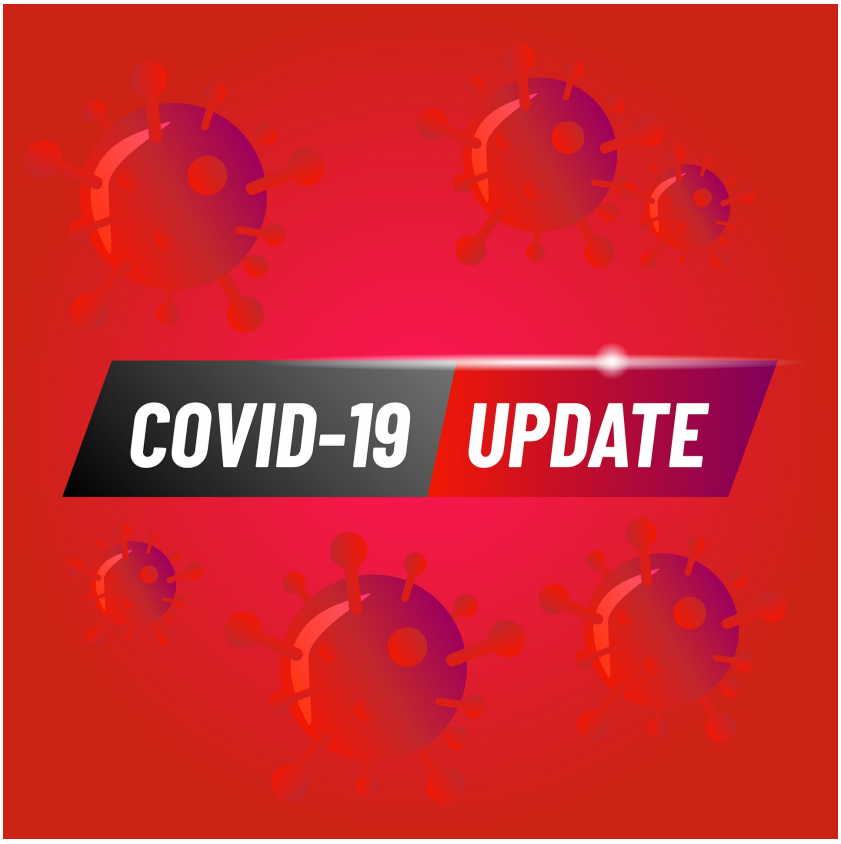

The Truth about Covid Variants

How Are Journalists Handling This Important Story?

By

Mark McGee

New Covid-19 sub-variants (omicron sub-variants BA.4 and BA.5) are big news this summer. That will most likely continue into the fall and winter months based on what the news media is telling us right now.

A recent news report on CNN led with this headline: ***The 'worst variant' is here.*** The writer included these statements in the first two paragraphs of the story without any immediate attribution —

> Nearly two-and-a-half years since the coronavirus pandemic began, the most infectious and transmissible variant yet has arrived …. The latest version of its shape-shifting, BA.5, is a clear sign that the pandemic is far from over. CNN

The writer did attribute the claim that the pandemic is far from over to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus - 17 paragraphs later at the end of the article. However, the majority of online readers don't read to the end of news articles. Most would not know where the writer got the information for that claim. More about that in a few minutes.

The reporter also quoted Dr. Michael Ryan, the executive director of WHO's Health Emergencies Program, Dr. Ashish Jha, the White House's Covid-19 response coordinator, and Eric Topol, a cardiologist and professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research. Dr. Topol called BA.5 "the worst version of the virus we've seen." Dr. Topol is a media favorite, as you will see later in this article.

The report is the weekly edition of CNN's coronavirus newsletter, which CNN calls a "roundup" of information about the virus. So, a journalist quoting from two WHO officials, the Whitehouse Covid-19 response coordinator, and a cardiologist/professor at Scripps Research is a "roundup" of everything that the medical/health community has said about the sub-variants for the past week? Really? No other health experts with a different view said anything during a seven-day period? I find that hard to believe based on my own research — research that took me less then five minutes to find opposing expert views. Why didn't the writer take the same five minutes and include other perspectives about the variants?

If a journalist brought that story to me for approval when I was a news manager, I would have sent them back to do more research. If there was only room for 17 paragraphs, four quotes, and one graphic, I would expect the article to reflect a true “roundup” of what health experts were saying. If the reporter couldn’t or wouldn’t do it, I’d assign it to another journalist who would. Every story should fairly represent the truth of what information can be gathered and confirmed.

A “fair” story does not necessarily mean a 50-50 split for opposing sides of a story, but the content should at least reflect an attempt at fairness. This particular story is obviously one-sided and unfair. It lacks the kind of context that a “roundup” of health news demands. News managers should never approve stories that present only one side of an issue, but it happens every day across the country and around the world. It’s also helpful if news managers know as much, if not more, about stories than their reporters do. I recommend all news managers spend at least five minutes of research on every story they assign. The information is out there — you just have to look.

The News Consumer Dilemma

What are news consumers supposed to do about this? Many of them depend almost entirely on just one or two news sources. Some do their own research, but what will they find when they do an online search for news sources covering Covid variants? Will they find all sides of the story or just one perspective?

Another issue is that many news consumers depend on headlines for information. Some online readers don't even click on articles — they just scan the headlines. Those who do click a news link to read a story often look at only the first paragraph or two before moving on to another website. If they don't read a different perspective about that story from any other news source, that's what they will believe about the story. What they believe about a news story can affect how people vote, how they live their lives, make decisions for themselves and family members, etc.

Many studies have shown that news consumers (especially younger people) read online articles for less than 15 seconds before moving on to something else online.

> Tony Haile (CEO of Chartbeat -- a company that analyzes real-time web analytics) analyzed 2 billion online interactions, most of them from online articles and news sites, and found that **55 percent of the time people spend less than 15 seconds on a page**, which means they're not reading the news articles. Psychology Today

Fifteen seconds of reading a news article means they see the headline and first paragraph, maybe the second paragraph if it's short. If you're a journalist or editor, that means you need to be sure your headline and first paragraph accurately present the truth of the story. If they don't, you may have lost your opportunity to get the truth to them. Hopefully, if you're a good writer, your information will engage the online reader and keep them reading longer than 15 seconds.

News viewers are also impacted by the lower-thirds on television stories. Lower-thirds are the large graphics with bold colors at the bottom of the television screen. News consumers often remember them as much or more than what the anchor or reporter says. Viewers often multi-task while watching television news. They may be texting, looking at something online, talking to a friend on the phone, etc, while the story you worked hard to prepare is broadcasting. What will the viewers remember? Lower-thirds for sure, along with any eye-catching video. The words you spent so much time crafting may be lost in the whirl of how people consume television news today (especially younger viewers).

Reporters, producers, and managers need to keep that in mind as they prepare their newscasts. How they write a headline or a lower-third is often more powerful than the words contained in the story because of how people remember information.

A News Experiment

I decided to do an experiment this summer to see what news consumers would find in a simple online search about Covid variants. All of the stories listed below came from the first page of an online search from the "News" section. News consumers often depend on the information they find on just the first page, so that's important to remember as well. The first page of the "All" section often includes articles from non-news websites, so I'm focusing only on what journalists are writing. That's why I used the "News" tab in the search.

I'm interested in how objective a story is by looking at headlines (lower-thirds for television), first few paragraphs, people quoted, and overall approach. As we mentioned in the last newsletter, the majority of people who get their news online read your story for only 15 seconds. Because of that fact, journalists need to make sure their story is clear and easy to understand from the beginning.

How many people are quoted for the story? Do you see some of the same experts being quoted in different media stories? Are opposing views presented from similarly qualified experts? If not, why not? Is it because there are no opposing views? If there are opposing views from qualified experts (which there almost always are), why would journalists not include them in their coverage? That's a question news managers should ask their reporters and writers.

Keep in mind the three primary "follows" of journalism — Follow the Money, Follow the People, Follow the Science. Are there any reasons to question the articles based on those "follows"? Any advertising dollars that could influence a news organization's coverage? Who are the experts? What are their personal and professional backgrounds? Do or did they work for any companies or organizations that might be a conflict of interest? If so, is that mentioned in the article? What previous statements have they made about similar subjects? Did they change their positions at some point recently? If so, why? Any reason to question their objectivity?

Scientists determine what people believe about *science*, so have you examined their objectivity and accuracy carefully in preparation for writing your article? A scientist who has displayed obvious bias in the past may be similarly biased in the future. Be careful about who you choose to present as "experts" for your reading, listening, or viewing audience.

Let's look at some of the Covid variants' headlines and stories from the past several weeks. You can read the full story by clicking on the the headline "link." Do you think the journalists exhibited curiosity, skepticism, objectivity, and accuracy in their reporting? Did they get all sides of the story? Do you think the editors and producers wrote the proper headlines to accurately represent the stories? What do you think about how the news managers handled approval of the story? Let me know what you think in the Comment section.

Special Note

I did the online search for stories on July 10th while preparing to write this article. The key words I used were “covid subvariant.” 46-million search results came up on Google. Almost 15-million came up under the **News** tab. I chose seven news stories that came up on the first search page in the **News** tab.

The vast majority of online news readers usually don’t look past the first search page. A very small minority of readers will check out stories on the second search page. Almost no one goes to pages three and four.

> A June 2013 study conducted by Chitika Insights reported that 91.5% of Google traffic stays on the first page, and only 4.8% of users click through to the second page of a search. More than 90% of people never click on the second page of Google search results. Reputation911

According to Moz, the first page of Google captures 71% of search traffic clicks and has been reported to be as high as 92% in recent years. Second-page results are far from a close second coming in at below 6% of all website clicks. Forbes

Covid Variant Stories

- This New ‘Ninja’ COVID Variant Is the Most Dangerous One Yet (Yahoo News, Daily Beast — four people were quoted for the article)

Still, BA.5’s ongoing romp across half the planet is a strong reminder that the COVID pandemic isn’t over. “We’re not done yet, by any stretch,” Eric Topol, founder and director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California, wrote on his Substack.” — “The development of variants now is a freight train,” Irwin Redlener, the founding director of Columbia University’s National Center for Disaster Preparedness, told The Daily Beast.” “The more additional jabs you get on top of your prime course, the better protected you are. Arguably the best protection results from two prime jabs of the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer or Moderna plus a couple boosters. “Get your damn fourth shot!” Redlener said.” — “But vaccines, boosters and past infection still offer

meaningful, if reduced, protection against BA.5. “Even a boost of the original genome, or a recent infection, will [produce] some cross-protective antibodies to lessen the severity of a new Omicron subvariant infection,” Eric Bortz, a University of Alaska-Anchorage virologist and public-health expert, told The Daily Beast.” — “It’s looking more and more likely that COVID will be with us, well, *forever*. “COVID is becoming like the flu,” Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington Institute for Health, told The Daily Beast.”

- New variants are poised to keep Covid-19 circulating at high levels throughout the summer (CNN — two people were quoted in the article)

"It's like boxing," said Dr. Alex Greninger, assistant director of the University of Washington's clinical virology laboratory. "It's like the national champion from South Africa going against the national champion in the United States. You don't know how to rank them if they haven't ever fought," he says." "For the summer, going into the winter, I expect these viruses to be out there at relatively high levels," Greninger said. "Just the number of cases, the sheer disruptions of the work force -- It's just a very high, high burden of disease." — "It's a serious threat," Dr. David Ho, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Columbia University in New York City, wrote in an email. "Only a month ago, it was .02 percent."

- BA.5, now dominant U.S. variant, may pose the biggest threat to immune protection yet, The FDA recommended that Covid vaccine makers target two omicron subvariants — BA.4 and BA.5 — in new booster shots expected to come this fall. (NBC News — two people were quoted for the article)

"They're taking over, so clearly they're more contagious than earlier variants of omicron," said David Montefiori, a professor at the Human Vaccine Institute at Duke University Medical Center." — "Francois Balloux, the director of the University College London Genetics Institute, said that's most likely another reason the subvariants have taken over. "At this stage now, I think all these variants actually are roughly equally transmissible, so there's not a huge difference," he said."It's just some are slightly better at infecting people who have been vaccinated or infected by previous variants."

- COVID-19 omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5 could be ‘worst’ so far, doctors say — Expert explains why masks may be our 'new normal' — BA.4 and BA.5 evade immunity and infect more efficiently (Fox News Tampa Bay, The Associated Press contributed to this report. This story was reported out of Los Angeles — one person was quoted for the story)

Health care experts are calling these new subvariants the worst they’ve seen of any of the COVID-19 variants thus far. "They are sort of children of omicron that have gone a different route," explained Dr. Stuart Ray, professor of medicine in the division of infectious diseases for Johns Hopkins Medicine.” “I like to at least talk about how we define ‘worst,’ because worst would mean the thing that kills the most people, causes the most hospitalizations, and the most disruption. And of course the temporal, what we in science call the secular trend, the thing that’s happening over time that’s changing, because we have immunity that’s gaining over time, that makes this

milder than it would have been if it appeared in 2020 because we had so little immunity back then," Ray said.”

- As COVID-19 Cases Rise, New Variant Poses Major Challenge (VOA News — two people were quoted for the article)

"The Omicron subvariant BA.5 is the worst version of the virus that we've seen," Dr. Eric Topol, a member of the Department of Molecular Medicine at Scripps Research, wrote in his popular Substack newsletter. "It takes immune escape, already extensive, to the next level, and, as a function of that, enhanced transmissibility, well beyond Omicron (BA.1) and other Omicron family variants that we've seen." — "Right now, the public health stance should be maximizing vaccination, including boosters for those who are eligible and primary vaccination and boosters for children," David Blumenthal, president of the Commonwealth Fund, a public health foundation, told VOA. "That's the absolutely critical, essential first step in a public health campaign to reduce the impact of COVID. That also should include planning for, we

hope, a more specific vaccine in the fall against the Omicron variants.”

- Move over, measles: Dominant Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5 could be the most infectious viruses known to man (Fortune — two experts' views mentioned for the article, though not quoted directly .. one expert quoted directly)

Globally dominant Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5 are neck and neck with measles in the competition for the title of most infectious disease known to man, according to an Australian professor of biostatistics and epidemiology. The original Wuhan strain of COVID-19 had a reproductive rate—also known as an R0 or R-naught value—of around 3.3, meaning that each infected person infected another 3.3 people, on average. That put COVID-19 among the least transmissible human diseases. Slightly less transmissible were the 1918 pandemic strain of flu, which had an estimated R0 of 2, along with Ebola. On the higher end of the spectrum, mumps has an R0 of 12; measles tops the list at 18. — So called "stealth Omicron," nicknamed for its ability to evade detection

on PCR tests, was about 1.4 times more transmissible than BA.1, so its reproductive rate was around 13.3, Adrian Esterman, a professor at the University of South Australia, recently wrote on academic news website *The Conversation*. — The next dominant COVID strain should surpass them all. BA.2.75, an ultra-new Omicron subvariant nicknamed "Centaurus" by some on Twitter, made headlines this week after the World Health Organization said it was tracking it. It's already on the heels of dominant BA.5 in India, with "apparent rapid growth and wide geographical spread," according to Tom Peacock, a virologist at the Department of Infectious Diseases at Imperial College in London.

- ‘Headed in a bad direction’: Omicron variant may bring second-largest US Covid wave (The Guardian — two people quoted for the article)

“Covid-19 is very clearly not over. We’re seeing dramatic increases in the number of cases and hospitalizations in many places throughout the United States,” said Jason Salemi, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of South Florida’s College of Public Health. As BA.5, one of the Omicron sub-variants, begins buffeting the US, “we’re headed in a bad direction”, Salemi said. “We’ve seen it coming for a while … We’ve seen it go pretty unabated.” “The older you are, the much more likely you are to be hospitalized,” said Salemi. “But hospitalizations are increasing for every age group.” Even if variants are more pathogenic in the lab, high levels of immunity can help keep severe illness at bay. That’s why staying up to date on vaccination is key. “The first and second booster are very important,” Salemi said. “There’s a lot of opportunity for waning immunity and waning

protection from the vaccine, without those booster doses, to allow these new circulating variants with some maybe more concerning characteristics to do a little bit more damage," Salemi said. Waning immunity coupled with a more immune-evasive variant means "you can start seeing a pickup in some of these indicators of severe illness". — The immune-evasive properties of the evolving variants make new waves more likely, says Tulio de Oliveira, director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation at Stellenbosch University and the lead of the Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa. "BA.4 and 5 are potentially the variants that can break through immunity the easiest," he said. They are "really capable of reinfection". People who have been vaccinated and those who were previously infected "easily acquire BA.4 and BA.5, but they will develop very little disease," De Oliveira said.

You Can Do It!

These are just seven short examples from the **first page** of a search for news stories about Covid variants. You can do the same thing. Put in some keywords to the search site, look at the stories on the first news search page, write out the headline, read the story, count the number of people quoted, and look for a variety of perspectives. It's a good exercise that should remind us to do our jobs well. News consumers are counting on you.

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