

Media Coverage of the 2003 Toronto SARS Outbreak

A report on the role of the press in a public crisis

ROBARTS CENTRE FOR CANADIAN STUDIES



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SARS in the Media



Questions...

Did media inadvertently exacerbate the situation?

What are the new communications challenges associated with global flow of information?

SARS in the Media



More than 2600 Canadian and American newspaper articles examined

Detailed content analysis of more than 1600 SARS related articles from:



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

NATIONAL POST



The New York Times

1. Examine Saturation Coverage

- ‘*intense, prominent 24/7 reporting*
- Torontonians *inundated* by huge volume of news coverage
- Conventional wisdom: coverage gives public clues on scope/size of issue
- During saturation periods, coverage jumped 3 to 4 times average level
- Each paper printed as many as 25 articles/day about SARS crisis
- Intensified coverage may itself have shaped perception of SARS crisis



2. A question of balance

- Shifting balance caused by going from 1 story to 3 stories: health, economic and political
- Despite perceptions of change in coverage, health-centered stories remained focus
- At least half of all coverage (Canada & US) devoted to health issues

3. Differences in coverage

- Coverage by *Globe*, *Star*, *Post* were similar in subject matter and in-depth analysis
- One difference was target of ‘fingerprinting’
 - ***Star* critical of Ontario government**
 - ***Post* centered criticism on Ottawa**
 - ***Globe* blamed both levels of government**



4. Getting the message out

- Local and international story
- Same health message on containing virus was heard by public at large but also by world-wide audience
- Interpreted differently by each group
- Stakeholders found their communications strategies working at cross purposes
 - Business wanted advisory lifted
 - Doctors urged caution
 - Politicians disagreed among selves



5. US media coverage

- Canada often not differentiated from other SARS affected areas
- Toronto included on same list as locations where disease was active in general population instead of health care facilities



The New York Times

SARS Scare in Toronto

**THE SARS EPIDEMIC: CANADA
Health Officials Seek Help
From U.S. to Control Virus**

**Canadian Strain of Virus
Appears to Be Stronger
Than the U.S. Variety**

**Toronto Mayor Calls for Understanding
From Businesses and Consumers**

SARS in the Media



Globalization: One message reaches all

- Difficult to target one audience
- Potential for distortion is real

‘Understanding SARS crisis and communicating its nature requires an understanding of how global cultural flows have reshaped public events within far reaching and complex chains of causality.’

SARS in the Media



Torontonians subjected to ‘saturation news coverage’ of SARS issue

- Torontonians inundated with extraordinary volume of news coverage about virus
- Period researched was 91 days in length, running March 16 to June 15, 2003. Average articles per day, between March 25 and May 30
 - *Toronto Star* 6.1
 - *Globe and Mail* 3.6
 - *National Post* 4.3

SARS in the Media



Tracking the news spikes

Period	Start Date	End Date
Initial Outbreak	March 25	March 31
WHO Travel Advisory	April 20	April 30
End of Initial Outbreak	May 14	May 18
Second Outbreak	May 23	May 30

SARS in the Media



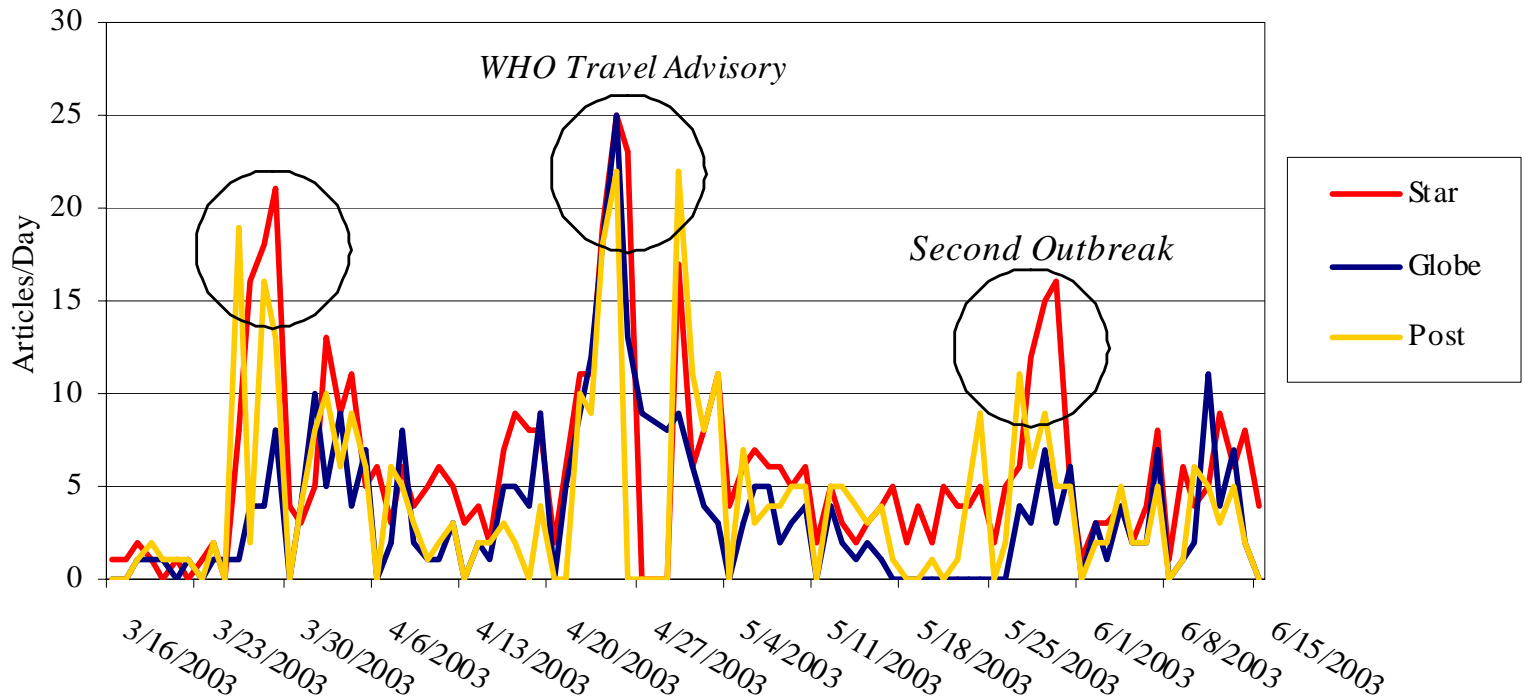
Tracking the news spikes

- During three periods of saturation coverage, number of articles per day jumped dramatically (200% and 300% of average levels)
- As many as 25 articles/day/paper
- Saturation coverage in local press may have reinforced world impression that SARS was out of control in Toronto

SARS in the Media



National Post, Globe & Mail and Toronto Star





Role of news media in a health crisis

- Four generally recognized functions of news organizations:
 - channel local public health information
 - provide national, international conduit for news reports and analysis
 - document impact of crisis on businesses, front line health workers, community
 - offer venue for public, political debate on handling of crisis

SARS in the Media



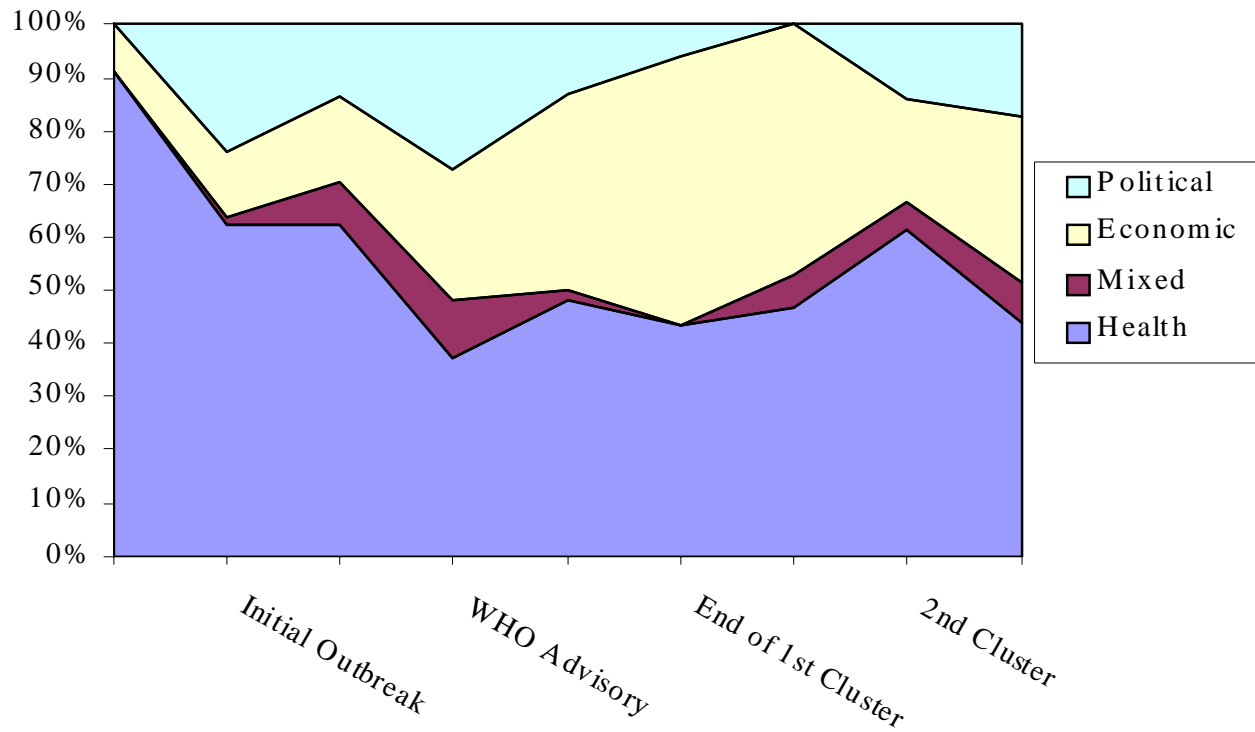
What was the story?

- Although economic coverage gained substantial ground and health story was *diminished*, it remained the big story
 - *National Post* 65%
 - *Toronto Star* 55%
 - *Globe and Mail* 53%

SARS in the Media



National Post, Globe & Mail and Toronto Star





Canadian newspapers consistent in focus on stakeholders as crisis unfolded

- Gave special place to voices from health sector, public officials
- Later in crisis, health care workers received more attention.
- Health voices strong throughout but
- Many competing voices - no single message

SARS in the Media



Tone, substance of coverage changed as economic costs mounted

- After WHO travel advisory, voice increasingly given to politicians, business people

Who's to blame?

- Newspapers differed in target of criticism, defined as...
- Negative statements directed at officials
- Each of 3 Canadian newspapers was critical in 1/3 of coverage
 - *Post* tended to be most critical of the federal Liberals
 - *Star* most often criticized Provincial Conservatives
 - *Globe* apportioned blame equally between Provincial and Federal governments

SARS in the Media



Table 2: The Apportionment of Blame

Criticized Group	Critical Articles*			
	National Post	Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Total
Federal Government	34 - 8.7%	22 - 6.7%	37 - 6.7%	93 - 7.3%
Provincial Government	24 - 6.2%	26 - 8.0%	60 - 10.8%	110 - 8.6%
Public Health	14 - 3.6%	13 - 4.0%	13 - 2.3%	40 - 3.1%
Health Care Workers	3 - 0.8%	8 - 2.4%	6 - 1.1%	17 - 1.3%
WHO	24 - 6.2%	16 - 4.9%	24 - 4.3%	64 - 5.0%
Citizens	3 - 0.8%	10 - 3.1%	5 - 0.9%	18 - 1.4%
Business	2 - 0.5%	1 - 0.3%	5 - 0.9%	8 - 0.6%
Foreign Governments	13 - 3.3%	17 - 5.2%	23 - 4.1%	53 - 4.2%
Total # of Critical Articles	117 - 30.1%	113 - 34.6%	173 - 31.1%	403 - 31.7%
Total # of Articles	389	327	556	1272

* number of critical articles as a % of the total number of stories run by each newspaper.

SARS in the Media



Who's to blame?

- *Star* was more critical of the federal government than the *Post* was of the provincial government
- Province received most criticism



Canadian vs US Coverage

- US didn't differentiate Toronto from other SARS-affected areas
- Greatest difference was volume of coverage
- 556 articles from *Toronto Star* versus 273 from *New York Times*
- American papers took SARS story seriously but...

SARS in the Media



Canadian vs US Coverage

- It shared news agenda with war in Iraq
- American coverage mirrored Canadian press giving prominence to health story over economic/political stories

SARS in the Media



Coverage by story content

Area	Health	Economic	Political	Mixed
Toronto	52%	24%	17%	7%
National	51%	24%	19%	6%
American	59%	23%	12%	6%

SARS in the Media



Health Sub-topics

US Canada

– Cities current list of probable/active cases	2%	4%
– WHO travel advisory	5%	5%
– Research on disease spread	27%	14%
– Impact on health care system	1%	13%

USA Today

Direct
Mention of
Canada - 20%

'Lumped-in'
References to
Canada and
China etc. -
41%

Why was 'linking of Canada and China' so important?

- Demonstrates usual US neglect of differences in Canadian institutions and health care system
- Created impression risks were higher here than they actually were
- Canada received mention in all US articles more than half the time
- References 'in passing' were 2x direct mentions

SARS in the Media



TIME Magazine

SARS Outbreak

In **Canada and Asia** people struggle to deal with the spread of a deadly disease





‘The cumulative effect of SARS coverage in the media defined the nature of the crisis itself.’

SARS in the Media



The ‘new normal’

- In Toronto, SARS outbreak was simultaneously local *and* international
- Difficult in a global environment to target media messages to individual audiences
- Neither media, stakeholders nor public yet used to “new normal” of news

SARS in the Media



Study demonstrates the need to strike balance between medical realities of epidemic and media's use of saturation coverage

- Severity of crisis was communicated by *quantity* of news coverage as much as content
- Media played role in shaping crisis
- Media needs to realize how quantity of coverage affects nature of story

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Global Cultural Flows is story behind the story of SARS crisis in Toronto

- Continuous, growing exchanges of people, trade, media and ideas
- Requires understanding of how flows behave in complex chains of causality
- Global flow of people resulted in an infectious disease being brought into city
- Global flow of information resulted in disease being identified

SARS in the Media



Global Cultural Flows is story behind the story of SARS crisis in Toronto

- Flow of information at global and local level responsible for controlling disease and...
- Impacted upon flow of global capital in the form of reduced tourism
- Flows altered when they collide with other, seemingly unrelated flows
- Physical flow of disease stimulated information flow that had negative economic consequences and sparked political conflict