

# In Defence of Panicking: Swine Flu and the Media

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Don't Panic!

It's like [Dad's Army](#) in MediaLand at the moment: The Germans (Mexican Viruses) Are Coming! Don't Panic! The news is full of Swine Flu while the analysis columns, blogs and Twitter are full of clever commentators saying how there's no real risk and that far more people die of malaria in Africa every day. Meanwhile, my beloved son is upstairs in bed with a terrible cold/sore throat which appears to conform to all the symptoms that are killing Mexicans. Don't tell me not to panic.

Of course, I am not actually panicking because we have at least two GPs as close friends. And I am well aware of how the media played its role in boosting MMR and Avian Flu, to take just two past examples of how journalists find it difficult to explain risk. So why 'in defence of panicking'?

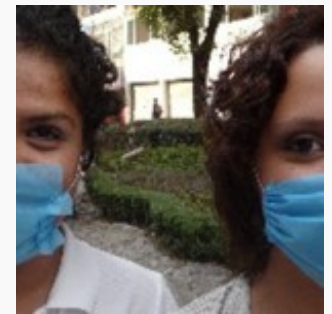
## Nice and calm

Firstly, I think it is the media's job to panic. Government would love to keep everything nice and calm. It doesn't want to be rushed into expensive precautionary measures. Surely, it is journalism's job to challenge the authorities to come clean about the dangers and to make them share their thinking and information with us.

There have been too many occasions in the past, such as with nuclear power and Thalidomide, where the powerful have not been honest with the public about the hazards we face. So we need hacks to presume a problem until convinced otherwise.

## Masking the truth?

I am not defending crazy coverage, but generally in the UK the media has been excellent. Partly thanks to the Internet there is a mass of information out there. The main media brands have produced endless carefully-worded and easily-understood guides to Swine Flu. Even in the States, which is a lot closer to Mexico, the [polling evidence](#) is that the population has not been panicked. Only one in eight Americans is at all dissatisfied with Obama's handling the issue.



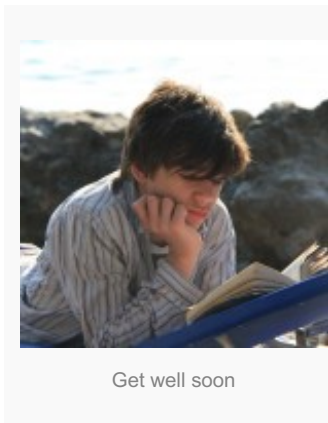
Masking the truth?

And then there is the awkward fact that it IS actually a risk. [Ben Goldacre](#) would be the first to jump on the media for misrepresenting this story but he acknowledges that it is a real problem and worthy of attention.

## Harbinger of doom

I think that some [people](#) forget what the news media is about. News is the process of telling you something novel, topical, out of the ordinary that matters. It can also do a lot of other stuff (which is really 'coverage', not news) but its primary role is to witness and report new stuff that you care about. The Swine Flu outbreak is just that. It might not end up killing more than a few hundred people. As we all find out more about its real nature it may turn out to be a piglet of a threat rather than a monstrous harbinger of doom. But if the latter was the case then think how cross you would have been if the news hadn't told you about it in large font headlines and live broadcasts from Mexican hospitals.

My former colleague, the wonderful Jon Snow at Channel 4 News always used to greet this kind of story with the same comment in the morning editorial meeting: 'More people die everyday in car accidents' Jon would mutter as he removed his cycling clips. Or he would point out how malaria kills thousands a day in places like Africa.



Jon's words were a useful corrective. But a philosophical approach like that misunderstands what headline topical news is all about. It is the *new* threat we want to hear about. And we all most interested in the new threat to *ourselves* or our family or community. All news is local. My son is upstairs in his bed, we are not in Africa.

I have spent my whole career trying to get people to think beyond those first principles of news. Good journalism is always about trying to do more than the basics. My think-tank Polis spends most of its efforts on reaching out internationally and encouraging the news media to do more than the obvious formula.

### **Canaries and coalmines**

But it is also the job of journalists to rush to where potential stories break. I would rather an over-eager media than a complacent press corps. Our job is to be the canary in the coal-mine, the first draft of history. We need to be much better at understanding and explaining risk, but it is hardly an exact science. While the experts argue, it is the journalists job to dig and to question.

I also think that news consumers are much better at sifting out sensation from fact these days. They certainly get a lot of help from online resources that can give them immediate facts and context along with the headlines. Ultimately, it is always a deficiency of information and a lack of journalistic inquiry that creates the real panics. In this case I think the media – taken as a whole – has done a pretty good job. Now, where's that face-mask?

[Here's](#) the Indie's respected Science editor agreeing with me.

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