

Renee Rodriguez, Dr. Joseph Gabriel

FSU College of Medicine

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic required rapid public health communication in an uncertain, and ever-changing environment as there was new information released daily, even hourly. Between December 2019 and July 2022, U.S. media served as the primary source of information and updates for citizens during widespread shutdowns. News articles influenced the way people understood policies and national health guidance. This study analyzes coverage from major news outlets such as ABC News, The Washington Post, and NBC News to examine how government messaging was communicated and how people reacted during different periods of the pandemic. Using literature review and qualitative content analysis, articles were selected and evaluated for tone, content, and public compliance or resistance. There is a clear emphasis on lockdown measures, mask and vaccine mandates, and quarantine protocols. Findings remain inconclusive regarding whether media promoted compliance or resistance. Thus far it has been noted that framing across news outlets has emphasized themes of public safety, individual liberty, and institutional trust. By examining the interaction between government communication, media framing, and public reaction, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the media's role in shaping public health outcomes and informing future crisis communication strategies.

Methods

- A literature review was conducted using major news outlets between December 2019 to July 2022.
- Outlets included but were not limited to ABC News, Axios, Reuters, Military Times, New York Times, NBC News, and The Washington Post.
- Each week's major trending articles were analyzed to capture the public messages.
- Articles used were based on their relevance to the COVID-19 policy, accessibility, and brevity, emphasizing those read beyond the headline.
- Each article was surveyed for tone (supportive, neutral, or critical to the government's policy/response), thematic emphasis (public safety, individual freedom, and government trust), and public compliance or resistance.
- All articles were organized chronologically to construct the timeline and analyze framing shifts.

Timeline

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people, Mar 1, 2020 to Feb 8, 2026

7-day rolling average. Due to varying protocols and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death, the number of confirmed deaths may not accurately represent the true number of deaths caused by COVID-19.



Data source: World Health Organization (2026); Population based on various sources (2024) CC BY

Phase 1: Origin and uncertainty December 2019 - February 2020

- Pneumonia cases reported in Wuhan, China.
- Scientists identify the virus.
- First confirmed case in the US.
- WHO declares Public Health Emergency of International concern.
- Travel restrictions from China.
- Monitoring guidelines in place.

Phase 3: Reopening and Division May 2020 - October 2020

- Some states begin reopening businesses.
- Nationwide mask mandates and resistance.
- National debate over school reopening.
- Operation Warp Speed.
- Efforts to balance economic reopening and health precautions.
- Public health becomes politicized.

Phase 5: Variants and Backlash June 2021 - February 2022

- Delta and Omicron variants surge.
- Vaccine mandates for workers.
- Protests against mandates.
- Booster campaigns expand.
- Pandemic fatigue.

Phase 2: Lockdown and Panic March 2020 - April 2020

- WHO declares global pandemic.
- US declares national emergency.
- Stay-at-home orders in place.
- Mask mandate in some states.
- Supply shortages.
- Protests against lockdown.
- Economic relief efforts.

Phase 4: Vaccines and Skepticism November 2020 - May 2021

- Pfizer and Moderna vaccines receive emergency authorization.
- Vaccination campaigns begin.
- Vaccines become available for adults.

Phase 6: Management and Normalcy March 2022 - July 2022

- States lift mask mandates and pandemic restrictions.
- Schools, work, and other events return in-person.
- Resume normal activities.
- Manage COVID as an endemic issue.

Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic required rapid and evolving public health communication.
- U.S. media outlets became the primary source through which the public received updates on policies such as lockdowns, masking, vaccination, and quarantine.
- Research shows that media framing influences public perception of risk, institutional trust, and behavioral compliance during health crises.
- Tone, language, and political context in reporting can shape attitudes toward government mandates and individual responsibility.

Conclusion

- As more information and instruction was revealed, the tone shifted from urgency and unity to skepticism and polarization.
- Due to changes in the scientific understanding of the disease created instability in messaging.
- The government's inconsistent statements brought distrust and confusion.
- This timeline represents an initial analytical framework, not a complete interpretation.
- More research is needed to understand the longterm effects on the behaviors and faith in the US public health system.
- More research is also necessary to analyze the regional differences in the resistance and compliance of citizens to policy changes.

References

