In a unique educational series, Project Information Literacy reveals Business Insider outpaced The New York Times in coronavirus news coverage by two-to-one during the early months of 2020, while news websites, in general, posted more photos evoking feelings of fear than hope.

Santa Rosa, Calif. -- At a time when the news industry is hemorrhaging jobs and newsrooms are shrinking, the mainstream news websites producing the majority of Covid-19 stories during the first 100 days of 2020 were Business Insider followed by Fox News and CNN, The Washington Post, the New York Post, and The New York Times. These findings provide a rare look at how newer digital-only news outlets compared in coverage to established news publications during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak.

That is one of the findings of a new national two-part educational series on news literacy by Project Information Literacy (PIL), a nonprofit research institute. Aimed at college students, the open access series, "Covid-19: The First 100 Days of U.S. News Coverage," traces the pandemic in its early stages as it unfolded in the U.S. media. The series includes research findings, interactive visuals, and learning activities that investigate the early development and visual representation of the Covid-19 news story.

“Our series takes the biggest story of the century,” Dr. Alison Head, the study’s lead author and researcher, said, “and examines how media messages, both the written word and visual storytelling, influence what we see and learn, what we think, and ultimately, who we are.”

By conducting a comprehensive computational analysis of 125,696 news stories from 66 mainstream and digital-only U.S. news websites, researchers analyzed the ebbs and flows of Covid-19 coverage between January 1 and April 9, 2020. Data were drawn from Media Cloud, an open-source platform for large-scale media analyses at the MIT Center for Civic Media.

Researchers also analyzed a random sample of 532 news photos from a subset of the sample, finding that a theme of fear was most dominant during the early months of the Covid-19 coverage. These photos typically stirred feelings of alienation, anxiety, and fear of the unknown by using tightly framed compositions with solitary subjects in darkly lit settings.
In January, when the novel coronavirus was a distant problem in China, there was far more U.S. news coverage about the race for the Democratic presidential nomination than the imminent threat of the contagion.

The death on February 7 of the Wuhan doctor, Li Wenliang, who sounded the alarm about a growing coronavirus threat in China months before, was one of the first news spikes in U.S. coronavirus coverage. As the story picked up momentum, it took on urgent political, health, and social justice angles that set social media ablaze.

News photos evoking hope and grief did not pick up in news coverage until early March when the pathogen hit the U.S., confirmed cases started mounting, and businesses, schools, and sporting arenas began to shut down.

One of the biggest days of news coverage occurred on March 12, when the stock market took a 10% dive, U.S. students were called home as Europe closed its borders, the NBA suspended basketball season, Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita Wilson tested positive, and the largest emergency bill -- $2.2 trillion – was passed by the Congress and Senate.

After March 19, after schools, businesses and public life began to shut down across the nation, the number of news stories about Covid-19 started to gradually decrease, as news consumers became overwhelmed with the constant barrage of coverage.

The two-part series from PIL is the first educational resource of its kind about Covid-19 and news literacy, intended for virtual and in-class teaching by instructional librarians faculty in a variety of disciplines. These reports consider how journalism plays a vital, though often misunderstood, role in a nation’s grasp of events. Included are learning exercises for helping students critically evaluate the news while becoming more discerning news consumers.

“Ultimately, our series is about reclaiming information agency,” Head said, “this is critically important at a time when we all need to exert some control over the torrent of news about Covid-19 to remain critically informed when our individual lives may depend on it.”

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a national nonprofit research institute based in the San Francisco Bay Area that studies what it is like to be a student in the digital age. In a series of 12 groundbreaking scholarly research studies, PIL has investigated how high school and college students, and recent college graduates utilize information-gathering strategies and skills to complete course work, engage with news, and solve information problems in their everyday lives and the workplace.

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