

Ed Yong on the pandemic's future

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The coronavirus is once again grabbing headlines. But sometimes, especially on summer Fridays, I like to take a break from the barrage of heavy virus news.

As part of an occasional interview series that will run in this newsletter, I'll be speaking with some of the most prominent people of the pandemic, asking them to reflect on the last 18 months and look at what's ahead.

First up, I talked with Ed Yong, a science journalist at The Atlantic, who recently won a Pulitzer Prize in explanatory reporting for his work on the pandemic. (His responses have been condensed and lightly edited.)

Before the coronavirus, you wrote about possible pandemics. How accurate were you about what would unfold?

I think the basic theses that we were unprepared, and a pandemic during a Donald Trump presidency would be catastrophic, were correct. The reality, sadly, bears out the predictions. I also talked about how our health care system is overstretched — how we rely on fragile supply chains. And I talked about the overconfidence that some countries have when they haven't seen a large pandemic for a while.

But there were also things that I didn't talk about, and these issues have been crucial over the last year. Things like the role of misinformation and the staggering inequalities that Covid has clearly exposed.

As a science reporter, I think I saw pandemic preparedness as a science and health story. But what I learned last year is that it is obviously so much more than that. Covid is an omni-crisis. It touches on every aspect of society, and it exposes societal failings and vulnerabilities everywhere.

Overall, how well has the media covered the pandemic?

It's really hard to say because we all know that the media isn't a monolith. So I think you saw great heroic efforts, and you saw work that made things worse — that's just our industry.

A lot of what I've written about the pandemic has argued that our failures are almost always as systemic as they are individual. So what Covid is great at doing is revealing flaws in entire institutions and entire systems — and the same is true for the media and for journalism. The Atlantic did good work, and I could do the best work that I was capable of because I had a newsroom and editors who gave me time and a mandate to do the big stories that would help really make sense of this crisis for our readers. And that's a very privileged position in journalism. So criticism doesn't just fall on individual journalists. It falls on the kind of ecosystem that we have all created and have allowed to flourish.

What do you think the pandemic will look like over the next year?

My sense is that we're in for a period of time that is going to be confusing and uncertain in slightly different ways than last year was. In May of last year, I wrote a piece about America's patchwork pandemic — about how the spread of Covid is so patchy around the country that people in one state have radically different experiences with one another. And I think that dynamic is only going to be accentuated over the next year.

So some people are vaccinated, some people are not. Some people live in heavily vaccinated communities, some people don't. Most people who have been vaccinated will be incredibly well protected, some people will not. There's just going to be an enormous amount of variation. A lot of people hoped that the advent of vaccines would be like a global off switch for the pandemic, and it's just going to be messier and more protracted than that.

What about the pandemic has you most worried?

The legacy of it. I remain very worried about the long-term impacts of the pandemic, and I worry that they will get forgotten. There are still who knows how many long haulers out there who are still suffering from the long-term effects of Covid, and there are nowhere near enough services for them.

Similarly, we don't have the mental health infrastructure to support people who will go through the psychological ramifications of the pandemic and the horrors of last year. Our health care system is going to be weaker because a lot of health care workers have quit, some of them have died, and others are burned out and traumatized. We'll have massively expanded inequalities in terms of gender, race, and ability.

Even in the miracle situation, when everyone, let's say, gets vaccinated tomorrow around the world, and it actually disappears — everything we've experienced has already been bad enough. And it's going to leave scars that we'll have to deal with for decades. And it worries me that we will forget to do any of that work because people want so badly to not think about pandemic anymore.