

The Role Of  
**JOURNALISM**  
IN GLOBAL HEALTH  
DIPLOMACY



Priti Patnaik

# The role of journalism in global health diplomacy

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Do journalists have a role to play in global health diplomacy?

I was a part of a recent discussion in Geneva on a panel that delved into global health diplomacy with insights from diplomats and practitioners. This set me thinking on examining the responsibilities and the function of the media in global health diplomacy.

As journalists we are expected to illuminate the less-understood mechanics of power. This also holds true in the context of greater scrutiny of global health policy-making, given the closed and cloistered settings of the global health ecosystem in Geneva.

The pandemic of COVID-19 has cast a somewhat harsh light on Geneva and the processes associated with global health actors including but not limited to, the World Health Organisation, the World Trade Organization, Gavi – The Vaccine Alliance and The Global Fund, among many others. I believe this attention to global health policy-making - in many ways long-due - is now here to stay.

The ubiquitous health crisis that COVID-19 was, became an inflection point for global health diplomacy forging collective action at political levels across countries to pay more attention to health priorities within governments. Accordingly, journalism has become a catalyst in contributing to some of these processes. World over, journalists have asked questions of their governments around the lack of preparedness and the perceived failure of state response to COVID-19 in many countries. They have consistently pushed for accountability from various actors at national, regional and international levels, and often at grave personal costs.

More than ever before, technology coupled with greater awareness and agency, have empowered the media to play a more pronounced role in the shaping of global health policy-making by raising questions around the technical and opaque discussions in these multi-layered processes.

## **WHY DIPLOMACY NEEDS JOURNALISM?**

Given the uneven capacities of delegations at the permanent missions of countries here in Geneva, there has been a need for greater information and analyses on policy-making that takes place here.

I founded [Geneva Health Files](#), in early 2020, just as WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. I had long felt the need for consistent reporting and comprehensive analysis of global health discussions in Geneva. I was compelled to act. I did so, by self-publishing at a time when it appeared as if global health was being recast every other week.

Based on my limited experience of founding and running this entrepreneurial initiative for more than three years now, I believe that journalism has a crucial role to play in shining light on the field of global health, its actors, and the state of play on how global health policies are crafted at an international level. Journalism can and should have an impact on diplomacy in Geneva and beyond.

We have tracked how the international community responded to the pandemic of COVID-19. We have consistently kept an ear to the ground, by talking to a range of diplomatic sources across the spectrum to get a sense of the deliberations as they unfold. In the process, we have provided a service to not only diplomats and negotiators in Geneva, but thousands of readers globally, who are keenly watching how global health policy is being shaped here.

*Global health journalism largely speaks the language of science. We sought to change that by also reflecting the power and politics underlying these seemingly technical choices in global health that are often presented as apolitical. In our reporting, it has been our efforts to also pay attention to the politics in policy-making.*

At Geneva Health Files, we look at the field of global health from the lens of politics, law, governance and diplomacy, without limiting ourselves to the fundamental scientific basis of this discipline. In fact, our unique selling proposition is using an inter-disciplinary approach to reporting on global health and providing actionable information to our readers. We try to capture the vast space that global health as a field occupies, for it touches several aspects at once.

For three years, we have [tracked negotiations at the WTO](#) and now at the WHO in the wake of the policy response to the pandemic of COVID-19 from these organizations. By merely bringing to the forefront some of these closed-door discussions, we have raised and highlighted critical questions. Our reportage has not only aided smaller delegations, civil society actors, scholars in the field, but also large delegations of developed countries, some of whom are our regular readers. Since we connect the dots across policy spheres, our reporting has been useful to diplomats.

There is value in our journalism that seeks to furnish actionable information that directly feeds into the work of the diplomatic community engaged in global health in Geneva and beyond. This is demonstrated by the engagement of our readership that comprises a community of global health professionals. We at *Geneva Health Files* are proud to have created this platform. Experts routinely write for us in order to reach thousands of our readers across more than 130 countries.

The larger goal has always been to contribute to greater accountability and transparency in global health policy-making in Geneva, often perceived as being far removed from national and local realities at the country level.



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## PRACTICING JOURNALISM IN A POLITICAL PROCESS

I have also been asked if we exercise power by elevating certain voices over the rest.

There are two considerations in how we source and cite.

One is respecting expertise in the sources we cite. Remember that journalism as a practice entails discretion and responsibility. In a climate where experts have been shunned in populist democracies, this is vital. I am firmly of the view that we exercise discretion and deploy our own agency in bringing facts and analyses on under-reported issues.

The other is, paying attention to the diversity in the narrative and who is being cited. We are acutely aware, of what some scholars refer to as “epistemic injustice”, where certain voices routinely get ignored or are underrepresented leading to exclusion and misrepresentation of meanings. We seek to address this in our journalism.

We continuously exercise judgement in our reporting. For example, while reporting on the various stages of on-going negotiations in global health, we also keep in mind our responsibility as journalists. While the goal is to provide information, we do so without harming the larger objective of what countries are trying to do behind-the-scenes during the political process that global health policy-making is. This is often a complex choice that involves some thinking and taking a step back, without betraying our readers’ right to know.

*To be sure, as a self-publisher, we are also aware of the risks of being at the receiving end. Our access has been threatened in the past. And we are mindful of the battles we pick even as we have to provide a service that feeds directly into the work of our readers.*

Our gaze as an outsider, providing synthesis of what we observe has been useful to our readers. We are constantly challenging mainstream narratives, so while that makes us unpopular in certain quarters perhaps, a vast variety of readers continue to read us as illustrated by our high retention rates.

Given the sensitive nature of global health diplomacy, at *Geneva Health Files*, we also follow the practice of not naming diplomatic sources – something that is *de jure* even among the big news outlets. Anonymity is central to diplomats, for it enables them to share their views and insights without fear of losing their identity.

This also, to an extent explains, why sources speak with us. Trust is the only currency that small newsrooms such as ours have. After nearly 400 long-form analyses on global health over the last three years, institutions and diplomats do see us that we are here for the long haul. The sheer breadth of our readership shows that we are trusted across the board given our attention to detail and the depth in our coverage.

To be sure, journalists are also often seen merely as tools to disseminate information. We are aware of how certain issues or narratives can be used to hook reporters. But all good journalism is conscious of this, while balancing with the role that media outlets are expected to play.

Having an open mind is crucial for objectivity, but it is more than that. Our own analysis of facts, independent investigations, and examining the narrative behind the facts, collectively inform our editorial decisions. The golden rule of robust journalistic practice is to confirm facts with multiple checks and verifications and to diversify sourcing. We also employ a fair degree of self-reflexivity while practising our craft.

## **SOOTHE NOT FLARE**

Finally, I do believe that more journalists should look at connecting foreign policy matters to health. There is a need to look at health more broadly, beyond the narrow confines of how journalists traditionally covered these issues, such as looking at this field along vertical diseases, or technical interventions, for example. As a former financial journalist, I am struck by how closely integrated economics and health is, and yet there is inadequate media attention on looking at these issues as a whole.

Given the polarized narratives and fragmented geopolitical fissures often felt in Geneva, journalism must bring facts to light. Information is sunlight.

While misinformation and fake news have jeopardised scientific temper and imperiled democratic efforts, it goes without saying that journalism needs to contribute to diplomatic efforts and not flare existing tensions.

## **THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE MEDIA**

Media's ability to engage is fully dependent on whether journalists can actually afford to play a role in the first place. While advertising dollars have dried up and choked the media industry in recent years, new business models are taking shape, some of them being supported by readers themselves.

In the case of *Geneva Health Files*, we are an independent journalistic initiative that keep us objective and enables us to raise questions. However, this independence also dictates the way we are funded. The fundamental reader-funded nature of this initiative by way of subscriptions, is vital and central. We are cautious about ethical considerations, and the kind of grant funding we can receive given the political nature of global health itself. Our hope is that more of our readers become paying subscribers to fund this public service journalism.

Everyone has a stake in understanding global health diplomacy and journalism is one of the means to that end.