

The most prominent voices of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed

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Epidemiologists and immunologists enjoyed record media attention during the coronavirus pandemic but their profile still paled in comparison to that of politicians and public health officials.

A joint project from the Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC) and Stream media monitoring examined the highest profile academics and institutions among COVID-19 coverage in the nation's leading newspapers and news websites.

The goal was to see whether those with the most applicable fields of expertise had been those who had received the most media attention. Those results were then compared to other leaders in politics, business and the public service.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison was the standout leader in the study, with 11,294 media items, ahead of chief medical officer Brendan Murphy (2706) and an array of state premiers, federal cabinet ministers and health officials.

Reserve Bank governor Philip Lowe was the only person in the top 20 to not be a politician or public health expert.

The University of Sydney was the most prominent academic institution mentioned in coronavirus coverage, while the University of Queensland—which is working on a high-profile vaccine—pipped the Australian National University into second place.

But it was a University of New South Wales academic—global biosecurity expert Professor Raina Macintyre—who was the most prominent expert in articles involving COVID-19.

Other prominent academics included Professor Peter Collignon, Professor Peter Doherty and Associate Professor Ian Mackay.

As the leading academic, Professor Macintyre's 252 distinct media items put her ahead of ABC journalist Dr. Norman Swan (207) but behind ACTU secretary Sally McManus (308) and AMA president Dr. Tony

Bartone (288).

Lyndal Byford, director of news and partnerships at the AusSMC, said it was reassuring to see that people qualified in immunology, virology and epidemiology had generally been the most prominent academic voices during the pandemic.

"In times of crisis, it is essential that the media can access the nation's best scientific and [medical experts](#) so that they can share clear and accurate information with the public about what we know, but also about what we don't know," Ms Byford said.

The Peter Doherty Institute—named after the Nobel Prize winning immunologist—was the most high-profile institute, ahead of the CSIRO.

Conal Hanna, media and partnerships lead at Stroom, said he expected the results to be of high interest to university and institute communication teams who had been working overtime to connect journalists with academics.

"I think it's fair to say there has been an unprecedented hunger from the public for scientific information, and at a more detailed level than they would normally seek out.

"Being able to explain complex concepts in accessible ways has been vital to keeping the community safe."

The only non-medical expert to feature in the 10 most quoted academics in coronavirus stories was Professor Gary Mortimer from the Queensland University of Technology, who specializes in retail marketing, perhaps not surprising given how panic buying dominated media coverage in the early part of the pandemic.

Ms Byford said while there had been considerable coverage of the economic ramifications of coronavirus, that didn't necessarily cause as large a spike in demand among academics.

"Journalists often turn to academics to understand medical or science aspects of the pandemic but might reach more broadly to politicians, industry, lobby groups and think tanks in business, social or economic reporting."

The study looked at coronavirus-related [media](#) items in major metropolitan newspapers and the nation's biggest news websites from the initial outbreak in China until the end of May. It counted distinct stories, with syndicated versions ignored.

Provided by Strem, Australian Science Media Centre

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