015 (image: Yonhap News)



4. Findings

This paper posed three key questions: Does media exaggerate or misinform and why; does the media communicate government messages, or is it merely critical of public officials; and does the media reflect public opinion?

Through interviews and content analysis, the research findings indicate that the media in South Korea did not set out to exaggerate or misinform the public at the start of the MERS outbreak. In fact, when the

MERS virus first arrived in South Korea, the media was initially more concerned about maintaining social order, than exaggerating or sensationalising the news.

This unusual approach came from the fact that the media had recently been accused of overreacting and spreading panic over epidemics. A series of outbreaks including SARS, Influenza A had left reporters wary of covering epidemics. The media had previously been blamed for over-reacting and had sometimes been sued for getting things wrong. During the MERS outbreak, news organisations were reluctant to risk their reputations again.

Journalists interviewed for this study agreed that this attitude made reporters reluctant to follow-up leads, or investigate in the way they may have done with other stories. Part of the logic is that reporting on infection was not like reporting corruption: the people who would be most exposed by investigative reporting of a pandemic were the victims of a potentially fatal disease. Getting facts wrong, implicating innocent people, would only make the public more furious at the media.

The reporting of the MERS crisis also raised interesting questions over what a journalist is.

The three television stations mentioned in this study all had specialist health reporters who were fully qualified doctors, with some talent for journalism. But they could not take over the whole editorial line. They provided specialist information in longer segments about the crisis that also included the political and social implications of the outbreak.

Trust in government

The study found that journalists covering the MERS outbreak initially reported government messages without questioning them, but grew more critical of the way public officials handled the crisis as the outbreak developed.

In-depth interviews with journalists conducted for the study revealed the complex relations between accredited journalists who are part of Korea's kija-dan press club and the government. Kija-dan accredited reporters receive press releases and regular briefings from the authorities. The relationship here is one of strong trust and cooperation on both sides. In the case of the MERS virus, which was treated as an emergency, there was no other way to get hold of staff working in government disease prevention units as the authorities blocked all media contact with public officials. At the start it made sense for the media to rely on existing relationships with the authorities.

But this relationship collapsed when authorities were evasive over details of how the virus was spreading. The reporting then focused on how officials had lost control of the situation. In return, the government became even more evasive.

Editorial power shifts to social media

The way information about the 2015 MERS outbreak spread via social media, rather than through traditional media sources, highlights how the mainstream news media is in danger of losing control of the news agenda. Legacy media no longer has priority access to information. Whereas journalists could previously rely on getting information from authorities and broadcast it to the public, audiences can now access information independently, through social media.

Citizens are now able to witness events first hand and share them immediately, before reporters have verified the content. The media is therefore being blamed both for being slow off the mark, and for not being able to verify all social media and report on it reliably. The research found that in the case of MERS, the Korean public turned to social media before traditional, or legacy media. This was in spite of the knowledge that information on social media was often unverified and sometimes false. News published on social media reflected public anxiety about the outbreak far better than news coverage by legacy media.

5. Conclusion

Disaster can rarely be predicted. There will always be unexpected events and journalists cannot write guidelines for every eventuality. But it is a duty of the media to keep asking questions. Media should provide a forum to discuss and question established theories.

The South Korean government suppressed information on the MERS virus because it did not want to panic people. But in the resulting information vacuum, rumour and misinformation caused even more chaos. It was clear, in hindsight, that both the media and the government should not have allowed this vacuum to form.

Professor Park Hyojung at the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication believes the most important role the media can play at times of crisis is to provide clear, comprehensive information. And the government should play its part too.

In his book, Roles of Risk Communication in Disasters, Newspaper and Broadcasting, Hyojung Park wrote: “What government should do is share all the information with the public as fast as possible. They should cooperate keenly with the media to deliver the information in the most effective way. This will fulfil the right to know of the public and also to resolve the situation in fast ways. To do so, we should take a good example of Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, USA. They have pages on their website to communicate with the public about any current status of contagious diseases. This page is updated on [a] regular basis throughout the year.”

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Interviewee

	Position	Media Type	Journalist Experience	Gender
A	Reporter	Broadcast	12 yr	M
B	Deputy Editor	Broadcast	13 yr	F
C	Deputy Editor	Broadcast	14 yr	M
D	Reporter	Broadcast	9 yr	M
E	Editor	Broadcast	18 yr	M
F	Reporter	News Agency	17 yr	M

G	Reporter	News Agency	10 yr	M
H	Reporter	News Agency	3 yr	F
I	Reporter	CATV & Paper	10 yr	M
J	Reporter	CATV & Paper	2 yr	M
K	Reporter	CATV & Paper	6 yr	F

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