Reporting on – and during – the COVID-19 Pandemic

Objective
This module provides instructors and students with information and strategies for staying safe – mentally and physically – during this crisis. Journalists reporting during the pandemic must make sure they take precautions to protect themselves, their colleagues, and their sources. Knowledge of the coronavirus continues to evolve so staying informed with current resources is of paramount importance.

Covering health-related crises presents risks for journalists. Journalists should remain informed on updated information about the coronavirus while also drawing upon past health crises to develop their action plans. Journalists must take steps to mitigate risk as nothing is more important than staying physically and mentally healthy. There are additional concerns regarding the effect the pandemic is having on journalism, including many journalists working from home and newsrooms virtually empty. Journalists also find themselves spending more time secluded indoors filing stories, raising concerns about digital safety. This module offers resources for journalists adjusting to this ‘new’ normal.

Readings/Resources
“CPJ Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus outbreak” from Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (Updated: April 6, 2020 – this page is regularly updated)

CPJ offers this very thorough and easy to digest resource with information and advice for journalists for every step when covering stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a versatile resource for introducing journalists to various aspects of reporting during this – or any – health-related crisis. The resource includes information on the following: (1) Pre-Assignment Planning; (2) Psychological Well-Being; (3) Avoiding Infection & Infecting Others; (4) Digital Security; (5) Crime & Physical Security on Assignment; (6) International Travel Assignments; and (7) Post-Assignment. Depending on the daily lesson in class, this resource could be used in a single class period or spread about to complement the material covered over several class meetings. CPJ also provides a link for their helpful “Safety Kit for Journalists”: https://cpj.org/safety-kit/

Discussion Questions
1. When preparing to cover stories during this pandemic, what are steps that journalists can take to mitigate risk, including protecting their mental well-being?
   - During the crisis, assignments can change or be cancelled at a moment’s notice. Journalists must prepare themselves for that. When possible, phone or online interviews should be conducted. Due to the transmission of the virus, older or health-compromised journalists must seriously weigh the risk of their exposure, and journalists of certain nationalities must consider the risks of being targeted. Plans should be in place if a journalist falls ill, whether working near or far from home. To ease concerns, be prepared to discuss with family and friends about why this work is important despite the risks.
2. What precautions can journalists take to avoid infection and infecting others?
   • First and foremost, journalists should be well-aware of the hygiene measures that have been put in place in the location they are reporting from. Journalists should review and understand the following: (1) standard recommendations to avoid infection, (2) how to avoid transmitting the virus with their equipment, and (3) how to properly use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including face masks.

3. Why should journalists be particularly aware of digital security during this pandemic?
   • The threat to digital security has increased. Journalists covering the pandemic may encounter more online hostility, governments may be using increased surveillance to track the spread of the virus, and criminal hackers may be targeting journalists with sophisticated phishing attacks. Journalists should exercise caution when opening links with information on COVID-19 and when using social media.

4. Is there increased risk of crime and concern for physical security when reporting during the pandemic?
   • There is an increased risk of social unrest with more people out of work and struggling to provide. Many urban areas are deserted, and police resources are often stretched thin. In rural areas, there may be a fear of ‘outsiders’ that may increase risk. Journalists should make a concerted, intentional effort to know the areas they are reporting from. This is especially true for journalists on international travel assignments.

5. What post-assignment precautions should journalists be prepared to take?
   • Journalists should continue to monitor their own health while being prepared to self-quarantine after reporting from the field. CPJ recommends journalists keep a journal of all people they come into contact with for 14 days after working on assignment. If symptoms develop, inform the management/newsroom team and find safe passage to a hospital or medical clinic. Be sure to follow WHO or CDC guidelines.

“Media ethics, safety and mental health: reporting in the time of Covid-19” by Hannah Storm, Director, Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) (March 19, 2020)

This resource will help students gain a better understanding of the changes happening in journalism. EJN Director, Hannah Storm, explains how the pandemic is causing newsrooms and journalists to change decades of work habits in order to effectively cover COVID-19. Storm notes that “nothing compares with the events of recent weeks in terms of the global impact on media around the world of Covid-19 and the unprecedented scale of the story, and the demands it is making on our journalism and on us as journalists.” Storm offers advice based on her experiences, expertise, and interactions when explaining the importance of responsible and ethical reporting of the pandemic, strategies for how journalists can stay safe, and tips for managing mental health.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it increasingly important that journalists practice the core principles of journalism, including truth and accuracy, fairness and impartiality, humanity, accountability, and independence?
   While students may consider this a common sense exercise, instructors are encouraged to lead a class discussion on Storm’s suggestions and consider why these suggestions are
increasingly important due to the havoc being wreaked by the pandemic. Storm emphasizes the following:

- Avoid sensationalism and scaremongering
- Avoid racial profiling; Protect affected people
- Be accurate and report facts; Seek expert opinions
- Provide context; point people to credible information sources and resources
- Be careful when using maps showing case distribution
- Be cautious of using images of people in masks
- First Draft News also compiled the following helpful list, including tips on debunking misinformation: [https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/coronavirus-responsible-reporting-and-ethics/](https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/coronavirus-responsible-reporting-and-ethics/)

2. **What steps can journalists take to protect themselves while working during the pandemic?**

These are rapidly changing times. Journalists must monitor their physical health and, should they experience any symptoms, inform their newsroom manager and follow health and medical policies of the area where they are working. It is imperative that journalists perform risk assessments and make sure they have all the necessary safety equipment needed – don’t rely on already affected communities to provide these things. Journalists should make sure they have contingency plans in place should they become ill or if they are unable to leave the area in which they are working.

3. **How can journalists manage their mental health when covering the pandemic?**

Storm, based on her discussion about mental health with Professor Anthony Feinstein, explains that during this stressful time, it is important for journalists to acknowledge that they fill an important role when covering the pandemic. Reporters are essential and that means that reporters must make sure that they remain healthy. Storm suggests all journalists complete the following exercise: make a list of the things you can and cannot control. This should lead to a robust classroom discussion. Storm suggests journalists can exert control by doing the following:

- Get enough sleep; Eat properly; Avoid excessive alcohol and caffeine
- Take breaks from work, digitally and physically; Switch off news & social media
- It’s normal to feel affected by difficult images or stories
- Go for a walk, if able; If you can’t get outside, consider something else to give yourself a break; Try meditation or mindfulness; Watch a comedy or read a book
- Spend time with family and friends, even remotely; Isolation is difficult
- Take time off: if you feel unwell, mentally or physically, don’t be afraid to ask.
- Newsroom managers – lead by example. Be clear about policies and priorities; be as transparent as you can; be aware of those who may be more vulnerable

“U.S. video journalist shares tips for covering COVID-19: ‘We have to get creative’” from Committee to Protect Journalists (April 2, 2020)


This resource provides insights into tackling the new challenges created by the pandemic. Jon Gerberg, a veteran video journalist with experience reporting on conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, is currently reporting from New York City. Gerberg examines changes he has observed, precautions he takes, obstacles and concerns when covering current stories, apps for ensuring digital security, and how to deal with misinformation about the coronavirus. Discussing this resource will help journalists gain a greater understanding about how to incorporate safety into their reporting.
Discussion Questions

1. What impact has the pandemic had on covering regular beats?
   - This is a great opportunity to engage students in understanding how the pandemic will most likely inform all the reporting they do, regardless of their beat. Gerberg notes that he has had to reconsider most long-term projects and believes that this pandemic will be the primary story for a long time to come. From that perspective, this is a good time to impress upon young journalists the importance of adapting on the fly. Gerberg also points out how much he relies on Slack and video conferences to engage editors and colleagues.

2. What safety measures can – and should – journalists take when preparing to report during the pandemic?
   - Journalists must take risk assessments seriously (see page 56). Journalists must honestly assess whether the risks of covering the story are worth the potential rewards. If the answer is yes, then take these practical steps: choose the right equipment, wear proper PPE gear, maintain social distancing, wipe down all gear, etc. After completing daily assignments, remove clothing and put it directly in the laundry – this is not extreme; this is protecting yourself and others, and it is a journalists’ responsibility.

3. How can journalists protect their communications?
   - This is a chance to discuss the importance of digital security. Gerberg mentions the use of encrypted communication tools, like Signal, and making sure to use PGP encryption and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to provide digital security. Whether experts on digital security or not, instructors and students should be willing and able to discuss this topic since so much reporting is conducted remotely.

4. What responsibility do journalists have when dealing with misinformation during the pandemic?
   - Journalists should always be concerned about getting the story right; however, Gerberg points out that the stakes are even higher right now. Gerberg writes, “Since most of us are not [his italics] epidemiologists or medical professionals, we have to be honest with ourselves and our audience about what we do and do not know.” Instructors and students should be prepared to discuss what they are comfortable reporting on and what they feel is beyond their grasp due to the medical and scientific nature of the virus. This type of assessment will prevent journalists from making unnecessary mistakes.

“How Journalists Can Deal with Trauma While Reporting on COVID-19” by Olga Simanovych, Gloval Investigative Journalism Network (GIIN) (March 24, 2020)
https://gijn.org/2020/03/24/how-journalists-can-deal-with-trauma-while-reporting-on-covid-19/
This resource examines the delicate balance journalists face in causing no additional harm to victims while also remaining focused on their own mental well-being. Dr. Cait McMahon, director of Dart Center Asia Pacific, reminds journalists of the following: “During a natural disaster or outbreak of violence, a journalist — like a psychotherapist — often takes on the role of a witness, who at times may experience a horror, rage and despair that is almost like that of the victim’s.” In the process, a journalist “risks psychological harm at three different stages of his or her work: firstly, as a witness or participant in the event; secondly, while communicating and showing compassion to the victims; and thirdly, by telling their stories — allowing their experiences to pass through the reporter to an audience.” Instructors can assign this resource to help prepare journalists for covering all three stages – before, during, and after – of an assignment to better understand why developing a strategy for their own mental health is so important.
Discussion Questions

1. What can journalists do to prepare for covering an assignment during this pandemic?
   - A risk assessment is a great starting point (see page 9). Instructors should stress the importance of having an action plan in place. From there, emphasis should be placed on making sure that journalists plan times when they can step back from the story, including putting away their work and their devices before retiring for the night. This can also be a good time to make sure that journalists identify their own limits – physically, mentally, and psychologically – when reporting during this pandemic. Dr. McMahon includes a checklist for evaluating psychological risk that we strongly encourage all journalists complete. Perhaps most importantly, Dr. McMahon suggests that journalists do the following: “Pursue attainable victories – both personal and professional.” Journalists must not be too hard on themselves. These are extraordinary times.

2. What do journalists need to know about their behavior, and the behavior of others during the pandemic?
   - This is a chance to discuss what is expected and what is possible when reporting during the pandemic. For instance, Dr. McMahon notes that eye contact can be extremely important when physical distance is required. On top of that, students need to prepare for the fact that the trauma involved with this pandemic will impact how they respond. Remember, it is normal to feel anxious and in distress. Students should know that it will be normal to need to take a step back, to leave a room, to catch their breath. And it will most likely be the same for their sources. These unprecedented times will result in unexpected behaviors.

3. What can journalists do to protect themselves after completing an assignment?
   - Instructors should stress that the completion of an assignment does not mean that the story has ended. Besides checking for symptoms of COVID-19, journalists should look for signs of anxiety, confusion, shame/guilt, and desperation, among others. Instructors can help their students by letting them know that these are normal human reactions. Covering stories can be traumatizing, and journalists must make time for themselves. Be sure to go over strategies that Dr. McMahon offers, e.g., don’t rush to transcribe, vary story angles, support each other, and take time to think over responses.

This brief article can be applied to nearly all journalists. Typically, a health crisis would be covered by journalist well-versed in science; however, due to the wide-reaching impact of this crisis, most journalists, regardless of their beat, are reporting on the pandemic. In this article, science journalist Aldana Vales provides tips so reporters can “familiarize[e] themselves with new concepts, sources and data.” Vales briefly explains key concepts, offers advice on incorporating testimonials, and examines ethical dilemmas that should lead to robust discussion about the role of journalists when covering stories during the pandemic. Note: Provided is a link for additional resources about covering the pandemic:

Discussion Questions

1. Why must journalists understand key concepts of COVID-19, regardless of their beat?
   - The pandemic is influencing the way all stories are covered – and read. Even though most journalists will not have scientific expertise, they must be increasingly aware and careful of the terminology used in their stories. This will prevent the spread of misinformation.
2. Why should journalists be aware of how they incorporate testimonials of those with first-hand experience of COVID-19?
   • The goal around the world is to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Journalists must be sure they do not weaken the public health interventions currently being implemented to slow the pandemic. For instance, certain stories may provide undue optimism for the public – journalists must do their due diligence to make sure that optimism is warranted. In the same vein, journalists should be careful not to create further panic. This highlights the importance of being an ethical journalist.


The pandemic is making remote work necessary. With so much work taking place outside the newsroom, there must be increased awareness about the importance of digital security. This resource examines systemic changes journalism faces while focusing on the importance of digital safety for newsrooms and for individuals working from home. Instructors can utilize this resource to help newsroom managers and editors understand basic infrastructure needs and to offer reporters tips on digital security.

Discussion Questions

1. What can newsroom managers and editors do to help ensure digital security?
   • Instructors should go through the list of steps newsroom managers and editors can take to build an infrastructure that protects the digital security of the team. This includes having Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), a team-friendly password manager, and two-factor authentication for shared accounts.

2. What much, or all, of reporting taking place without the benefit of a newsroom, what precautions can journalists take to protect their equipment and their stories?
   • With journalists almost exclusively working remotely, there is an increased need to put digital security efforts in place. A number of important steps for instructors and students to consider are addressed, including following IT guidance, bringing inventory items home, tightening wireless security, updating connected devices, watching out for phishing attacks, shutting down devices not in use, and sharing resources with colleagues.

Additional COVID-19 Resources

These resources – webinars, newsletters, a journalist toolbox, additional tips for working from home, etc. – can supplement and/or replace those listed above. The webinars provide instructors and students the opportunity to hear experts discuss the many challenges journalists face in covering the pandemic. Instructors and students are encouraged to register for one or more of the newsletters listed below. These newsletters will keep instructors and students updated on information about the pandemic. Instructors can encourage class discussion by requiring students to report back on newsletter updates.


Columbia Journalism School’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma hosts online conversations about the challenges of reporting amid the COVID-19 pandemic and are led by Dart Center executive director Bruce Shapiro. These webinars provide a great opportunity for students to learn from experts. Links to previously recorded webinars are available.

“IJNet webinar on 'Journalists' mental health” International Journalists’ Network (April 3, 2020)
This webinar, hosted by IJNET editor, Taylor Mulcahey, and with Bruce Shapiro, executive director of Columbia University’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, and Sherry Ricchiardi, professor of journalism at Indiana University, examines trauma and journalist self-care.

The Coronavirus Daily Brief is a daily news and analysis roundup edited by New America’s International Security Program and Arizona State University. The brief is edited by Peter Bergen and co-edited by Melissa Salyk-Virk, Emily Schneider, and David Sterman.

Poynter champions the duty of a free press to inform, educate and hold the powerful accountable. Poynter also offers journalists the opportunity to sign up for free, real-time chats with Poynter experts.

Columbia Journalism Review. (Daily & Weekly Newsletters): https://www.cjr.org/email
CJR offers The Media Today, a daily email providing commentary on the biggest media story of the day, and Top Stories, a weekly digest of CJR’s most popular stories. There is also a weekly Tow Center COVID-19 Newsletter, which tracks news of the virus through research and analysis.

Global Health NOW, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (Free Weekday Newsletter) https://www.globalhealthnow.org/subscribe
Global Health NOW is an essential daily read for anyone interested in US and global public health. Every weekday, Global Health NOW aggregates and summarizes the latest global health news—delivering critical stories to each subscriber’s inbox.

The Society of Professional Journalists provides this regularly updated list of resources for covering and responding to Coronavirus, SARS and Flu Resources.

“Over the past couple of weeks, newsrooms have abruptly transitioned from operating in an office to newsroom members being spread out in their homes, working remotely…Here are some valuable tips on how to have an equally productive workday from home.” This resource provides several links to help those adjusting to working from home.

This resource originally appeared in Navigator, GroundTruth’s newsletter for early-career journalists. Instructors can assign this to help prepare journalists for the emotional impact of covering this pandemic. In this article, Gluck interviews Mike Niconchuk, Director of Research and Development at Beyond Conflict. The focus is on helping young journalists prepare themselves for the impact/trauma that may result from covering stories during this pandemic. Niconchuk focuses on the following topics: (1) The effects of reporting on crises; (2) Strategies to self-regulate; (3) Avoiding the common coping mechanism of romanticizing the work; and (4) What editors and managers can do to help.
Risk Assessment for Journalists

(modified from Rory Peck Trust: https://rorypecktrust.org/freelance-resources/safety-and-security/risk-assessment-get-started/)

Assignment outline

- To identify risks, you need to outline your project. Before beginning your risk assessment, it is important to write an assignment outline. Identify and list the key elements of your project: interviews, travel and actions that are vital to your plans.

Locations and brief schedule

- Where are you going, when, and for how long?

Assignment details

- Give specific details of what you intend to cover to complete your assignment. What will you film, photograph, record, write about to make your piece? Including relevant meetings, sequences, interviews and locations. This is the basic foundation of your risk assessment and will provide a clear idea of what you want to achieve and how you want to achieve it.

Project specific risks

- Is this a sensitive topic?
- Are you covering a high-risk location, activity or event?
- Who will you be meeting, and might they be at risk if they talk to you?
- Is your security threatened by talking to specific people, visiting or working in a specific area?
- More than anything, effective risk management is about asking questions, listening to the answers, and working within the realm of the possible. Seek advice from experienced journalists, if possible.

Travel Risks

- Have you made travel arrangements? Plan and research the safest means of travel.
- Have an alternative plan in case you need to adjust travel arrangements or if you do not feel comfortable with your initial plan.

Profile Risks

- This is not about how you perceive yourself, but how others may perceive you. Be aware of your image and presence online. The same questions apply to those accompanying you.
- Is there an increased risk as a result of your gender, age, ethnicity, religious beliefs or nationality? What about those accompanying you, and how does your profile affect them?