

On Omicron, uncertainty, vaccine equity, and the media | Columbia Journalism Review

By Jon Allsop

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Late last week, the world started to hear about a new coronavirus variant that had already started to worry scientists: B.1.1.529, which was first detected in southern Africa earlier this month. On Friday, the World Health Organization noted the variant's very high number of mutations, declared it to be "of concern," and christened it "Omicron," in line with the Greek-alphabet naming convention for variants that the WHO adopted earlier this year (yes, they skipped Nu and Xi); meanwhile, various countries imposed travel restrictions on southern Africa, even though we don't yet know for sure where the variant originated. Indeed, there's very little that we do know for sure about Omicron at this point: it may be much more transmissible even than the Delta variant, but then again it may not; it may cause milder illness than other variants, but then again it may not; it may render our existing vaccines less effective, but we don't know by how much. Kai Kupferschmidt, of *Science* magazine, likened the picture to a jigsaw puzzle whose every new piece changes the puzzler's perspective. ("It's a picture of the sky. No, wait the sea. Oh, a ship.")

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