

Module 1 Interview - Sonia Shah

Hi. Welcome to the first round of video segments in module one, of the course, Journalism in a pandemic: Covering COVID-19 now and in the future. I'm here with science journalist, TED Speaker and author Sonia Shah.

Among her books are *The Fever Pandemic* and her newest book, *The Next Great Migration*, which comes out in June. Sonia, thanks for joining us. Thanks for having me. So you're one of the very few journalists to publish a book length examination of the possibility of pandemics. And I'm really curious what it feels like, having tried to send that warning to have one unfolding around you now.

I suppose it shouldn't be, feel so eerie and surprising and yet it does. I think just like it does for everyone else. It's a surreal experience, but at the same time, things happen that echo the history so much for me. So I'm constantly kind of like remembering other outbreaks. So I don't feel surprise so much, but it is still very surreal and eerie.

And so as you look at the events of the past four months, we're just outside of China. Just past. We will be just past the four month mark. What do you think confirms the past reporting that you did? And has there been anything that surprised you?

I mean, many things are familiar. So the way that the disease has spread, of course, is very familiar. It's threat traveling through trade and travel patterns in ways that we've underestimated for a long time. And, you know, people, you know, policymakers kind of closing the borders right after everyone kind of spreads through. And that's that's really kind of emblematic of how a lot of the epidemic spread.

The blame that we're casting, pointing fingers at each other, whether it's, you know, it's the Chinese or it's bad scientists or it's, you know, this conspiracy or that conspiracy or these immigrants or these people on the move.

You know, that's all very familiar. The kind of search for the biomedical cure that will save us from all of it. That also is very familiar. But what really surprised me about the way this pandemic is unfolding is the huge political failure in the United States. I think that really was not expected. You know, I think we've all been kind of confused about the US response and, you know, the the political moment we're in where we have all of these right wing populist leaders around the world and how that's kind of complicating the responses to the pandemic. That has actually been pretty surprising and unexpected.

As I look back, I realize that I myself have been writing about the possibility of a pandemic for a good portion of my career. And in all the different sort of models and possibilities that I gamed out for myself, the fact that the U.S. government would be essentially absent, and certainly the CDC would be absent or not visible, those were never among the possibilities that I consider.

It's absolutely amazing, amazing, amazing how quickly those institutions in those, you know, governance structures have just completely crumbled and become morphed into this whole other thing, like, you know, propagandizing or, you know, just using, using policy as a political weapon. That happened very quickly.

So I remember that in your book *Pandemic*, you wrote about how political leaders make choices about quarantines, that they decide between predictable costs and unpredictable benefits, which is a lovely phrase.

So I'm wondering through that lens, how do you view the very different choices that have been made to respond to this around the world about lockdown, social distancing? To what degree movement should be free? We've just been talking about the U.S. response, but from China to Italy to Sweden to South America, there's an enormous menu of different ways that governments have responded.

I mean, I think what happened is, you know, I don't have any I don't have a clear sense of it yet. I think we're just so sort of in the moment right now and still trying to understand what's driving a lot of the policy responses.

But I feel what happened is without the US kind of giving an alternate way of dealing with this pandemic that the Chinese model really kind of took, took sort of center stage. And so we saw I think a lot of countries are kind of responding in reaction to the Chinese models, like do we do the lockdown or do we not, you know, rather than looking at, well, what is our demographic situation? What is the age structure of our population like? How many ICU beds do we really have? How many ventilators do we have, you know? Giving a kind of differentiated response, I think what we're seeing is a lot of political response. So, you know, countries sort of deciding, well, the political costs of inaction are really high because we all saw what happened in Italy and we all saw what happened in, you know, X, Y, Z, a place that looked really bad to our population. And so we need to do something.

And I think there's just a lot of just reaction, sort of reflexive reaction, actionism for, you know, action, reaction sake sort of thing, because, you know, the costs, of course, are of lockdown are huge, but they're also differentiated. So, you know, they're falling heaviest, on poor people, marginalized people, small businesses. You know, we see a lot of the big businesses are actually doing OK. Some of them are actually even growing. So I think all of those are playing a role. It's not as simple as, you know, economic costs upfront for a future public health benefit. There's all this politics going on as well.

So let's switch for a minute from the politics to the science. In your book, *Pandemic*, you also talked about the difficulty of reforming surveillance systems. The idea is that we try to detect pandemic pathogens emerging from the animal worlds, as this one did. And as the original pathogen of MERS did and SARS did and Ebola did. So do you have any thoughts about what the possibility might have been of detecting this virus as it spilled over into humans and what ought to be done to detect the next spillover, which we know is coming? We just don't know when.

I mean, we know that scientists, for example, with Eco Health Alliance were in, you know, parts of China, they were studying antibodies of coronavirus antibodies in local populations there. And they found about 3 percent or in some places in China have antibodies to different corona viruses that they were tracking. Now, would they have found this one if they were still doing that work, if it was if it's still been funded? I mean, it's impossible to say. But, you know, these things can happen by accident. But of course, they're driven by these larger social, political and economic forces. And those have been progressing sort of with except accelerated momentum over time. So, you know, you can't say for sure, of course, that we would we would have caught this one. Maybe we would have. Maybe we wouldn't have. But the fact is that we had a program out there and that was looking for these spillover pathogens and especially from bats to people, you know, that was work that was going on. And the funding was pulled and it sort of fell apart. So, you know, we can we can only speculate what might have been if if they had continued doing that work and if we had to actually strengthen that research capacity.

Right. So we were talking before we officially started taping about how many people are taking this course on the day in which we're speaking. It's about 5000 people.

And they're coming literally from all over the world, understanding that that's an awfully wide spectrum.

Do you have any thoughts for the journalists who are taking this course about what angles or what stories they ought to be pursuing within their local context to throw the most light on the circumstances of this pandemic?

I mean, I think in general, we need to look for the the the stories that are, you know, being sort of suppressed, right. So the people who are suffering the brunt, who are not in the limelight anymore. So we need to look at people in detention, refugees, asylum seekers, homeless populations, you know, all these marginalized populations that are really hard to reach in normal times. And it's even harder now. But the other main thing I think is we need to kind of broaden the

expertise that we're drawing on for a lot of stories, you know? I think it's really easy to go to lots of virus. So find a virologist or it's it's an epidemic. Go to the epidemiologists. It's and economic crises, go to the economist. But we also can draw on medical anthropologists and global health lawyers and bioethicists. And, you know, there's just like a large range of other people who have expertise in this area. And also just a really important contribution to how you think strategically about what's going on. So I think we need to kind of expand out, because right now, we're in this moment where a lot of journalists are suddenly reporting on epidemics when they hadn't done that before. So I think we need to drop, you know, just to kind of expand the kind of sources that we look to to actually shed light on what's going on.

I think it's great advice, especially because we don't want to be quoting the same people that everyone else is quoting. Right. One of my first, actually, one of my favorite stories that I've done in the past month was talking to a couple of medical historians about lessons from the past couple of pandemics and and particularly to about vaccination campaigns and how that might inform what we do if we get a vaccine here. So last question, one author to another, I would love to hear a bit about your next book, and especially if you can relate your next book to what's going on right now.

Well, yeah, so I wrote *The Fever*, which is about malaria that came out in 2010, and then I wrote *Pandemic*, which is about emerging infectious diseases that came out in 2016. And one thing that came out of that work is just this, it became it was very striking to me how much pathogens have shaped human history. You know, we've accommodated pathogens over time in so many different ways, whether it's through genetic mutations that we carry around with us that make us, you know, at risk of modern diseases today or changing our settlement patterns or, you know, the list kind of goes on and on about how pathogens are really shaped, our society and our behaviors. But one thing that's really striking is that part of the human behavior that pathogens exploit the most is our mobility. And yet over time, what we've seen is we haven't altered our mobility. If anything, we've we've moved more and faster and farther. And so I wanted to kind of look at like, well, why does that, why does that happen? Like, what is the role of human mobility in nature, in history? You know, considering the great cost, it occurs to us, not just in modern times, not just with this pandemic or the last pandemic, but just like over our entire history. And so what I wanted to look at is how climate change is altering migration patterns, not just for people, but also for wild species. And what role mobility plays in our biological resilience.

I really look forward to reading that. So that's the book.

The Next Great Migration, which comes out in June. And Sonia is also the author, among other works of *Pandemic*, which we've been talking about, and *The Fever*. Thank you so much for being part of this course. We really appreciate it.

Thank you.