

March 2020

**Planning and producing effective emergency programming: COVID-19**

As countries around the world take action in response to COVID-19, good reporting practices are important to dispel myths, stop misinformation, and address fake news. Good reporting practices are also important to ensure that people stay calm in a time of emergency and take appropriate action to respond.

Farm Radio International has produced a Broadcaster how-to guide on [planning and producing effective emergency response programming for farmers](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/105-farm-radio-resource-pack/plan-produce-effective-emergency-response-programming-farmers/).

Here are some tips from this Broadcaster how-to guide and how they might apply to the coronavirus situation:

1. **Understand the different stages of an emergency and the programming required at each stage.**
   1. *Pre-emergency stage:* This is the stage when the emergency is being predicted or identified. Reach out to organizations to monitor conditions and forecast the development of the emergency. Make connections with local health officials and ensure you will receive the latest alerts. Ensure that information reaches people far enough in advance that they can respond accordingly.
   2. *Emergency stage:* This is when your listeners are feeling the effects of the emergency. Your station should provide a special daily program for all listeners that provides information and allows listeners to discuss how the emergency is impacting them, and what they are doing about it.
   3. *Post-emergency stage:* This is when the most severe conditions have passed and people are thinking about the future. Regular bulletins are no longer needed, but you can still deal with issues surrounding the aftermath.
2. **Be in regular contact with the right people in organizations that can provide you with the information you need to broadcast.**

Stay in touch with local health officials so you can get the latest information. Learn the basics about prevention, transmission, and treatment of COVID-19 so you can share this with your audience. Feature trusted voices and resource people from reputable organizations. People only act on information and guidance if they trust it, and that is partly based on who the information comes from. Try to get these trusted figures on your radio program to share tips for staying healthy and taking action if you are sick. Read more great tips in this blog post from BBC Media Action: [Our top 10 tips for media in the COVID-19 ‘info-demic’](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmediaaction/entries/1f096f1c-88d1-4084-9806-ae5125b983fc)

1. **Keep listeners at the centre of your programs. Help your audience stay healthy.**  
   Make sure information is accurate, easy to understand, and focused on listeners’ needs. Many public health organizations have drafted radio spots or other important information that needs to be broadcast to as many people as possible. Play these often and in prime time. You can also share the [following tips from the World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public):
   * Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, rubbing for at least 20 seconds.
   * Avoid touching your face. Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up viruses. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose or mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.
   * Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow.
   * Avoid close contact with anyone with flu-like symptoms. This is called social distancing. Stay at least one metre away from anyone who is sick.
   * Avoid shaking hands when greeting someone. Some places have adopted nods or bows, toe-taps, or elbow bumps instead.
   * Symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) include fever, runny nose, sore throat, and cough. The illness can be more severe for some people and lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties.

Be creative in how you share this information. [A group in South Africa has made a song and dance](https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/national/we-will-beat-corona-south-african-ndlovu-youth-choir-create-catchy-coronavirusawareness-dance-video/video/668ee23e3c1d4a09ee9a76cdd1f1ba04?fbclid=IwAR0h7klENs2VuopDKEhSeIU9xbJf0XHFgVJy6gk4e61Sk396IYA47C3a2ec).

1. **Avoid sensationalism. Counter misinformation.**  
   As you do your research, make sure you are looking at reliable sources of information to avoid spreading myths. Fact-check new information to avoid sharing fake news. Consider how your reporting might be interpreted and whether it will feed into panic, stigma, or discrimination—for instance. by appearing to link a particular group with the spread of a health problem.

Some facts to counter myths:

* Coronavirus is affecting both hot and cold regions.
* The new coronavirus cannot be transmitted through mosquito bites.
* Spraying alcohol or chlorine all over your body will not keep you healthy because this does not kill viruses that have entered your body.
* There is no evidence that eating garlic or taking antibiotics will protect people from the virus.
* Masks are not 100% effective in preventing the transmission of the coronavirus. The best way to avoid getting sick is good hygiene and social distancing.

[Read more myths and facts from the World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters). [The Guardian newspaper](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/15/can-a-face-mask-stop-coronavirus-covid-19-facts-checked) has also fact-checked some myths. And [Africa Check](https://africacheck.org/reports/live-guide-all-our-coronavirus-fact-checks-in-one-place/) is a great place to keep up-to-date on myths and facts.

1. **Plan ahead, but be prepared to adjust your programming if more urgent needs arise.**

One emergency can lead to another as actions to control a health emergency affect other aspects of society. For example, in many countries, gatherings are restricted, which has resulted in the cancellation of many events, including Parliament. Keep track of shifts and trends as the emergency evolves. During emergencies, the public needs radio broadcasters and journalists more than ever to keep them informed and to hold officials to account. Continue to practice good reporting skills. Ask important questions. Keep an eye on the big picture and zoom in on how different communities are affected. Look out for positive stories too.

1. **Plan for your station’s operational survival during a crisis. Also plan for your own health and safety.**   
     
   It’s important that you stay safe and avoid getting sick. Practice social distancing. Don’t shake hands. You may want to avoid visiting hospitals and health centres, even to do your reporting. And you may want to conduct your interviews by phone. It’s also important to remember that during emergencies, journalists can feel very stressed. Here are some tips for taking care of your mental health that can apply to any stressful situation—from conflicts to pandemics to natural disasters: <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-journalists-can-fight-stress-from-covering-the-coronavirus/>
2. **Use formats that are appropriate for the information you want to convey.**

Interviews, phone-ins, radio spots, dramas, song—all of these formats can be useful for conveying important information. But some are more appropriate depending on the stage of the emergency and the type of information being conveyed. Download the Broadcaster how-to guide to learn more.