



**NEWS RELEASE - PROJECT INFORMATION LITERACY (PIL)**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***National research series reveals the 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 news websites for television channels, *Fox News* and *CNN*, and those for *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 by [Project Information Literacy](#) (PIL), a nonprofit research institute. Aimed at college students, the series, [Covid-19: The first 100 days of U.S. news coverage](#), has interactive visuals, research findings, and learning activities tracing the pandemic in its early stages as it unfolded in the U.S. media about the early development and visual representation of the Covid-19 news story.

"Our series takes the biggest story of the century," Alison Head, the study's lead researcher, said, "and examines how media messages -- the written word and visual storytelling -- influence what we see and learn, what we think, and ultimately, who we are."

Conducting a comprehensive computational analysis of 125,696 news stories from 66 mainstream and digital-only U.S. news outlets, 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 looked at a random sample of 532 news photos, finding that a theme 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.

The series findings include:

>> News photos evoking hope and grief did not start to appear with any regularity until early March, once the pathogen hit the U.S., confirmed cases started mounting, and businesses, schools, and sporting arenas began to shut down.

>> In January, before the first coronavirus cases were reported, there was far more U.S. news coverage about the race for the Democratic presidential nomination than the novel coronavirus.

>>The death on February 7 of the Wuhan doctor, Li Wenliang, sounding the alarm about a growing coronavirus threat in December, was one of the first news spikes in U.S. coronavirus coverage as the story took on urgent political, health, and social justice angles that set social media ablaze.

>> 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, while 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.

This open-access series from PIL is intended for use in virtual and classroom teaching by instructional librarians faculty in different disciplines. The two reports both show how journalism plays a vital, though often misunderstood, role in a nation's grasp of events. Included are teaching resources for helping students critically evaluate the news while becoming discerning news consumers.

"By looking at early patterns of coronavirus news coverage during a finite timeframe," Dr. Alison Head said, "students can see what topics and voices were amplified by widely read news publications, and how certain news stories and visuals shaped our first understanding of the pandemic, well beyond what they might learn from their other academic readings."

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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