

Global Journalist: From Ebola to COVID

Abstract: On this May 3, 2020 program, two veteran journalists compared their own reporting on an Ebola outbreak six years with the current COVID coverage. They discussed storytelling tools, techniques and challenges.

Host: [Regan Mertz](#)

Guests:

- [Don Champion](#)
- [Jonathan Serrie](#)

Producers: [Brendan Hall](#), [Katharine Finnerty](#), [Hannah France](#)

Audio Engineer: [Trevor Hook](#)

Mentioned: Ebola, CBS News, FOX News, Don Champion, Jonathan Serrie, Ebola, COVID-19, Sierra Leone, World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Emory University, Alaska Airlines

Regan Mertz 1:00

Welcome to Global Journalist. I'm Regan Mertz, and this is a program for journalists, by journalists and about journalists. In this three-part series – with a surprise bonus from our classmate Aqil Hamzah in Singapore – we have spoken with journalists around the world and listened to their experiences covering viral outbreaks. We began in Beijing and learned about the difficulties reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic while worrying about government interference. Next, we visited Brazil and explored the tension between the need to report the news and the effort to not cause public panic during the Zika virus epidemic. Then, Aqil filed a report from Singapore where he's quarantined. He talked to editors who covered SARS in the early 2000s and now find themselves facing a story about a new Coronavirus. Now, we are ending this series of the look at the Ebola epidemic in Africa. In this episode, we will explore

different storytelling tools and techniques and how journalists use them to report on viral outbreaks.

Regan Mertz 0:26

Storytelling is a vital part of journalism. Stories are told through the written word, through audio, through video or through graphics. Don Champion is a former broadcast journalist turned strategic communicator. He reported on Ebola while at CBS News, and he is currently managing messaging on COVID-19 as a senior communications partner at Alaska Airlines.

Regan Mertz 0:10

Standing on a bustling sidewalk, outside of Manhattan hospital, broadcast journalist Champion awaited the test results for a patient with Ebola-like symptoms in August 2014.

CBS Reporter 0:05

CBS 2's Don Champion live at Mount Sinai Hospital on the Upper East Side for us this afternoon. Don.

Don Champion 0:08

And Chris, that patient is still in isolation this noon under close watch as doctors wait to get his test results back. The hospital is in constant contact with the Centers for Disease Control.

Regan Mertz 0:11

The former CBS News correspondent covered Ebola in the United States. Champion remembers it being an urgent, fast developing story that fit the urgent, fast developing 24-hour news cycle of broadcast journalism.

Don Champion 0:14

This was when the Ebola, the major Ebola outbreak, was top of the headlines. And so at the time, I was based in New York. So, I mostly covered it from there because we had a case or two in New York City, and it was quite interesting to cover it.

Regan Mertz 0:33

Two months later, in November 2014, Champion was assigned a story about a woman who returned from volunteering in Sierra Leone. Back home in New Jersey, she was immediately placed in quarantine. Now it may be hard to appreciate at a time when so many people around the world are being quarantined for COVID-19, but back in 2014, having someone quarantined for a potential Ebola case close to a population the size of New York City was a big deal. To put it into perspective: Ebola kills one out of every two people that get it, according to the World Health Organization.

Don Champion 0:28

Like we're seeing with coronavirus, you know, you have an outbreak of something like this, or Ebola even worse or coronavirus, in a city that dense and, you know, that kind of urban setting, like it's highly concerning if that happens. And so, you know, you did see a lot of fear in New York around that time. And, I think as a journalist, I mean, my top priority was just to be very clear and just be a calm voice.

Regan Mertz 0:04

Given the potential for panic, Champion always took pains to reassure his audience.

Don Champion 0:33

I think in the emergency situation like this, it's just, you have to be a calm voice of reason and a calm voice of fact, because you know there's a lot of fear in the public during situations like this and even fear that reporters are facing as they cover these stories, you know. So, I think that's always the priority in these situations is to be factual and be clear and try to not add to the fear and anxiety that people naturally have in these situations.

Regan Mertz 0:22

From New York City, let's head down south 800 miles or so to Atlanta, the home of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This is where FOX News correspondent, Jonathan Serrie, is based. Serrie covers public health stories, primarily in the southeastern United States, for broadcast and print.

Regan Mertz 0:10

When Ebola cases broke out in the U.S. Serrie was in the heart of health information because of his proximity to the CDC and Emory University's teaching hospital.

Jonathan Serrie 0:25

I have covered epidemics in other countries such as the Ebola outbreak and in West Africa. And we actually dealt with that here in Atlanta because Emory University, right next door to the CDC, was one of the institutions that was taking American doctors who had been infected with Ebola, successfully treating them and ultimately releasing them. And so that was a huge news story.

Regan Mertz 0:05

As Serrie was reporting on the Ebola epidemic, he didn't feel a need to change his methods.

Jonathan Serrie 0:33

In the case of Ebola, it didn't affect my reporting very much because this was a remote threat. This was in Africa, and so I could freely interview officials here, and you didn't have to worry about contagion because no one in this country was being exposed and even when the patients were brought to Emory University, it was under very close quarantine. They were in these specially designed rooms and so reporting from outside the hospital, we were totally safe.

Regan Mertz 0:13

COVID-19, on the other hand, has a lower fatality rate, but it is much more contagious and doesn't respect press credentials. So, Serrie finds himself having a completely different experience covering the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Jonathan Serrie 0:58

We're going around wearing masks in the rare circumstances where we can't keep social distancing of at least six feet. We're doing most of our interviews like you are remotely using Zoom or some other software and just interviewing people, either on internet apps or over satellite just to avoid that type of exposure. And then when we do interview people in person, we have to make sure that we're doing it at that distance of at least six feet, none of these personal, up close and personal, in your face interviews. It's under much more controlled circumstances. So we're still getting the interviews we need talking to the experts that we need, but much more heavily reliant on technology than doing things in person.

Regan Mertz 0:04

Serrie reports for both broadcast and print.

FOX Reporter 0:05

For this deadly virus, Jonathan Serrie, live in Atlanta with more on that, Jonathan.

Jonathan Serrie 0:08

Hi John. When the Ebola virus infects the cells inside your body it turns off their ability to alert your immune system that there's an infection.

Regan Mertz 0:07

As he is covering a story, he gathers enough information to report for both. He contrasted the two storytelling methods.

Jonathan Serrie 1:02

The difference between broadcast and print journalism is the difference between writing a poem and writing a novel. In print journalism, you can flesh things out. Back in the days when print journalism was almost entirely newspaper, you didn't have the luxury of the space that you do now with the internet. Theoretically, you could write on forever, you can certainly cram a lot more details in print for people who want to get more information. In broadcast, whether it's television, you have to be even more concise. For most commercial radio, you're more of a headline service, you're giving people a broad 35,000 foot overview. And then, if your audience is interested in a particular topic, they can go to your website. And there you have the luxury of fleshing out the more granular minutiae, but nonetheless interesting details about your story.

Regan Mertz 0:05

When I asked which method he prefers, Serrie claimed he doesn't have a favorite.

Jonathan Serrie 1:12

I actually like both. I enjoy the immediacy of television, I enjoy the feeling when you're doing a live report, that you are, even though there might be as many as 5 million people watching especially if you're in prime time. I always try to focus on one person in their living room, trying to see them through that camera lens. I'm talking to one person, and even though I don't get to see my audience I still feel this very personal relationship with them, it's very conversational. Print I love because I love writing. I started out in college as editor of my student newspaper, and I never got over that wonderful feeling of writing something, crafting an article and then having this tangible copy of it. Back then you actually had a physical copy of newsprint that if you rub too hard with your fingers you get ink on your fingers. But now, even seeing it published on the web page, you still get a very similar feeling there's more of a sense of permanence in print.

Regan Mertz 0:16

When Serrie broadcasts his stories, he usually keeps a light hearted, playful, cheerful and even joking tone. However, when he reports on viral outbreaks like Ebola and COVID-19, his tone shifts so that he addresses his audience in a calm manner to report the facts.

Jonathan Serrie 0:34

Reporting on the pandemic, I'm going to be more serious. I do try in these situations, I try to keep my tone calm because I tend to be an optimist, and I believe that you can get out of almost any dangerous situation. As long as you keep your cool and as long as you educate yourself about the facts and how you can protect yourself, and so I try not to be reactionary, I try to remain calm. But at the same time I'm going to be much more serious than if I'm doing a feature on the circus coming to town.

Regan Mertz 0:07

Being a public health reporter, Serrie has a specific reporting process that he uses during times of viral outbreaks.

Jonathan Serrie 0:57

The night before, there's usually a White House press briefing. And so I'm sitting at home watching that along with almost everyone else in the country. I'll go through and see what video elements there are, and then the following morning when I wake up, I repeat the process.

I see what's been going on in the news, and I'll look for more video elements and then I kind of compile a list of all of the things that I might want to talk about. And then when I get requests for different live shots during the day, depending on what material they want me to talk about, I'll rearrange those little pieces of the puzzle that I've been keeping on my little list, and that constantly gets updated throughout the day. Every reporter is going to have a different system but this is my personal system that works for me.

Regan Mertz 0:11

Serrie's reporting process changed from Ebola to COVID-19. During Ebola, he had more time to prepare, but now during COVID-19, he has to be ready to report at all times.

Jonathan Serrie 0:47

There's obviously a lot more interest than there was in Ebola, where obviously we were very concerned about what was happening to the folks in West Africa but for the average American it was not something that you needed to worry about. And so there's a lot more demand for information and so I'm doing a lot more reporting and so I've learned to be a lot more nimble in just staying organized with my notes, my facts so that I can turn on a dime and be ready whereas with Ebola I felt like I had much more time to prepare for each of my stories I had much, much more luxury of time.

Regan Mertz 0:13

The emergence of social media has made the spread of news on viral outbreaks ... well, viral. More popular and widely used since the 2014 Ebola outbreak, social media can be a vector for disinformation.

Jonathan Serrie 0:45

There's definitely a lot of bad information circulating on social media, it's funny that you mentioned that. An acquaintance of mine sent me this, and it turned out to be a hoax but he thoroughly believed it. And so I very quickly sent the link to that article back to my friend, and said, you don't need to worry about this. Don't spread this on to any more of your friends, because you should always be skeptical when friends send you links like this before you check them out. And so yes there's a lot of bad information out there. I think most journalists are good at approaching them with skepticism, and not reporting them until they've been verified.

Regan Mertz 0:04

Don Champion also had to protect his mom from being hoaxed.

Don Champion 0:17

I mean, my mom, like, you know, I talked to her every day and she's like, you know, the other day I forget what it was, but she had mentioned something about the conferences like now, that's true, you know. So we all kind of have to take the lead on that and just set the record straight with our loved ones and our friends and people in our circles.

Regan Mertz 0:07

But Champion takes advantage of social media platforms to get legitimate information to Alaska Airlines' customers.

Don Champion 0:17

We live in a different world now, again, where social media is huge, you know, and I think it's important for us to be information providers as well, you know, in partnering with news stations and newspapers and the media in our respective markets as well.

Regan Mertz 0:08

Champion uses social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to keep his audience abreast of COVID-19 updates.

Don Champion 0:23

So those create opportunities and spaces for us to inform our audience and our guests about the things that we're doing from our perspective, you know what I mean? So, I think that's been a great thing to have to, as a brand to have so many vehicles that you could reach people and inform them in difficult times like this is very beneficial.

Regan Mertz 0:23

That's what we're trying to do with this podcast series: to be more transparent with you and share journalists' perspectives about how they report in crises and all of the factors that go into that - from ethical decisions to how we take care of ourselves.

Regan Mertz 0:07

Champion says he sees another difference between coverage of the Ebola epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic: politics.

Don Champion 0:14

I feel like we're entering kind of a dangerous period because you're seeing health being politicized, and that's not a good thing. You know what I mean, like science and facts and reality need to lead.

Regan Mertz 0:01

Serrie agrees with Champion.

Jonathan Serrie 0:47

Stay focused on the public health. We're in such a polarized environment, every issue becomes political. But as soon as your viewers or readers start seeing everything through a political lens, that's when people get hurt. And so, trust the experts, find those impartial experts that serve administrations regardless of political party. We're talking about Dr. Deborah Birx, Dr. Anthony Fauci, people like that, listen to the experts who are unafraid to just give you the data, tell you how to interpret it, and give you unbiased advice. And that's how you serve your readers and viewers best.

Regan Mertz 0:08

Another reason the COVID-19 pandemic has become polarized is because of the economic issues that citizens and businesses have faced.

Jonathan Serrie 0:48

My concern is that this pandemic is becoming politicized. We all know people who are idealized regardless of the facts. They see everything through a political lens and those are the ones I worry about because they're the ones who either view this pandemic as fake news created by the mainstream media, or they view the business owners and states that are reopening as greedy. And the fact is the pandemic, and the public health threat it poses are very real but so is the economic impact and while we're seeing people dying from this disease and getting sick from this disease. We're also seeing people struggling economically. We're seeing people struggling, economically, most people aren't trying to get rich off of this, they're trying to survive.

Regan Mertz 0:05

But Serrie believes that in general, the media is covering COVID-19 well.

Jonathan Serrie 0:30

The temptation is always to get distracted by the politics. And so I urge everyone in the media just to stay on the public health at this point, at this point in the pandemic, it's just too important. You need to focus on the public health. We can do the post mortem after and figure out what politician did right. What politician did wrong, but in general, I think the media as a whole are doing a great job.

Regan Mertz 0:11

As a public health reporter, Serrie faces risks that many of his colleagues don't. Recently, he had an opportunity that's not yet available to many journalists, much less members of the public.

Jonathan Serrie 1:08

Most recently, I did a story on antibody testing, which is giving public health officials a better idea of how widespread the virus is. And hospitals are getting a lot of requests because people want to know if they've been exposed to the virus because so many people are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms. While I was doing that story, I did some reporter involvement and at Emory Hospital, they took a blood sample, and they performed an antibody test on me. And I waited until the end of the afternoon to get my results, and I was getting really excited because I had a hunch that I had been exposed, back in, in early March. I had very mild symptoms and felt like a cold, no fever. And I thought there was a good chance that maybe I was exposed to COVID-19 and wouldn't that be neat to know well, the results came back and I was negative.

Regan Mertz 0:04

Given Serrie's line of work, that was especially disappointing.

Jonathan Serrie 0:48

So almost definitely I have not been exposed to COVID-19. I have absolutely no protection and I need to keep protecting myself like everyone else in the country, and. And so, from a personal standpoint, I was a little disappointed but it also humbled me because it reminded me hunches are not science, you got to follow the science, not your hunches and I'm sure that there are so many other people out there like me, who assume that they know their exposure status, and they really don't until they get the test.

Regan Mertz 0:12

As my team and I reported on this story, we found out just how busy journalists are when covering viral outbreaks. In the middle of an interview with myself and my teammate, Brendan Hall, Serrie, suddenly had to break off.

Brendan Hall 0:06

And would you say the same for coverage of Ebola as well?

Jonathan Serrie 0:18

I think so too. I think they did a great job. And I apologize, I have a hard out. I have a one o'clock live shot, but if you have more questions, I'd be happy to dial in right after that do you need me for a little more.

Brendan Hall 0:05

Uh Regan, what do you think? Did you have some questions that you wanted to ask?

Regan Mertz 0:06

I did have a couple more just regarding reporting on Ebola. So if you do have free time, that would be awesome.

Jonathan Serrie 0:04

Yeah, I'll call you right back as soon as I do my one o'clock.

Regan Mertz

Even in the midst of deadlines and anxiety over covering a story that might make him sick, Serrie wanted to make sure we had all the information we needed. My team and I greatly appreciate the time he and Don Champion took to explain how professional communicators work to get the facts out and tell the human stories at times when reliable information is critical.

Regan Mertz 0:20

In partnership with KBIA, I'm Regan Mertz with Katharine Finnerty, Hannah France and Brendan Hall. That's it for this edition of Global Journalist! Thank you for listening and for traveling around the world - at a safe social distance - with us. Have any stories for us? Send us an email at globaljournalist@missouri.edu.