

News stories and headline articles attempt to be as objective as possible, simply reporting the facts given and known and avoiding perspectives or opinions. The readers and the audience are given the opportunity to unravel, comprehend, and act according to their own interpretation of what they read, hear, and see. And because of that freedom, the reactions of the public and the readership typically vary from one extreme to another.

By now, most people have been informed of severe acute respiratory syndrome, better known as SARS. If they don't know the name of the disease, they at least have heard of the illness that has infected much of Asia and has recently spread westward. Some have taken the WHO's and CDC's advice to heart, traveling with caution and being sure to practice general cleanliness. Others, however, have responded with hysteria and panic, unsure of exactly where the line between fact and fiction is drawn. Such hysteria has led to a rather severe economic downturn for many Chinatowns in the United States. False rumors are feeding the frenzy, and the usual visitors have found other places to eat and shop. The things that *are* being bought are cases and boxes of face masks, herbal remedies, vitamins, and other protective supplies. Much of the food, whether in the grocery stores, marketplaces, or restaurants, has been left unserved, leading to a 70% drop in business in some places. These rumors about SARS floating around Chinatowns in San Francisco, Boston, and New York are entirely false; in attempts to dispel and correct the "Internet hoax [that] erroneously claimed cases of SARS in Chinatowns," a

flurry of leaflets are being passed out and news conferences are being held, all attempting to dispel such incorrect information.

With words and phrases such as “highly contagious,” “incurable,” and “worldwide health threat,” residents and citizens around the world have started paying close attention to the slightest symptoms of colds or flus in anticipation that they may have somehow contracted SARS. In reality, though the sickness is indeed serious and contagious, the public has twisted simple warnings and informational facts into alarming panics. In reference to the American Airlines incident in which Tokyo passengers arriving in San Jose were thought to have been infected with SARS, a recent political cartoon showed an airplane in midair with one of its passengers emitting a soft *cough*. The next image displayed half of the passengers and crew falling and jumping out of the plane, frightened to death of a possible case of SARS. Meanwhile, the passenger who had originally coughed has exclaimed, “It’s only spring allergies, I swear!” Our perception of risk can and has easily become skewed.