

NIEMAN REPORTS

Nieman

A microscopic image of coronavirus particles, showing several spherical structures with a textured surface, colored in shades of red, orange, and blue against a dark background.

MEET YOUR NEW BEAT

**HOW THE CORONAVIRUS
IS IMPACTING**

**2020 CAMPAIGN
COVERAGE**

**MEDIA TRUST
IN EUROPE**

**THE ECONOMICS
OF LOCAL NEWS**

NiemanReports

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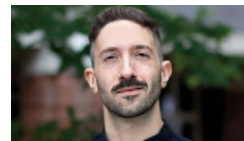
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COVER: Covid-19 coronavirus particles seen through transmission electron micrograph

ABOVE: Quarantined in São Paulo, Brazil

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“Courage is Contagious” Nieman isn’t waiting for the coronavirus to grant permission to do our work. We are reimagining the fellowship experience to help journalists emerge stronger from this historic crisis

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

Goenawan Mohamad, the Indonesian journalist and poet, had considerable impact on the members of my Nieman class. His parents had suffered exile to an internment camp; his father was later executed for political activism. Tempo, the magazine he founded, was denounced, shuttered, then banned by the Suharto government. Yet Goenawan was among the most stoic men any of us had ever met.

“Courage,” he would say, “is contagious.”

I have been thinking of Goenawan and our Nieman year conversations. As the sobering threat of Covid-19 emerged and Harvard closed its campus, I was asked if there was precedent for the disruption faced by the class of 2020. No; in the 82-year history of Nieman, there had never been a deadly pandemic that drove students, faculty, and staff into home lockdown. But as Nieman Fellows well know, there are colleagues in the world for whom hardship and disruption are commonplace. Goenawan and so many journalists, including members of the current class, have endured regular retribution — political and physical — as personally threatening as this virus. We know their names because they persevered in the face of suffering, often returning home from their Nieman year to face continuing difficulty.

Some fellowships suspended their programs in the wake of March shelter-in-place orders. But that was not an option for Nieman, nor is it an option going forward. If anything, our founding mission — to “promote and elevate the standards of

journalism and educate persons deemed especially qualified for journalism” — is more urgent. What would it say to the legions of journalists who experience hardship not as an interruption but as a condition of their work if we did not persist?

As we work on defining what fellowship will mean this fall and consider other initiatives to expand Nieman’s impact, we are influenced by our earlier experimentation. First we disrupted the academic-year model by offering short-term Knight Nieman Fellowships for innovative projects. Then we added the Abrams Nieman Fellowships in local investigative journalism, extending the traditional model with an additional nine months of fieldwork. Those projects have given us new tools and confidence to meet rapidly-changing industry needs.

We are also encouraged by our experience in confronting the pandemic this spring. For two months, work that traditionally took place at Lippmann House was successfully translated online. As with Harvard’s spring semester classes, our seminars and the course in narrative nonfiction writing were held on Zoom. Fellows moved their Soundings online, braiding classic storytelling conventions with the technological innovations that kept us connected. Some workshops, like those in podcasting, data visualization, or photography, were harder to convert, but the ingenuity of fellows and staff overcame the challenges. The quick, forced transition to online learning was merely a start. Having been catapulted into a new world, what were the opportunities? We tested new

initiatives, such as “Nieman to Nieman,” online sessions that united our global network of fellows for conversations with newsworthy alumni, programming we will continue no matter the path of the virus.

Fellows would have preferred their physical proximity and the easy access to the classrooms, libraries, museums, and more that make up the Harvard campus. Moreover, news of friends and colleagues who had fallen ill from the coronavirus — including the Harvard president and his wife — introduced worry that preoccupied many of us throughout the spring. But in these ways Nieman was not unique. Wherever you are as you read this, you have been impacted by the unforgiving virus.

The challenge for Nieman going forward is not a two-month reprogramming effort but a response that anticipates the galloping changes taking place in journalism. In mere weeks, everything from where you make your office to how we report the story of a lifetime while avoiding infection has birthed more newsroom transformation than we’ve witnessed in years. Like the changes forced by 9/11, we are absorbing adjustments to our lives and our work that will not be reversed. Against the backdrop of the industry’s twin truths — a soaring reliance on news and fewer and fewer people paid to provide it — this is as consequential a challenge as journalism has confronted.

While we look forward to the day we again may gather a new fellowship class on campus and await the university decisions that will guide that timing, we are not waiting for the virus to grant permission to do our work. Encouraged by conversations with dozens of reporters and editors throughout the industry, we are reimagining the experience in order to help journalists emerge stronger from this historic crisis. “If you’re game,” said one of our fellowship applicants, “so am I.”

Nearly 80 years ago, the new Nieman Foundation faced its first major fellowship challenge. In 1942, curator Louis Lyons debated suspending the fellowships in response to World War II and wrote to editors seeking their counsel. The 1943-44 fellowship year would not be without its difficulties, but ultimately Lyons was compelled by those who argued against sitting out the war. Wrote one editor: “There is a vast need now for clear thinking on the problems that will come like an avalanche when the Axis powers go down.”

We think Lyons got it right. ■



The Nieman Class of 1944 (top) and Class of 2020. Former Nieman curator Louis Lyons considered suspending fellowships in the 1943-1944 academic year in response to World War II, but ultimately decided against it. Likewise, the 2020 Nieman Fellowship continued on — if in a different form — in the face of the coronavirus pandemic

BOTTOM: MARTHA STEWART

Maria Hinojosa, Pamela Colloff among Nieman Award Winners

Pioneering journalist and multimedia entrepreneur Maria Hinojosa is among the award winners the Nieman Foundation announced recently. She is winner of the 2020 I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence.

Founder of The Futuro Media Group, Hinojosa is anchor and executive producer of the Peabody-winning radio program “Latino USA,” the longest-running Latino-focused program on U.S. public media.

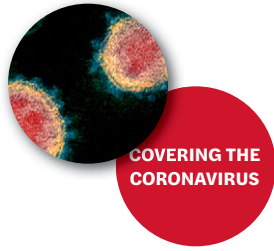
During her 30-year career, Hinojosa’s groundbreaking documentaries and investigative reports have brought to light stories about the lives, challenges, and contributions of millions of Americans living in communities too often ignored by traditional media.

Pamela Colloff’s investigation of the dangers of relying on jailhouse informants, “He’s a Liar, a Con Artist and a Snitch. His Testimony Could Soon Send a Man to His Death,” is winner of the 2019 Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Journalism.

Commenting on the investigation that was published on ProPublica and in The New York Times Magazine, Taylor Award judge Jason Grotto, a senior reporter for Bloomberg News, said: “This tale not only raises fundamental questions of fairness in criminal proceedings but also demonstrates the effectiveness of fairness in journalism. Pursuing the key character to his potential deathbed to confront him and give him his say brings the story to life while also exposing the man for who he is and revealing the hypocrisies of our criminal justice system.”

“Forsaken by the Indian Health Service,” a joint investigation by The Wall Street Journal and PBS’s “Frontline,” is the winner of the 2019 Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism. The reporting exposed decades of abuse, negligence, and dysfunction inside the Indian Health Service, the federal agency that provides health care to more than two million Native Americans.

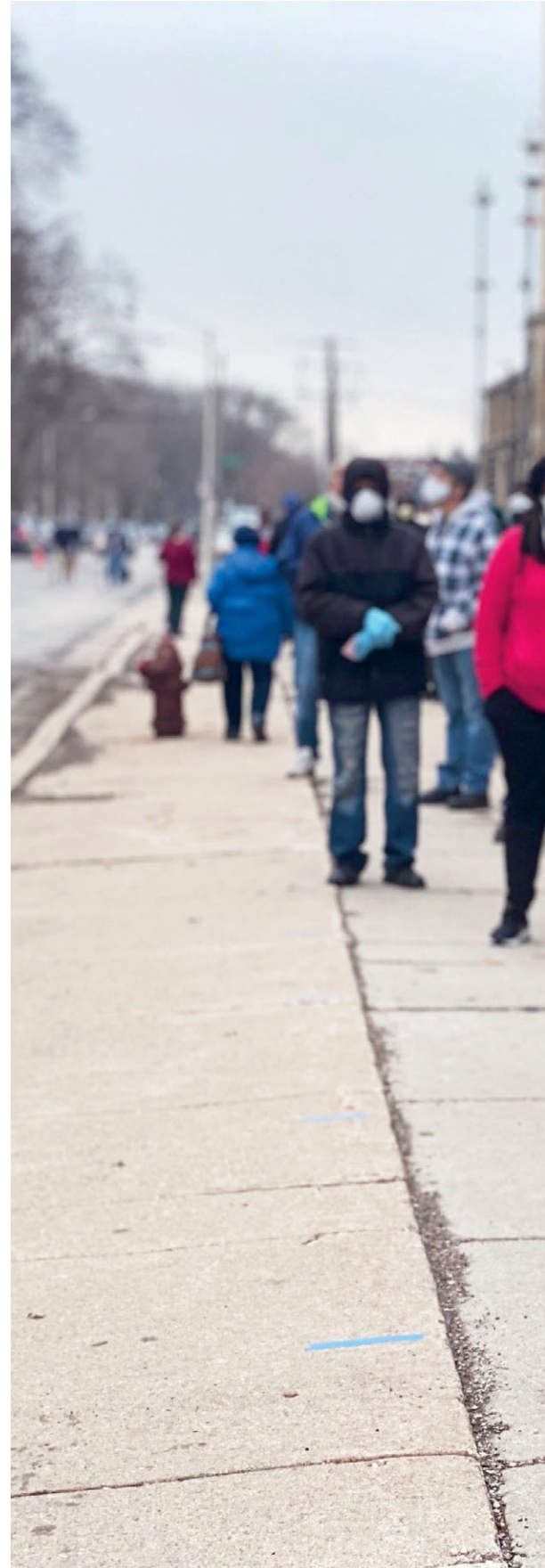
Upon publication, the IHS announced an immediate overhaul of its policies, requiring employees to report suspected abuse to local and federal law enforcement within 24 hours. It also introduced agency-wide training, fired at least two officials, and prohibited the hiring of doctors with licensing-board actions restricting their practice. ■

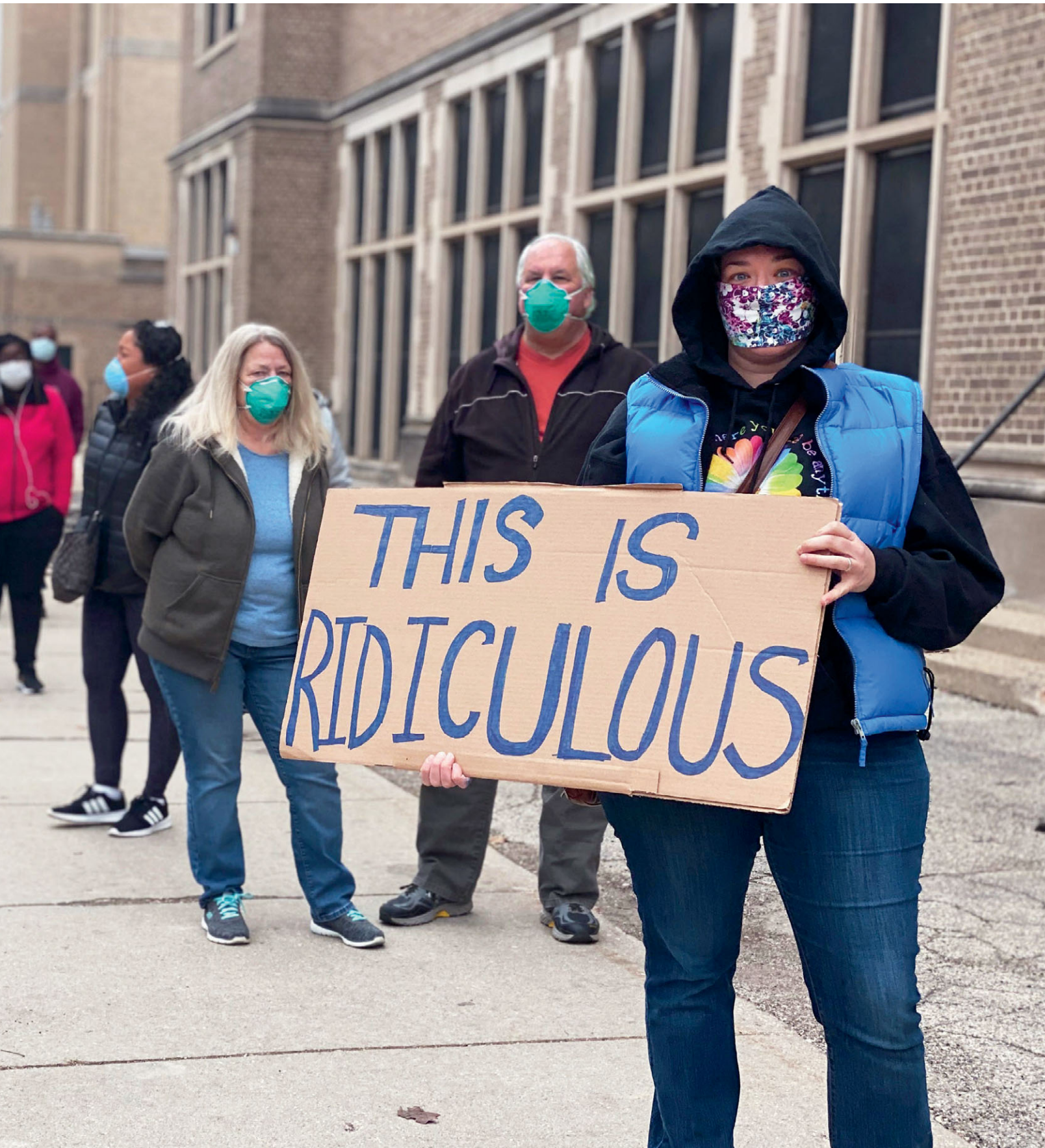


COVERING THE CORONA CAMPAIGN

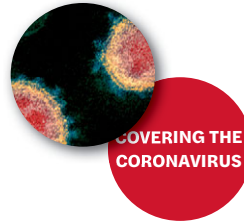
While Covid-19 has derailed the 2020 presidential campaign, it may actually improve coverage of it by shifting focus to a crucial issue — access to the ballot

BY CASEY QUACKENBUSH





THIS IS
RIDICULOUS



S PATRICK MARLEY moved down the queue of voters lined up near a high school in Madison, some of his interviewees had to shout. Six feet apart is not ideal for a personal conversation about politics, especially on the tense Tuesday morning of Wisconsin's primary elections on April 7. But the statehouse reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel was considerate, and the voters had a lot to say.

Between elbow bumps and squirts of hand sanitizer, Marley asked how they felt about standing in line to vote in the middle of a pandemic. Some were angry, some indifferent, some masked, some not. But for the most part, the sentiment echoed the now iconic image captured outside Milwaukee's Washington High School, where a masked woman named Jennifer Taff, who had waited in a line for two hours, held up a cardboard sign saying: "This is ridiculous."

By this point, the team at the Journal Sentinel had been expecting to be doing nothing but campaign coverage. But as the deadly spread of Covid-19 cripples the United States, from coastal cities to rural townships, election coverage has largely taken a backseat to the novel coronavirus.

While Covid-19 has completely derailed coverage of the 2020 election campaign, it may, in a way, actually improve it. Every election, the media beats itself up about covering the horse race and not the issues. Now, with an extremely limited horse race to cover, journalists are covering the terrain of how the election even happens. With the coronavirus laying bare the gravity of election-related issues like income and racial inequality and access to healthcare, journalists are working overtime to report on perhaps the most consequential of them all: access to the ballot itself.

Voting rights is a story of long lines, glitchy machines, bureaucracy, and legislation — a massive, sputtering apparatus long overdue for an inspection but sidelined by other political preoccupations. But with the novel coronavirus, journalists have a powerful lens with which to examine it. Even as the floundering economy drags an already struggling media industry down with it, political reporters are finding ways — in the face of furloughs and

social distancing guidelines — to report a story that is less about who is running than about how the election runs and who gets counted.

Election administration is "such a fundamental part of the campaign and election process that is under-covered and underappreciated and not understood like it should be," says Stephen Fowler, an election reporter with Georgia Public Broadcasting Radio News. "This virus has given an opportunity to give an extra human layer [to the election process] that generally appeals to a few wonky people interested in election administration."

The last time Ken Thomas saw Joe Biden in person was in an ice cream shop. It was Super Tuesday in East Los Angeles, and The Wall Street Journal reporter covering Biden's campaign was standing behind the parlor counter with the press corps — a better angle — with Biden and L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti on the other side. From across the display freezer, both sides bantered back and forth.

That was March 3, when the campaign trail was full of color, frenzy, and engagement. Thomas had followed Biden across the country — Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire — and had so much to cover. The rallies, the crowds, questions, the eye contact, cheers, the emotion, the staffers on the sidelines. For readers, this

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PATRICIA MCKNIGHT/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL
DANIEL ACKER/REUTERS



kind of coverage breathes life into the campaign.

“We don’t have that anymore,” says Thomas, who’s now working from home in Washington, D.C. “It’s hard to have that visual temperature we can take.” Coverage has gone from “seeing crowds from a pretty active campaign to suddenly you’re in your home on a Zoom conference call.”

For now, the path of the pandemic is the new campaign trail. With the race almost completely online, Zoom calls from Biden’s basement, where he has been broadcasting his campaign since late March, are the new norm. Thomas will get about four to five questions in during a press briefing, and there’s some back and forth, but the story is controlled by the width of the screen. To reach different demographics, Biden will host happy hours and family-oriented town halls online. But ultimately, it’s not the same as an ice cream shop.

For David Stebenne, a political historian at Ohio State University, no previous campaign has ever been quite like this. The 1918 Spanish flu offers little guidance as to what will unfold, as that was not a presidential election year. Instead, Stebenne looks to the 1968 and 1972 elections, when anti-Vietnam protests rocking the country posed such a threat to candidates that rallies to a large extent moved to in-studio televised town halls.

“They may find some way to replicate that kind of model because they can’t safely campaign in the conventional way,” he says.

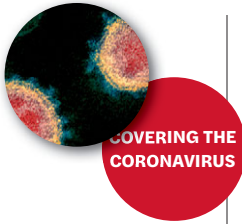
It’s been a major adjustment for state reporters, too, only significantly more frantic. The terrain was a mess — voter ID laws, mail-in ballot laws, gerrymandering. Throw in a pandemic, and journalists are hustling to keep up as the election process gets caught in the fault lines of partisan politics.

Wisconsin — a regular swing state on the front line of the presidential race — will go down as the prime example. Political upheaval is the status quo for the Journal Sentinel team, but the partisan chaos that unfolded amid the primary was extraordinary.

As a regular swing state on the front line of the presidential race, political upheaval is the status quo for the Journal Sentinel team, but the partisan chaos that unfolded amid the primary was extraordinary. After the Republican-controlled Legislature refused to postpone the election and the state supreme court overruled the Democratic governor’s postponement order, Wisconsinites had no choice: either head to the polls under stay-at-home orders amid a global pandemic — while all other states moved to delay their primaries that day — or sacrifice their vote.

Wisconsin voters fill out ballots at a Milwaukee high school during the state’s presidential primary election

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A Milwaukee resident holds up a sign as she waits in line to vote in Wisconsin’s presidential primary, which was held in person despite coronavirus fears



In the wake of 11th-hour court rulings, hundreds of people flooded the inboxes of the team at the Journal Sentinel complaining about unfulfilled requests for an absentee ballot. Three large tubs of undelivered absentee ballots were discovered in a postal center outside Milwaukee. At least 9,000 ballots requested were never sent, and there's still more data on missing ballots to come. The city of Milwaukee went from having 180 active polling stations to just five.

Between the absentee ballot processing backlog and poll closures, which fell particularly harshly on black voters, the episode raises serious questions about disenfranchisement and is viewed by some as an attempt at voter suppression. "Voter suppression is a loaded term," says professor Edward Foley, director of the election law program at Ohio State University's law school. But given its clear partisan motivation, "it does seem

regrettably a reasonable inference."

On April 27, health officials announced that at least 36 people who voted in person in the Wisconsin primary contracted Covid-19. Of the roughly 1.5 million voters, an estimated 413,000 voted in person.

When it comes to reporting on voter suppression, journalists need to be "really careful," says Craig Gilbert, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Washington bureau chief, data whiz, and longtime political writer who has covered every presidential campaign since 1988. Even with the evident mess of the absentee ballots, appraising voter suppression is not straightforward. Because, well, how do you quantify it? "You're writing about a negative, the votes that aren't being cast," says Gilbert, who did not use the term "voter suppression" while covering the primary "because it is so difficult to measure whether – and how many – voters who would have otherwise voted

VOTE AND DIE: VOTER SUPPRESSION DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY BRIAN FRIEDBERG, GABRIELLE LIM, and JOAN DONOVAN

On April 7, 2020 a new slogan began circulating on Twitter during the Wisconsin Democratic primary: "Vote and Die." The slogan is a play on "Vote or Die," a 2004 American voter mobilization campaign championed by rapper Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, aimed at increasing participation among young people.

This call to action, accompanied by a doctored image of Combs wearing a "Vote and Die" T-shirt, mutated into a grim commentary on Covid-19's ongoing impact on the ballot and highlights growing anxiety around voting during the pandemic. In the United States, these concerns are intensely partisan, as the incomplete Democratic primaries are already beginning to force changes to how we vote.

The U.S. has a long history of disenfranchisement and voter suppression, where struggles to achieve full voting rights are targeted by disinformation campaigns to keep already marginalized voters home on election day. As more of our political communication moves online, concern grows that misleading information is being micro-targeted to impact national and local elections.

Research indicates that online voter suppression campaigns are tailored across race, class, and age. However, there is a gap in understanding how Covid-19 or health disparities may contribute to voter suppression.

Grim parody slogans like "Vote and Die" help illuminate collective anxieties and anticipate a new political reality. The promise of the internet to

increase democratic participation is being hijacked by disinformation and authoritarian regimes, each of which is accelerated by the global pandemic. The coming year may be witness to the largest challenge to voting rights since the civil rights era, and failures in the media ecosystem may intensify its impact.

Even absent a pandemic, it is difficult to create equitable and accessible voting conditions. Efforts include ride-shares, increasing early voting and the number of polling places, and same-day registration. After the Russian Internet Research Agency scandal, there has been a tremendous push to get social media companies to thwart disinformation campaigns, so that voters are not impeded by false news when seeking information about voting. Taken together, these physical and informational obstacles alone would be enough to deter some voters. The pandemic both exacerbates and amplifies voter suppression.

Covid-19 will dramatically alter the mechanics of the national election, and what happened in Wisconsin may foreshadow what's to come in November. Many Americans will likely still have to travel long distances to get to polling locations. Mobilizing these voters often depends on their ability to share rides or use public transportation. If social distancing is still in place, people can't safely travel together. For the elderly, low-income, and those that live far away from their designated voting locations, carpooling and busing become unsafe options.

Flawed communication technologies will continue to add the static of disinformation into these

did not vote because of a particular requirement or restriction. It's very hard to say with certainty that turnout was not as high as it could've been."

In the case of Wisconsin's primary, fears swirled that going ahead with the election amid a pandemic would suppress voter turnout, especially on the Democratic side. But the race ended up drawing a remarkably high turnout of about 1.5 million voters, which consisted of a spring election record of about 1.1 million absentee ballots.

To report as complete a picture as possible "in a world where the campaign is invisible," journalists have to get creative and mine "every available source of information," says Gilbert. Especially data. There are the traditional tools like historical election data and public opinion. But there are also timely metrics like data on absentee voting, down to the county and local level.

That's what Gilbert used to decipher how

conversations about the equity, accessibility, and possibility of future elections. Even rumors of polling disruptions may be used by bad actors to deter people from coming out to vote.

Journalists, now more than ever, must help cut through the rampant disinformation around the pandemic and stop partisan attempts to prematurely delegitimize election results. Timely, relevant, and local reporting has become more crucial than ever, but finding sources and conducting investigations are going to be much more difficult as social distancing means there are far fewer opportunities for fact-finding.

Plans for the expansion of mail-in ballots for primaries have been suggested by prominent Democrats. President Trump and Republican lawmakers are already pushing back, claiming mail-in ballots are ripe for manipulation. This mirrors paranoia of supposed voter fraud that fuels voter suppression campaigns in states like Alabama. At the same time, Republican leaders are also further eroding institutional trust; as Senator Ted Cruz stated, the Democrats and media are "rooting" for a disaster and Trump has called mail-in ballots a haven for fraud.

When the ability to vote becomes constrained by reluctance to accept mail-in ballots, marginalized communities with the most at stake will be hit hardest. It is apparent that already fragile voting processes need to change, but as changes are introduced, the opportunity for misinformation about voting increases.

As barriers to voting increase due to physical safety, strained healthcare systems will become central topics of electoral politics. Medical insurance is going to become a flagship issue for these elections, particularly with tens of millions of Americans out of work or underemployed. Alarming trends in the data show that Covid-19 spreads fast in low-income communities and is fatal for high numbers of African-Americans and the elderly. As both Republicans and Democrats struggle with their party positions on Medicare expansion, controlling the narrative on healthcare will become key.

Wisconsin's absentee ballots made up such a large portion of the vote. Using an election database, Gilbert pinpointed clusters of communities with high absentee ballot rates. On Milwaukee's North Shore in Whitefish Bay, 60% of registered voters sent in absentee ballots, more than any other city or village and higher than the 32% state average. Gilbert proceeded to find out that the towns, in light of the virus, had aggressively promoted mail-in voting and even took the extra step of printing up and mailing absentee ballot applications to about 10,000 registered voters.

Every election presents some kind of issue, says NPR reporter Pam Fessler, who has been on the beat since 2000. That year was Gore vs. Bush. Over the years, there

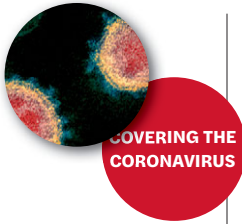


Marginalized communities are being hit hardest by Covid-19 and their participation will be suppressed even further without grassroots organizing. It's not just a question of how voter suppression will happen, but also how many people will be unable to vote. Journalists would do well to forge closer connections with civil society organizations that are taking on voting rights as a central issue during the pandemic.

A healthy democracy depends on reliable information so people feel like they're making sound decisions. This information is the responsibility of federal and local governments to disseminate. We rely on journalism to hold these bodies accountable and point out where we are being deceived. The media demand for Covid-19 information has resulted in deficient information flows around the election process itself, and the fixation on social media drowns out important news and updates.

Due to Covid-19 and the ensuing economic crisis, covering elections will require the collaboration of civil society, state agencies, social media companies, and news organizations. Democracy is a process that must be organized, accountable, and transparent. While the virus respects no human timeline, November 3rd is still on its way. We don't have a second to waste. ■

An elections official wearing a hazmat suit runs a polling station in Kenosha, Wisconsin as the state held its presidential primaries in April despite the coronavirus



have been regular controversies over malfunctioning voter machines, long lines, and partisan fights over voter registration lists. In 2016, Russia interfered. But what's happening now, "is very, very unnerving," says Fessler. "Election officials — local, state, federal — have spent a lot of time preparing for potential problems in elections. One thing people did not prepare for: a pandemic."

After the confusion that unfolded in Wisconsin, calls are mounting to establish an all mail-in system by November, under the not unlikely scenario that the virus is circulating and a vaccine will not be ready.

While universal mail-in voting is not impossible and would reduce the risk of virus transmission, the administrative challenges are real. Currently, five states — including Republican-leaning Colorado and Utah — conduct elections by mail statewide. At least 21 others have provisions to allow at least some elections to be conducted entirely by mail, according to the National Conference for State Legislatures. But the transition takes time, foresight, political will, vigilance, and money — a tall order in a time of hemorrhaging state revenues. Ballots require reliable supply chains of paper. But not every voter has a mailing address, internet access, ability to print out a ballot, or money for postage. Sometimes a

posing that there are huge structural problems and the stakes are even higher now."

The coverage for "Who Counts?" focuses on mechanisms of power in elections and the communities they marginalize. In collaboration with The Marshall Project, the Slate team published the result of a survey of 8,000 inmates, the most disenfranchised people in America, on their political views. They run analyses outlining the importance of the U.S. Postal Service in a functional election, and how voting rights advocates are shifting their focus to state courts. For a little fun, they also post puzzles: "Can You Put These Gerrymandered States Back Together?"

"Our readers recognize we're in a crisis moment that these kinds of rights and norms that we're used to taking for granted are not necessarily unbreakable," says Shen. "There's a lot of interest, not only [in] what the problems are, but how do we fix this?"

To ensure every county stays on the radar, ProPublica established Electionland, a coalition of over 120 newsrooms across the states that covers all things election-related: misinformation, cybersecurity, and any issues that prevent eligible voters from casting their ballots.

Jessica Huseman, the lead reporter for Electionland, won't report a federal-level claim about elections without verifying it with local districts. Citing everything from President Trump's baseless claims about voter fraud to illegal ballots in California to false claims about mail-in voting favoring Democrats, "People need to ground their stories in what is actually happening at election administration offices rather than what the president or state officials are saying," says Huseman. "Those two things are rarely ever the same."

Among the resources Electionland shares is a partnership with Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which transfers thousands of calls from voters into a database of tips and complaints about voting issues. That way, reporters can quickly identify hot spots. Founded in 2016, the project has grown significantly.

Another important objective of Electionland: ensuring every newsroom stays on top of local election laws. American elections are a massive, decentralized enterprise with more than 10,000 independently-run voting jurisdictions. Compounded by a pandemic, the rules of the game are much more complex. Facts change quickly, and context is crucial. For Huseman, keeping readers informed underscores an essential but simple premise for election coverage: voting is good.

"We can talk all day long about journalism and bias and preconceived notions, but I think it's not wrong for journalists to decide that people should be able to vote," says Huseman. "We live in a democracy ... If we start our jobs as covering elections from the twofold premise that people should be able to vote and we are participants in the elections, then our responsibilities become very clear" — to make voting accessible.

For example, Electionland generally won't write about lines longer than 30 minutes because studies show that lines up to half an hour do not discourage voters. Otherwise, you could deter people from going

"There is enough time to get this done so that November can be a free and fair, genuine opportunity to participate"

EDWARD FOLEY, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

ballot requires a witness's signature — how do you get that if you're in isolation?

Yet the alternative of in-person voting carries its own potentially deadlier costs. On top of the health risk to voters, in-person voting largely depends on a volunteer base of poll workers, most of whom are elderly. If the virus is still circulating, that will shrink, along with the number of poll stations. Replacing elderly volunteers with younger ones without the knowledge and expertise could introduce a whole new set of issues.

"There is enough time to get this done so that November can be a free and fair, genuine opportunity to participate, even if we're still in the middle of a pandemic," says Foley, from Ohio State University. "But it has to be done. The good news is that failure is by no means guaranteed. But the bad news is, success is not either."

For Aviva Shen, a senior editor at Slate, what happened in Wisconsin underscores the urgency of Slate's latest election initiative, "Who Counts?" Launched in October 2019, "Who Counts?" is a project pursuing 2020 election coverage specifically tailored to voting, immigration, gerrymandering, and citizenship. After years of mounting issues, from voter purges to ID laws, Slate wanted to ensure voting rights remained a central focus in the 2020 election. The pandemic only brings that into sharper relief. "The pandemic has really shown a lot of strain in society in general, especially when it comes to elections," says Shen. "This crisis is really ex-



to the polls. It's also crucial to report election laws accurately. Huseman recounts back in 2016 in Texas when voter ID laws were changing quickly and moving through the courts. The shifting information meant not everyone had the right materials and so couldn't vote. "Lots of people don't read past the headline," says Huseman. "We have to be really, really focused on the details because those little details, those are things that disenfranchise people."

Election administration is technical, complex, and often eye-glazing. But for GPB Radio News's Fowler, the coronavirus chaos is an opportunity to inform the electorate of how the process actually works through the people that make it work: poll workers.

Georgia is particularly convoluted. With 159 counties, Georgia has the second highest number of voting jurisdictions after Texas. That means 159 different sets of staff. Speaking to them as the gatekeepers is key. So Fowler and his colleagues spoke with more than half of the state's county election directors for a radio story to illustrate just how complicated the process is, how much it impacts the lives of people dealing with the constant change, and how much it varies in every county. These are mostly elderly people, who are struggling to keep up with the day-to-day confusion of the pandemic.

"Voting has inherently become a partisan issue, and I think the chaos wrought by coronavirus is only going to deepen that wound," says Fowler. The human angle is key to depoliticizing it. "It's more important for journalists to cover the mechanics of election administration and explain why and how decisions are made to deflate some of the rhetoric there is around accessing the ballots."

The last few weeks have been a rollercoaster for

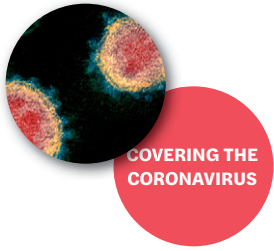
Ashley Lopez, a reporter with NPR's Austin-based KUT who covers politics and healthcare in Texas, which has some of the strictest voter laws in the country when it comes to absentee ballots. So when the pandemic came along, fears mounted over whether people should be able to claim the "disability" category in order to obtain an absentee ballot based on a fear of catching the virus at the polls. After Texas Democrats filed a lawsuit to clarify who could seek mail-in ballots in the state, a county judge issued an order allowing any voter to apply for a mail-in ballot — trumping the state attorney general's opinion to the contrary.

Now young voters are facing another major hurdle: registration. Since the last presidential election, more than one million young people in Texas have registered to vote. Turnout for voters under 30 tripled in the 2018 Senate race. But the pandemic has stalled that momentum for one glaring reason: Texas is one of the few states that does not allow online voter registration, which is creating barriers for Texas youths, according to voting rights advocates Lopez interviewed.

To figure out how that demographic was coping, Lopez tapped into Texas voter groups she had previously covered and reported a story on how those groups are still endeavoring to mobilize voters digitally: calling, texting, and via social media. Groups are tracking down addresses of people and sending ballots and pre-paid postage so that all they have to do is fill out the ballot and pop it in the mail.

"We are talking about the same things that we were talking about before, but the stakes are so much higher now," says Lopez. "I've been yelling about this for years. Now everyone is like, 'This is a real problem.' This is why we have to deal with things years before a pandemic." ■

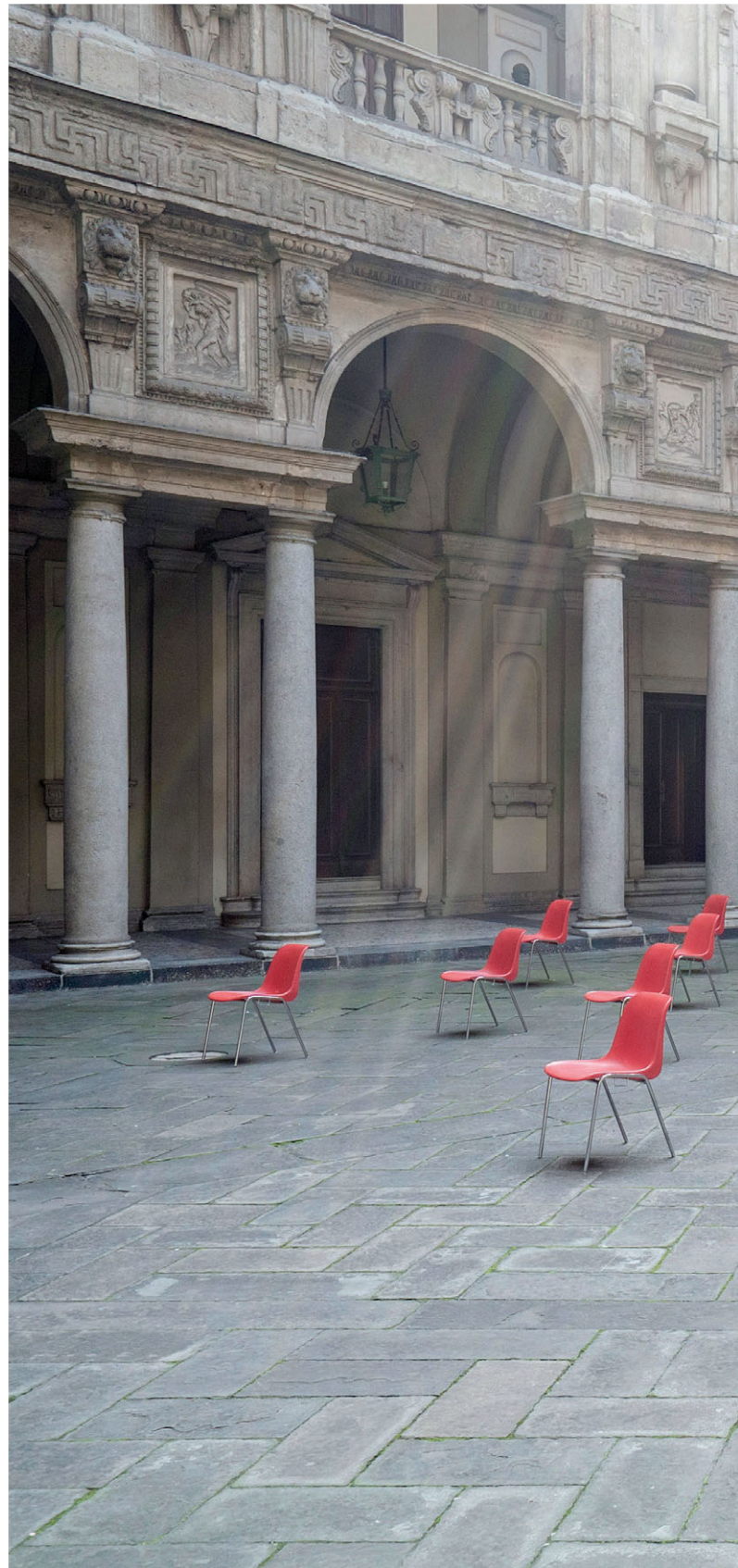
A healthcare worker stands in counter-protest on April 19 as hundreds of people gathered near Colorado's state capitol in Denver to demand the stay-at-home order be lifted



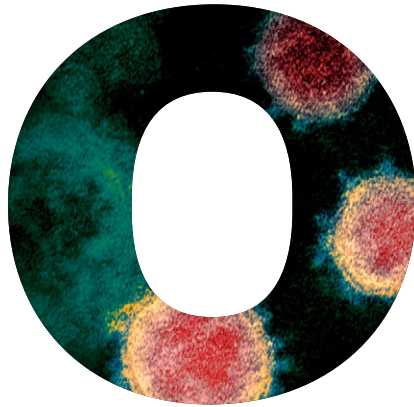
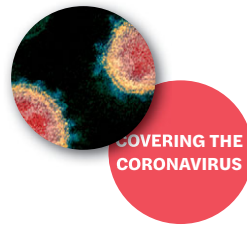
A TRUST TEST FOR THE MEDIA

How coverage of
the coronavirus in Italy,
Spain, France, and
Germany has impacted
trust in news outlets

BY MATTIA FERRARESI







THE WAY TO think about the coronavirus pandemic is as a large-scale process of sorting out what is essential. That is true on a personal level, but it's also true for governments, many of which are making painful choices over what activities should be shut down to make social distancing efforts effective while guaranteeing people access to essential goods.

Media are going through a similar process. What are the essential values for journalism in a moment when reliable information is decisive but the prospects for the already battered news industry look grim, if not apocalyptic?

Trust is most essential. Without it, even a stable media industry doesn't matter because people won't believe it.

Outbreaks and massive emergencies have always been hotbeds for disinformation. Chronicles from the plagues during the Middle Ages show that many of today's basic dynamics surrounding misinformation were already in place. The notion of *pestilentia manu facta*, or man-made epidemic, was first introduced by the Roman author Seneca and played a significant role in the Black Death epidemic, in the mid-1300s, when many in Europe accused the Jews or foreigners of purposely spreading the disease.

Journalism should be an antidote to the misinformation pandemic. In a way, these extraordinary circumstances are a giant "trust test" for the media.

Are European media winning back — or increasing — the public's confidence through coverage of the pandemic? With a few exceptions, not so much.

A recent global survey by Edelman on trust during Covid-19 shows that journalists are the least trusted source of information regarding the pandemic, even though a significant majority of the population worldwide gets its updates about the coronavirus through well-established national media. Data collected March 6-10 in Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, the U.K., and the U.S. show that scientists are the most trusted source regarding the novel coronavirus, at 83%. Only 43% consider the media trustworthy on Covid-19, making journalists less trusted than co-workers, NGO representatives,

politicians, and "a person like yourself."

Confidence in the media in the European Union has been declining over the past five years. A 2019 Ipsos survey shows that trust generally decreased across Europe, but the impact of the relative decline varies greatly from country to country. For instance, trust in newspapers and magazines in Germany decreased by 12% between 2014 and 2019, but 65% of Germans still trust newspapers. In Spain, 57% do not trust newspapers and magazines very much or at all, and distrust is even higher for online news platforms.

Overall, the survey, conducted between January and February 2019, shows a stark division between highly-trusted media in countries like Germany and Sweden, and low-trust media in southern Europe, most notably in Spain.

Distrust in the media has dramatically increased in France, mostly because of the Yellow Vests protests coverage and the widespread perception of a growing divide between ordinary citizens and the Parisian elite. Italy stands in the middle of the trust curve, as half of the country generally trusts journalists, while the other half actively distrusts them. The resurgence of nationalism and the spread of authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in Eastern Europe sent the trust index plummeting there, especially in countries like Serbia and Hungary.

Trust won't change the industry's bottom line or fix dysfunctional business models. But it could be the cor-



nerstone upon which to start to rebuild the commercial fundamentals of journalism after the pandemic is passed. Continental Europe was hit by the coronavirus outbreak before the United States, so an overview of how European media – in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany – have dealt with the emergency may suggest some preliminary considerations regarding the trust trajectory in journalism.

ITALY

A STUDY CONDUCTED BY the Milan-based firm TradeLab in mid-March — when the country had already been in lockdown for a little over a week and the death toll had surpassed 2,500 — shows that confidence in media was low. Asked whether the health emergency was accurately represented by the media, 46% of respondents strongly disagreed; only 16% said the coverage was balanced and transparent. By comparison, 31% said the government and health officials were portraying the situation more accurately.

“Our research reflects people’s disappointment in national media coverage during the first weeks of the emergency,” says TradeLab co-founder Paolo Bertozzi, adding that local media are less trusted now than before the pandemic. Even though there’s an appetite for coverage of how the pandemic is affecting local commu-

nities, Bertozzi says, “our survey indicates the public is looking for highly-qualified voices capable of unpacking the complexity of the situation,” expertise not commonly available among financially strapped local Italian news outlets. “We interpreted these trends as a clear request for a more responsible approach by the media.”

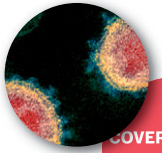
What went wrong? The intense politicization of media is one dimension. Especially in the early days of the outbreak, media coverage echoed the quarrelsome ecosystem of Italian politics. The result was a mix of alarmism and under-estimation, mostly reflecting politicians’ attitudes and agendas.

Italian newspapers and magazines are quite openly engaged in political debate, thanks also to the noticeable absence of firewalls between newsrooms and editorial pages. The old power structure was partially shaken when La Repubblica, one of the newspapers with the widest circulations and an openly left-leaning voice, was acquired by the Agnelli family’s Exor, which owns the Turin-based La Stampa and is the major stakeholder in The Economist Group. La Repubblica’s main competitor, the centrist Il Corriere della Sera, is part of the RCS group, which publishes, among others, the conservative-leaning daily El Mundo in Spain.

On February 27, a week after the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in Lombardy, a giant headline on La Repubblica’s front page blared “Let’s re-open Milan,”

A waiter stands outside a restaurant in Venice’s St. Mark’s Square, which is usually full of tourists, in March 2020

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
To limit the spread of coronavirus, chairs are set a safe distance apart for a meeting at municipal headquarters in Milan



COVERING THE
CORONAVIRUS

quoting the Democratic mayor of the city, Beppe Sala. At that point, schools in Milan had been closed for several days, but the mayor was pushing to go back to normal life, against the advice of Lombardy's governor, Attilio Fontana, a member of the right-wing populist party The League. Most of the national media insisted on the back-to-normal narrative.

The same day, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that the epidemic in Italy and elsewhere “demonstrate[s] what this virus is capable of” and pushed even countries with no confirmed cases to move swiftly. The next day, no major newspaper in Italy mentioned WHO's warnings on its front pages. “Faced with increasingly dramatic circumstances, Italian media weren't able to get rid of their typical flaws: fear and discord,” says Luca Sofri, the editor of *Il Post*, an independent online outlet focused on explanatory journalism.

Peddling alarms and sowing conflicts, he says, are the main criteria Italian media apply for selecting and presenting news in ordinary times. “But in extraordinary times like these, media should be more careful than usual, as our responsibilities dramatically increase. That just didn't happen,” Sofri says.

Giuseppe De Bellis, editor-in-chief of the all-news channel SkyTG24, thinks that, after a rocky start, Italian media are now generally reporting fairly on the crisis. “Most of the fake news circulating at the beginning of the outbreak has been debunked and marginalized,” says De Bellis. “An excessive rush to publish unverified scoops before the competitors is now giving way to a more responsible attitude by the media.”

Il Post emerged as a go-to source for clear and noise-free reports on the pandemic. A combination of Vox-style explainers unpacking basic scientific notions, carefully reported pieces on areas particularly hit by the pandemic, and well-sourced stories on its broader effects on society – for instance, the shortage of fresh food in grocery stores, as European agriculture heavily depends on immigrant workers – offered readers an alternative to the rushed and heavily politicized coverage of some legacy media. The timing was also relevant. *Il Post* launched a coronavirus-dedicated newsletter on February 24, four days after the first case was confirmed in Italy. *La Repubblica* started its themed newsletter on March 13.

Il Post traffic, Sofri says, almost tripled during the first weeks of the emergency, and the revenue from subscriptions significantly increased. *Il Post* is free, and it has an optional monthly plan that rewards subscribers with an ad-free experience. Despite the success of some independent media, early surveys on Covid-19 coverage suggest Italy is hardly experiencing a surge in media trust.

SPAIN

IN SPAIN, WHERE a lockdown has been in place since March 15, media initially focused on factual reporting and were generally supportive of government measures. “That attitude lasted maybe a week, then the traditional polarized instincts kicked in again,” says Hector Fouce, a media theorist



at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. He notes the “national emergency” narrative slowly gave way to more political coverage.

Sometimes factions try to rewrite history. Health authorities issued no public warning against the March 8 Women's March, and conservative politicians in Madrid, for instance, not only didn't call for the suspension of the march, but they actually joined the march. The closest thing to a warning was a general recommendation to all European countries from the ECDC (the European equivalent to the CDC) on March 2 to be careful with large gatherings, especially indoors. The fact that the march went ahead as planned is an issue that conservatives and especially the far-right are using, but there was no health warning at the time. That weekend there were still soccer games and a large gathering, indoors, of the far-right party Vox; unfortunately, few were aware of the danger.

In Spain, the three major newspapers are marked by their political orientations. *El País*, part of the media conglomerate PRISA — which also controls the largest private radio station, Cadena SER — is openly left-leaning and generally aligned with the socialist party PSOE, currently leading a fragile coalition government with the left-wing populist Podemos and some independentist parties. *El Mundo's* center-right editorial line jibes with the agenda of the People's Party, and in 2014 its

PAU BARRENA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



editor-in-chief and co-founder, Pedro J. Ramírez, was fired after exposing an illegal financing scheme in the party led by then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The daily ABC represents social conservatives and its views are inspired by the Catholic faith. Along with legacy media, a number of native digital outlets have been gaining traction, such as El Español, eldiario.es, El Confidencial, and público.es.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 emergency, Spanish outlets have produced some remarkable journalism and aggressively reported on the government's faults in dealing with the crisis. For instance, El País reported that the much-needed quick testing kits purchased by the government from a Chinese company were unreliable. The government bought 640,000 faulty kits and pre-ordered 5.5 million more.

The Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has been criticized for declaring a state of emergency too late and underestimating the warnings coming from Italy. When the wave of infections hit, the Spanish health system was hardly prepared to handle it, and hospitals experienced a massive shortage of protective equipment. Health care workers unions are suing the authorities for not protecting their members, who got infected at rates higher than anywhere else in the world.

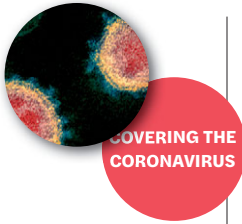
Sánchez's popularity is plummeting. A survey by the Spanish firm GAD3 shows that government approval

ratings dropped to 27.7%, from around 35% before the emergency, making the socialist leader the only head of government in Western Europe who's losing support. By contrast, the same research, conducted near the end of March, suggests trust in media has been rising during the emergency: 54% of Spaniards said they have a good opinion of the media.

Another debate involving the role of journalists stemmed from El Mundo's controversial decision to publish on its front page a picture with dozens of coffins lined up in a popular Madrid ice rink that was turned into a morgue. For the first time during the coronavirus crisis, the Spanish people were confronted with images that visually depicted the scope of the tragedy. El Mundo defended its choice to use a photo that "challenges the government and the Spanish civil conscience in a drastic and unavoidable way," and other media have complained about the strict limitations put on photo-journalists covering the harshest dimensions of the crisis. The digital newspaper El Independiente called it a "censored tragedy."

María Ramírez, director of strategy at eldiario.es, says much of the public criticism among Spaniards seems to be focused on the government response rather than on the media. "Trust is also measured in terms of subscribers," Ramírez says, noting that since the beginning of the emergency eldiario.es moved from 36,000 members to

A Spanish soldier stands in a temporary hospital set up in a Barcelona convention center



about 50,000. The digital newspaper, founded in 2012 and owned by its journalists, doesn't have a paywall but asks its readers to pay a recurring fee to support its mission. Roughly one-third of its revenue comes from their community members, known as *socios*.

Many established outlets in Europe gained new subscribers during the crisis, but most of them offer discounted subscriptions. *eldiario.es* instead increased its annual fee from €60 to €80 as part of an emergency plan to compensate for the loss of ad revenue, which also included self-imposed salary cuts in the newsroom.

As in other countries, the emergency is drawing people mostly to legacy media, but some data journalism outlets like *Datadista* are gaining traction for their engaging, user-friendly presentation of stats on the pandemic. *Datadista* is doing granular analysis of the main figures provided by the health authorities on confirmed cases, people who recovered, number of victims, and hospital capacity. But it's also providing simple explanatory videos on government subsidies for commercial activities and the self-employed, maps of gas stations still operating, and heavily researched anal-

ysis on unemployment and the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

Founded in 2016 by investigative reporters Antonio Delgado and Ana Tudela, *Datadista* specializes in data analysis and visualization and was behind several in-depth investigative works, such as *Playa Burbuja*, a two-year-long project that unveiled a vast network of corruption in the real estate market on the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

FRANCE

A SINGLE STORY ON the epidemic in France sums up all the tensions that have been ravaging the national conversation in the past few years, including the elements that contributed to a remarkable erosion in media trust: the debate around Didier Raoult, the iconoclastic microbiologist who's suggesting treating Covid-19 patients with a therapy based on hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug. Raoult's hypothesis, which has been tested so far only on a small sample

THE THREAT—AND OPPORTUNITY— COVID-19 BRINGS TO HUNGARY'S EMBATTLED JOURNALISTS

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is ratcheting up pressure on independent news outlets. But coronavirus coverage can demonstrate the value of a free press

BY ANDRAS PETHO

JOURNALISTS HAVE HAD a rough decade in Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's increasingly authoritarian rule. Now, the coronavirus crisis may make it even harder for independent news outlets to survive.

The economic downturn driven by the pandemic has already caused enormous damage to the news media even in wealthy and stable democracies. Try to imagine then the impact it has in a country where independent journalism has been shrinking rapidly for years due to a lethal mix of financial pressures and political attacks.

Orbán, called "Trump before Trump" by former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, has been in power since 2010. He made cracking down on independent media one of his top priorities. Under his rule, the supposedly impartial public media has been turned into a mouthpiece of the government. His business allies took over previously independent news organizations and transformed them into propaganda outlets. The biggest opposition newspaper was shut down as part of these maneuvers while every single

local newspaper in the countryside came under the control of Orbán and his allies.

Those still standing are often accused by the government of being part of the opposition. While there are outlets that follow more partisan lines, this is definitely not true for all of them. The constant attacks, however, hurt the credibility of everybody, even that of more objective news organizations.

Whenever facing criticism over the state of the media, the government is quick to point out that there are still several critical news outlets in Hungary. That is true; some of the most widely read online publications and even the most watched TV channel are independent and they often publish critical stories about Orbán and his circle. But it's also true that even five years ago we had a much healthier landscape with many more outlets doing what journalism should: informing the public and holding the powerful to account.

The danger of the current crisis is that it has the potential to cause serious, maybe even irreversible, damage to the remaining independent outlets. Their

of patients, was enthusiastically endorsed by Donald Trump and touted on Fox News, but was met with skepticism by many scientists. French media are aggressively covering a dispute whose nature is not purely scientific but has deep cultural and political implications.

Raoult is from Marseille, in the south of France, and frames his understanding of the present as a struggle between the French people and the Parisian elite. The 68-year-old director of the Méditerranée Infection Institute enjoys a cult-like following on social media, and his theories have been warmly endorsed by anyone wanting to strike a blow against officially validated experts. Emmanuel Macron's decision to pay a surprise visit to the doctor in Marseille suggests the story, in France, goes beyond its clinical dimension. Journalists too have been entangled in this cultural clash.

The 2019 Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute ranked France last among European countries in terms of public confidence in the media. The Yellow Vests protests — started in the fall of 2018 as a protest against rising taxes on gas, which then morphed into an anti-establishment movement advocating for eco-

nomie justice — only exacerbated mistrust in reporters. Journalists struggled to cover in a balanced way an elusive, grassroots movement that sparked violent clashes around the country and became a vehicle for the frustrations of both the far-right and the far-left. Protesters were successful in portraying mainstream media as government-friendly entities, encouraging their sympathizers to look for alternative sources of information on social media and elsewhere.

During the protests, the all-news channel BFM TV, known for its sensationalist and inflammatory reporting, became one of the most popular and yet most criticized broadcasters in the country. Outlets like RT France, the French version of the Russian television channel RT, and the Kremlin-controlled agency Sputnik gained traction among online news brands. The decision of President Macron to treat them as “propaganda organs” indirectly contributed to their popularity among Yellow Vests supporters.

Le Monde, Le Figaro, and Libération are the three main legacy newspapers, characterized by different political inclinations. Le Figaro is the voice of conservatives,

financial foundation is already shaky, not only because of universal business model problems but also because Hungary is a small market where the government happens to be a dominant advertiser. And it is using its gigantic marketing budget to further disrupt the market: the friendly outlets can count on lucrative ad campaigns while the critical ones will not see any of that money.

Independent media can only rely on the advertisements of private companies and those readers who are willing to support their favorite outlets. Online paywalls are not prevalent in Hungary. These already unstable financial legs can be crushed by the economic downturn expected from the pandemic. Bankrupt companies or ones with tight budgets will advertise less and readers who lost their jobs or face uncertainty may think twice before they financially support news outlets.

In fact, the suffering has already started: several media companies announced budget cuts and layoffs in recent weeks. And, since we are in Hungary, there is a political threat in addition to the financial struggles.

At the end of March, the Hungarian parliament, where Orbán's right-wing coalition has a supermajority, adopted a new law that authorized him to rule by decree indefinitely. The government says that this will end as soon as the coronavirus crisis is over. But opposition parties, human rights organizations, and several E.U. member states criticized the move, saying that this practically means the end of Hungary as a democracy.

The critics find one element of the law especially alarming. It threatens jail terms of up to five years for those who spread false information that hampers the fight against the epidemic. Some see this as a way to further silence independent news outlets that have been questioning the preparedness and the efficiency of how the government is handling the crisis.

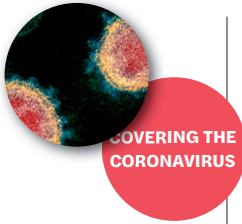


But it is not all bad news. The government has also made some supportive gestures towards media companies. As part of its economic support package, media firms will be exempted from paying some portion of their social security contributions. There is some confusion over whether this will apply to every outlet, but it seems certain that even many of the independent media companies will be among the beneficiaries.

And while it is an understandably stressful time for everybody, this crazy period is also a huge opportunity for journalism. By informing the people who are hungry for reliable information and by holding the powerful to account — and thus, making their response to the crisis more effective — we can demonstrate the value of our profession, so that when this is finally over we will have a more trusting and fruitful relationship with the public.

Nobody needs that more than Hungary's embattled journalists. ■

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at Parliament. Legislation was approved giving him sweeping powers to enact measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus



while *Libération*, co-founded by Jean-Paul Sartre on the heels of the 1968 movement, progressively moved from the Marxist left to more mainstream progressive ideas. While formally not affiliated with any political stance, *Le Monde* is broadly associated with center-left values.

France has also a strong tradition of regional newspapers, like the widely-circulated *Ouest-France*, in the western region of the country, or *La Voix du Nord*, based in the northern city of Lille. Among digital native outlets, the investigative website *Mediapart*, founded in 2008, is a staple in French political journalism. Last year, the subscription-based outlet reached 170,000 members and switched to a nonprofit structure to secure its editorial independence.

The Covid-19 emergency provides an opportunity to rebuild trust. In the past few weeks, several legacy media websites and broadcasters broke their previous audience records, and in March the heavily criticized BFM TV had its best month in history, showing again the ambivalent relationship between trustworthiness and popularity. “What is relevant is that digital subscriptions to local press are also doing well,” says Alice Antehaume, executive director of Sciences Po Journalism School, pointing to a trend not seen elsewhere in Europe. “We could imagine that when confined in a specific town, people want to know more about the number of cases in the area they are concerned about.”

Unlike Spain and Italy, France may be seeing a more effective suspension of the political engagement that traditionally characterizes national media. Arnaud Mercier, a communication science professor at the Université Paris 2, sees a significant change in attitude by the media since the emergency started. (France has been in lockdown since March 17.) “Media have tried from the early stage to provide useful and clear information to the public, sticking to the facts and giving voice to experts, while relying less on opinion and editorials,” says Mercier. “The public is generally not very fond of journalists, but I think the dramatic circumstances are temporarily bridging this divide.”

“The public is generally not very fond of journalists, but I think the dramatic circumstances are temporarily bridging this divide”

ARNAUD MERCIER, UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 2

Le Monde has put in place tools to engage its audience in a more personal way. “When people really care about what’s happening, they tend to go to legacy media to get reliable information and authoritative, fact-based analysis,” says Cécile Prieur, *Le Monde*’s deputy editor. “That’s why we are stressing the importance of strengthening the relationship with our community.”

For its Covid-19 coverage, *Le Monde* introduced “Live,” a continuous stream of updates on the pandemic driven by a dedicated team, operating every day from 5 a.m. to midnight. On “Live” — a tool that has been used

for several years for breaking news and big, developing stories — readers can interact with questions and comments, and reporters strive to provide timely and clear answers. This service, which is not paywalled — *Le Monde* has a freemium model — gathers around 1 million visits per day, getting on average 4,000 to 5,000 questions from users. A slower “Live” section dedicated to life in lockdown is also active on the website on a daily basis, where readers can share their experiences and reflections.

At the end of March, *Le Monde* launched an explanatory WhatsApp thread providing a selection of verified news and practical information to navigate the daily routine of the pandemic. Subscribers to this free feature can also flag suspicious messages and unverified information on what has probably been the platform most hit by misinformation. The legacy daily also produces the podcast “Pandémie,” which has consistently been among the top-downloaded podcasts in the country.

GERMANY

C **COVID-19 HIT GERMANY** somewhat later, compared to Italy, Spain, and France, and so far the country has been able to contain the number of victims, thanks to its massive ability to test and to its robust healthcare system. The German media landscape is also solid and generally trusted. The major daily newspapers are defined both by their regional areas and by political orientation. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, headquartered in Munich, has a center-left outlook; the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is generally associated with a center-right position, and *Die Welt* is a conservative outlet. The left-leaning *Der Spiegel* is the most widely circulated weekly magazine in the country, while *Die Zeit* is a liberal newspaper.

Despite being generally trusted, in recent years German media have gone through a series of challenges. In 2015, the refugee crisis coverage pushed public trust in journalism to its lowest point, and far-right parties like *Alternative Für Deutschland* waged a vocal campaign to discredit what it called the government-serving “lying press” and question public financing for federal broadcasters. The relative decrease in trust was also fueled by the case of a prize-winning journalist, Claas Relotius, who was discovered to have falsified facts for his stories in *Der Spiegel*.

Media observatories in Germany are currently studying the impact of the coronavirus coverage on media trust, but preliminary observations suggest Germans are generally satisfied with reporting that is mostly data-oriented and led by legacy media. “My sense is that people are flocking around established sources of news,” says Carsten Reinemann, a communications professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. “That does not mean there isn’t fake news, conspiracy theories, and bad, sensationalistic reporting out there. But my feeling is that this crisis might strengthen the image of and trust in quality journalism, and public service broadcasting in particular.”

“This is obviously a crucial time for explanatory data



journalism,” says Uli Köppen, head of data journalism at the German public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR). She co-leads an investigative data team and has built a newly created AI team at the Munich-based network, but the Covid-19 emergency turned their focus to what she calls “bread-and-butter data journalism.”

“We’re really focused on processing and explaining the numbers in a way that is understandable for the public, without being too fancy about visualization,” Köppen says, starting with an automated map that monitors confirmed cases and drew significant traffic. “Users need to understand what’s happening, and we have to carefully explain what the numbers are saying and what they are not saying.” Her data team is doing also some investigative work on the spread of the coronavirus in Germany.

For instance, BR analyzed the Instagram accounts of thousands of people who between the end of February and early March visited the popular ski town of Ischgl, in Austria, one of the hotspots of the contagion in Europe. Tourists moved then as far as Turkey, Portugal, and Iceland, but the vast majority returned to Germany, where they contributed to spreading the virus before any social distancing measures were in place.

“We are working a lot to make our users understand that the numbers are not the truth, but approximate estimates of what’s happening,” says Vanessa Wormer, an investigative reporter who leads a data team at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and was part of the Panama Papers global team. “There’s also a lot we don’t know. Some of them are confused by the fact that also experts disagree,

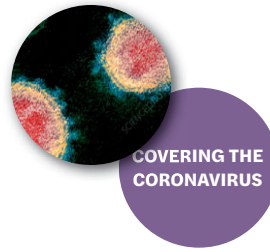
and one thing we’ve been focusing on is explaining the different sets of assumptions upon which different scientific hypotheses are based.”

For instance, her team created a “corona simulation” exploring different scenarios of the outbreak, explaining why some scientists suggest the curve should be stopped, not just flattened. The paywalled story brought many new subscribers to the daily. “I can’t think of any other time in data journalism when visualization was so important,” says Wormer.

The effort to carefully present audiences with data-based, expert-driven reporting on the pandemic comes with some questions over the role of journalists. “While media in Germany are generally providing a good service to the public in need of information, I am concerned we are missing a debate about the role of journalism,” says Mario Haim, a professor of data journalism at the University of Leipzig. “There’s a lot of very useful data visualization on numbers of infected and victims in different countries, presented in a way that reminds me of the Olympics medal table. But the reporting mostly echoes the words of political leaders and experts are sometimes given the stage without the mediation of journalists.”

The pandemic poses an existential threat to the media industry at a global level. But the urgency of the threat is also strengthening the demand for reliable information, providing a chance for media to correct its own flaws. It could be a space for self-criticism and re-orientation toward practices and standards that will, in time, rebuild trust. ■

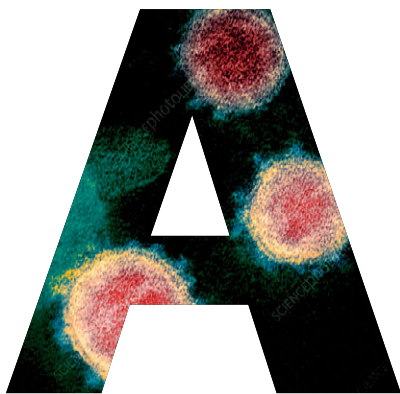
Place de la Concorde is empty during the morning rush hour in Paris



THE ANTIDOTE FOR AUTHORITARIAN OVERREACH

By joining forces across national borders,
news outlets can better counter censorship
and misinformation

BY BRIAN FRIEDBERG, GABRIELLE LIM, and JOAN DONOVAN



S THE WORLD grapples with the spread of Covid-19, we see a wide range of individual national responses to the pandemic. Different countries around the world are seeking to both control the spread of the virus and to also control the behavior of their citizens during this global crisis. Many of these responses strain democratic systems, accelerate authoritarianism, and restrain journalism.

Civil society, journalists, and academics have long documented opportunistic expansions of state power during periods of unrest and instability. Crises allow “would-be authoritarians an escape from constitutional shackles,” say political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. In just a few short months, Covid-19 has emboldened leaders to both expand and centralize state power at an unprecedented pace.

At the Technology and Social Change Research Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center, we are noticing alarming trends wherein ill-defined categorizations of "fake news" and misinformation are being used as justification for censorship and the suspension of civil liberties. For example, in Iran, where Covid-19 has wreaked havoc, merely questioning government reports on Covid-19 has caused backlash from the authorities. When two journalists were summoned by Iranian intelligence agents, they were told that "releasing information in this sensitive time is like cooperation with adversary states."

Iran's intervention in journalism is emblematic of a growing trend in the use of censorship to curtail press freedoms, intimidate dissidents, and prop up authoritarian leaders in a time of crisis. This hostile situation unfortunately leaves journalists, along with civil society, stuck in a war on two fronts: one against increasingly draconian measures to limit speech and another against a deluge of lies and misinformation online.

Recently, South Africa has made it a criminal offense to spread disinformation about the disease, though it remains to be seen how intention and veracity will be determined. Egypt has revoked the press credentials of a journalist with The Guardian and censured The New York Times Cairo bureau chief over "bad faith" reporting on the country's Covid-19 cases. Meanwhile, Russia has ordered tech platforms to remove "fake news" regarding the pandemic lest they face "stringent" action.

The upward trend in information controls is not limited to foreign states. In the United States, President Trump and his administration have repeatedly misled the public by promoting unproven treatments, playing down the severity of the pandemic in its initial outbreak, and limiting access to information for journalists, leading to a number of FOIA requests.

More direct assaults on the democratic process are also underway in the name of fighting Covid-19. Cambodia, in an ambitious power grab, has drafted a state of emergency bill so extreme that Human Rights Watch warned that it would "allow the government to restrict all civil and political liberties and target human rights, democracy, and media groups."

There are three ways civil society, academia, and fellow journalists can fight this dual-pronged attack on press freedom and democratic participation.

First, civil society is in a prime position to push back against undue censorship and attacks on the free press. Not only are activists and NGOs connected with issues most salient to the public, but their international networks and connections with intergovernmental bodies can be leveraged to document violations of civil liberties.

For example, Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), an organization that promotes grassroots activism and human rights in China, has not only documented and provided analysis regarding Covid-19 and censorship but actively engages with the United Nations. Indeed many other international advocacy organizations do similar engagements, but they must come



together in innovative ways to combat the growing threat to press freedom. Years of network and capacity building have prepared civil society for just such a moment. Now is the time to experiment with broad coalitions.

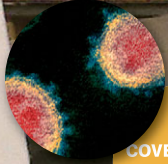
Academic freedom and freedom of speech are codependent, making for another point of common cause between academics, researchers, and journalists. Although universities and research centers must hold themselves to a high standard of academic rigor, this does not mean remaining silent when others depend on evidence. This means not only sharing research with journalists, but taking a position and speaking out when necessary, even on matters that may be politically charged.

Lastly, international journalism and cross-border reporting can help journalists and press freedom overall. Where local journalists are fearful of government retaliation, foreign outlets and journalists in a different jurisdiction can help. Take the 1MDB financial scandal, for example. Following explosive allegations in 2015 that Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak was involved in a massive multi-billion dollar financial scandal, domestic journalists and media outlets were targeted with arrests, harassment, and content blocking. However, foreign reporting from The Wall Street Journal and The Sarawak Report helped shed light on the extent of the corruption as well as bring international attention to the matter.

What's novel about the pandemic isn't the authoritarian response. What's different is the scale and speed with which it's happening all over the world at the same time. But authoritarian overreach doesn't have to be the only hallmark of the pandemic. With extraordinary measures should come extraordinary oversight. This era will also be marked by how journalists and their allies respond in this two-front war against misinformation and censorship, and hopefully stand as testament to what can be achieved amidst a global crisis. ■

A makeshift memorial outside Wuhan's Central Hospital for Dr. Li Wenliang, who issued early warnings about the coronavirus before dying of it himself in February 2020

Direct assaults on the democratic process are underway in the name of fighting Covid-19



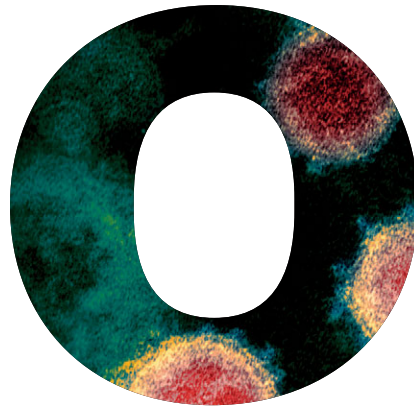
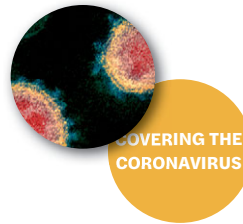
COVERING THE
CORONAVIRUS

SOLVING THE FUNDING CRISIS

**Covid-19
is threatening
to extinguish local
journalism — and fueling
bold proposals to fund
its long-term future**

BY CATHERINE BUNI





N APRIL 3, Mandy Jenkins paused from her work as general manager of The Compass Experiment — a partnership between Google and McClatchy to explore new business models for local news — to take a call. She had to be quick, she said. Traffic at Mahoning Matters, a digital community news source in Youngstown, Ohio, the first of three Compass Experiment projects and part of the Google News Initiative’s Local Experiments

Project, was spiking.

Two days earlier, Mahoning County — of which Youngstown, a city of some 64,000 with one of the highest poverty rates in the country (36.2%, more than three times the national average) is part — had become the state’s top hot spot for Covid-19. And just a few days before that, Jenkins’ colleague and friend Mahoning Matters business executive Mark Eckert died after contracting the virus.

Now, Jenkins and her staff of four, all working from home, were under tremendous pressure to cover critical breaking health news. They also had to maintain newly developed community resources for the thousands of additional readers looking to Mahoning Matters for local coronavirus coverage: a running FAQ, lists of closures and cancellations, churches offering virtual services and restaurants open for carryout and delivery. Not only were more readers coming directly to Mahoning Matters’ website, Jenkins says, “Our email list is going through the roof. We are far exceeding our growth projections.”

Little more than a month before Jenkins launched Mahoning Matters in October 2019, Youngstown’s local paper, The Vindicator, folded after 150 years in operation, leaving residents without local coverage. Mahoning Matters is trying to fill that void — but at a time when local news faces what some commentators have called “unthinkable” destruction, “extinction,” and “total annihilation,” as the coronavirus ravages revenue sources such as advertising, events, and sponsorships. Even as the pandemic has caused traffic to explode, the financial side effects of the disease have forced news outlets to furlough or lay off reporters, to merge operations and, in some cases, to shut down entirely, the wreckage now tracked through the Tow Center’s Covid-19 Newsletter.

All this comes at a time when, even before the pan-



demic, more than 65 million Americans lived in counties with only one local newspaper or, like those in Youngstown, Ohio, none at all, according to a November 2019 Brookings report.

“This may be a moment where we lose local journalism,” warns David Chavern, president and CEO of News Media Alliance, a D.C.-based trade association representing some 2,000 news publishers in the United States and Canada.

As local journalism’s revenues collapsed in the early days of the pandemic, local news readership and subscriptions were surging. Sue Cross, executive director and CEO of the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), says that in a poll of some member organizations, lo-

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The Toronto Star newsroom as staffers work remotely during the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020

THIS PAGE: Mandy Jenkins, general manager of The Compass Experiment, launched Mahoning Matters in 2019

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES
THIS PAGE: DOUGLAS ZIMMERMAN OPPOSITE: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS



cal, national, and specialized outlets alike are reporting five- to 10-fold increases in readership. In Missouri, a St. Louis American story about the first Covid-19 death in the region received more than one million pageviews in three days. In the prior month, there had been 167,000 unique visitors to the site. In Pennsylvania, Christopher Baxter, editor-in-chief of Spotlight PA, a collaborative newsroom backed by The Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and PennLive/The Patriot-News, among others, says some stories now attract “easily north of 500,000 and 600,000 readers.”

“Local news and information provide a first-warning system, but they are also a connective tissue,” says Tim Franklin, senior associate dean at Northwestern University’s Medill journalism school and head of the Medill Local News Initiative. “We’re in self-isolation and quarantine. The ability to have an entity that is looking at your neighbors and local officials and describing to you how they’re doing is vital to mental health, not just physical health.”

The argument that journalism is an essential public service, that access to fact-based information is a human right, vital to civil society and public health, is gaining traction. How can that translate into a more sustainable financial future for journalism, especially at the local level and in the country’s most vulnerable communities?

There is a rich array of proposals in discussion — from antitrust and IRS reform to licensing fees for news

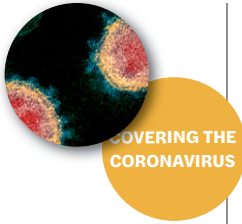
content, subsidized vouchers for readers to increased unionization, among many other ideas — including some that deserve serious consideration and yet are beyond the scope of this article. In conversation with more than two dozen journalists, researchers, and industry leaders across a wide range of news models, Nieman Reports examined four broad categories of support: monetization, philanthropy, taxing tech platforms, and public funding.

MONETIZE THE CRISIS

On March 24, with U.S. cases topping 50,000, 25,000 of them in New York, the Local Media Association’s Nancy Cawley Lane wrote a post, “How to Survive Covid-19,” on LinkedIn for LMA’s members. The 3,000 members represent newspapers, TV stations, radio stations, and directories. The previous week, across the country, some 36 local newsrooms had announced layoffs, furloughs, or shutdowns.

“Find a sponsor to cover your coronavirus coverage outside of the paywall,” she urged. “Grow your newsletter subscriber list ... Don’t have a newsletter strategy? Now is the time to change that ... Offer employees optional unpaid time off while still covering their benefits... If you rely on print distribution, cutbacks are necessary... Collaborate. Now is the time to team up with

Mahoning Matters is trying to fill the void left when Youngstown’s local newspaper closed



other media companies in your area.”

Cawley Lane argues that business model changes made now in response to the crisis can sustain outlets into the future. “Companies are implementing their three- to five-year plan in three days. The crisis forced their hand,” she says. And given the interest in pandemic-related news, consumer revenue is likely the biggest opportunity right now. “Journalists need to be having honest conversations with their communities about why they need to pay for news, whether that’s a digital subscription, membership, or contribution,” she says.

According to a 2019 Pew report, only 14% of adults and only 9% of those aged 30-49 say they pay for local news. The INN recently reported that some two-thirds of news organizations had yet to launch a member-

ship program. In late April, LMA issued “Sustainable Solutions for Local Media in the Time of Covid-19,” based on a survey of LMA members, finding that many publishing companies “are now aggressively looking for ways to promote their fundraising at every audience touch point. Paywalls have been lowered, or partially lowered, and that change is being used to drive subscriptions. Like donation drives, subscription drives are in full swing.”

The Nevada News Group, which includes more than a half-dozen local papers, is offering a subscription special and has put out “a call to action” to the community for donations. In less than a week, it raised \$3,000. “We’ve also set up a call bank to make phone calls for donations,” CFO Matt Fisher says. “We are using this as

GOVERNMENT FUNDING SHOULD SUPPORT INNOVATION

The Danish government is funding news outlets during the coronavirus crisis. But the structure of that funding obstructs innovation in an industry desperate for change

BY JAKOB MOLL

DENMARK IS KNOWN as a prototypical welfare state, and the country reacted as such from the moment the corona crisis emerged in Europe — with top-down and far-reaching measures from the central government. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen went on national television and brought the country to a halt.

The impact of the crisis on the news media was handled with the same governmental determination. As demands for action to support the media grew louder in parliament, Minister of Culture Joy Mogensen announced a rescue plan. The government would subsidize publishers’ lost advertising revenue: 60% of losses would be reimbursed for publishers that could document 30 to 50% declines in ad revenues, 80% for outlets reporting declines of more than half. Parliament immediately backed the plan.

I co-founded Zetland, a membership-based digital newspaper delivering slow journalism to our young-leaning audience of more than 15,000 members. We turned profitable last year. Calculating the crisis’s effect on Zetland’s advertising revenue is easy: We just compare zero to zero. Back in 2015, we decided to exclude ads from our business model.

I’m fairly sure a proposal to transfer cash to the private news industry would raise eyebrows in many

countries, or at least take more than a few days to formulate, discuss, and approve. Not in Denmark, though, where journalism long has been considered a public good. Danish newspapers were made exempt from sales tax back in the 1960s, and an elaborate system for government financial support emerged later in the century.

Critics noted that the support system was essentially preserving the status quo: It subsidized existing publishers based on recent balance sheets, but what about newcomers? A small “innovation fund” was put in place to help fund news startups. My company was among its first recipients, with the government contributing about a quarter of our initial funding.

A basic argument for government media support is the size of the country. Our population is 5.7 million, and if you want the media to handle a crisis like the coronavirus as efficiently as our public sector, then it makes sense to think of journalism as a public good worthy of direct support. But at the same time, the crisis package is symptomatic of the complications that arise when the government plays an active role in the private media sector. Denmark’s media policies have always been focused on preserving rather than transforming the status quo. Often, they actively obstruct innovation in an industry desperate for change.

an educational opportunity, too. We make sure the person at the other end of the line learns something about what it takes to produce a paper and regular news.”

In early April, the LMA launched the Covid-19 Local News Fund fundraising tool to help news outlets run campaigns for tax-deductible donations through LMA’s 501(c)(3) foundation. Jed Williams, LMA’s chief strategy officer, reported that within four weeks, news organizations had raised \$500,000 from 6,000 individual donations, with some 200 local news outlets participating, 13 of which had raised more than \$10,000. Anchorage Daily News was the first participant in the Covid-19 Local News Fund to reach \$30,000. The Houston Defender, which publishes community news in print and online, launched its fundraiser via text mes-

For example, the government supported physical news distribution until 2013. The sales tax exemption was not expanded to include digital publications until last year. The central law for newsroom support only applies to text-based publishers, since it was written back when media companies stuck to one way of publishing content. Other formats — audio, say — may only be included if the activities are, as described in the law, “limited in scope.” Nobody knows exactly what that means. Currently, Danish legacy newspapers can produce podcasts with government support, but podcasting companies cannot.

There are many more examples, but the bottom line is this: Danish media policies are solidly rooted in what media looked like in the past. They disincentivize experiments with publishing formats, distribution methods, funding, and organizing journalistic work. What the news industry needs is the exact opposite: Incentives to try to reach audiences in new ways.

And now, in the hour of the corona crisis, the government has singled out the advertising business model for emergency support. It’s a strange choice to directly subsidize advertising, as its value to the public is next to nothing, except for the revenue it brings publishers. Subscription- and donation-based business models have more promising long-term prospects than the old ad-based model. It makes sense to support these possibly more sustainable paths to funding than simply filling the holes in missed ad targets.

Similarly, many publishers have a growing interest in events as a source of revenue and a way to bring journalism to new audiences. These kinds of events benefit public debate, and bringing people together is a great path to social trust — once the pandemic has passed and it’s once again safe to gather, of course. So post-pandemic journalistic events would seem a more forward-looking choice for government support.

Any government thinking about supporting journalism should ask itself: How do we strengthen the parts of the news ecosystem that offer the most journalistic promise and the most financial viability for the future?

sage; within a week, it had raised more than \$45,000.

“One way or another, whether for-profit, nonprofit, your small donor or subscriber support is going to end up being essential,” says Nate Payne, editor of the Traverse City (Michigan) Record-Eagle.

The LMA is seeing additional monetization strategies such as special advertising programs and microsites that showcase local restaurants and businesses. The bottom line, says Payne, is, “Americans need to begin to realize that the journalism they’ve been used to getting at a deep discount or for free — and from which they derive and democracy derives significant value — is something they’re going to have to invest in.”

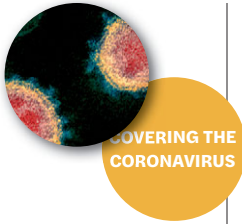


At Zetland, we have been fortunate so far. We have grown substantially since the crisis began. In the first few days, we made immediate and radical changes to how we work and what we publish. We started publishing an overview of developments every morning and afternoon. Teams were put together to make deep dives into aspects of the corona crisis. We invited members into a conference call with the editor-in-chief to inform our decisions. We published webcam-recorded videos of ourselves to remind our members that we are all in this together.

As a young company, we were able to adapt quickly when the crisis hit. We are used to changing things on a weekly basis based on member feedback, data, and testing. At the same time, we are proof that you can build a sustainable business on the principle that people will pay what journalism costs, if they experience its value. Which is a hopeful, encouraging thought for all journalists.

Change is coming to journalism no matter what. But it doesn’t all have to be for the worse. If the crisis inspires more radical decision-making within the news industry or helps us develop forward-looking models for supporting journalism as a public good, we might end up looking back at this crisis as a valuable turning point. ■

Clockwise from left: Hakon Mosbech, Lea Korsgaard, Kirstine Dons Christensen, and Jakob Moll of Denmark’s digital newspaper Zetland



PIVOT TO PHILANTHROPY

In 2009 former Washington Post executive editor and vice president Leonard Downie Jr. and Columbia Journalism School professor Michael Schudson argued in their “The Reconstruction of American Journalism” report that philanthropists and foundations “should substantially increase their support for news organizations that have demonstrated a substantial commitment to public affairs and accountability reporting.” In the intervening decade, according to a 2019 Media Impact Report, journalism philanthropy has quadrupled, with 17,750 total grants made to 2,369 U.S.-based organizations, totaling \$1.7 billion, with \$326 million going to investigative reporting. According to the INN, nonprofit newsrooms receive about 40% of their revenues from foundations.

In California, the Fresno Bee now has 10 reporters paid for by philanthropic funders. The Seattle Times brings in more than \$2 million a year for reporting. The Miami Herald was recently the beneficiary of a \$2.5 million endowment to pay for an investigative reporter. And, of course, there are strong single-issue models operating solely on philanthropic funding, including The Marshall Project, ProPublica, and MLK50.

“Philanthropy is going to be a key pillar going forward,” says Joseph Lichtenman, manager of editorial and digital strategy at the Lenfest Institute, dedicated to preserving local journalism. “The way we describe it is like supporting the symphony or a museum. Civic journalism as a public good.”

Elizabeth Green, co-founder and CEO of Chalkbeat, is a pioneer in creating local, sustainable, and independent news outlets. A nonprofit news organization covering education, Chalkbeat has more than 200 donors and institutions supporting its award-winning coverage, with an average gift of \$75,000 contributing to a \$12 million budget. “We also have seen that we are recruiting first-time donors to news,” Green says. “Eighty-three percent of our donors are first-time donors.”

Green is also co-founder of the American Journalism Project (AJP), which raised \$46 million in 2019, with donations from the Knight Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Emerson Collective, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Democracy Fund, and the Facebook Journalism Project, among others. So far, AJP has seeded 11 civic-news organizations, including Berkeleyside in East Bay, CA; Centro de Periodismo Investigativo in San Juan, PR; inewsourc in San Diego, CA; Mississippi Today in Ridgeland, MS; NOISE in Omaha, NE; MLK50 in Memphis, TN, and VTDigger in Montpelier, VT. “These newsrooms will be the examples that communities all over the country follow as we build a movement to ultimately sustain the local news landscape for the next generation,” says AJP’s CEO Sarabeth Berman.

In 2019, AJP backed Chicago’s City Bureau, a nonprofit civic journalism lab based on the South Side, with a 3-year, \$1.2 million investment designed to help it build a sustainable revenue model. That year City Bureau raised about \$1 million from foundations, sponsorships,

and individual giving, and earned revenue, mostly from consulting. City Bureau trained 27 reporters and placed 47 stories in the Chicago Reporter, Chicago Defender, Chicago magazine, Black Youth Project, Planning magazine, The Atlantic, and others.

On April 21, City Bureau launched Chicago COVID Resource Finder to provide, via text and other ways, verified information on food, housing, legal aid, and more during the coronavirus pandemic. City Bureau’s co-founder and operations director Harry Backlund says, “The biggest difference between our pre- and post-pandemic work is that we’ve found wide reception for our idea that information is an essential service. With so many people who have critical information needs in the wake of Covid-19, we’ve been able to forge partnerships with local government agencies and other organizations in more creative and nimble ways.” For instance, City Bureau has partnered with the advocacy group Free Press to further develop its Information Aid Network. Using the Documenters program, the effort aims to reach people by phone who “can’t or won’t access digital spaces in light of the increasing digital divide challenges that coronavirus presents in our communities, especially communities of color.” So far, 1,300 people have created Documenters accounts.

Elizabeth Hansen, academic lead for the business models for news program at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, sees philanthropy expanding to include news. Local news operations are vital community institutions, she says, “but sites have never thought of themselves that way. Fundraising using this logic requires a different way of thinking.”

Hansen points to WAMU, a public radio station based in Washington, D.C., with about a million listeners, as a case in point. Over the last five years, the station has turned its focus to local news, almost doubling WAMU’s news staff and reviving the local news site DCist. Membership has grown by 33% and audience by 41%, including doubling the percentage of African American and Hispanic listeners, according to general manager JJ Yore. In 2019, major gifts totaled \$16.5 of \$35.6 million total revenue; sponsorships brought in another \$15 million.

Philanthropic support also presents some challenges. Some argue that philanthropy is best suited for seed capital or to supplement specific reporting projects rather than general operations, given the long lead times involved in cultivating donors. Philanthropic support can come with the risk of influencing coverage, something recognized by Downie Jr. and Schudson, who advocated for “an impermeable wall” between foundation interests and newsrooms.

Philanthropic giving often is not inclusive. Only 8 to 9% of all grant-making goes to communities of color, according to the Foundation Center, a nonprofit that maintains a database of grantmakers. In early April, Borealis Philanthropy awarded \$2.3 million to 16 news organizations serving communities of color across the country. “When we emerge out of this crisis, [inclusivity] must be a top priority,” says the LMA’s Cawley Lane.



TAX THE PLATFORMS

Many in the U.S. are watching Australia, where the government in April mandated that Google and Facebook share advertising revenue with media outlets. France and the U.K. are looking to the tech companies, too, for bigger contributions to media.

As the pandemic continues, more calls are being made. The Irish journalists' union called for a 6% tax on search engines and social media companies, with the funds going to help the media industry. In addition to calling for more stimulus funds for daily newspapers, Seattle Times publisher Frank Blethen has called for a fee on the ad revenue of major internet platforms.

Both Google and Facebook have introduced Covid-19 emergency funds and made additional donations. Many newsrooms and journalism organizations welcome these gifts, even as there is widespread unease over accepting funding that comes from corporations the media needs to scrutinize. "They're keeping many organizations alive," says Mary Ellen Klas, the Miami Herald's Tallahassee bureau chief. "It is such pennies from what they are making off of us. ... I look at it as guilt money. Many in the industry see it that way, but we are so desperate."

Back in 2019 Craig Aaron, president and CEO of Free Press, urged a tax targeting online ads on platforms, including Facebook and Google, that would raise \$2 billion to fund diverse, local, independent, and noncommercial journalism. The money in what he called a First

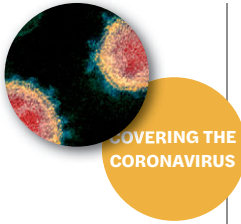
Amendment Fund would help news outlets in underserved communities and support new approaches.

Aaron compares the First Amendment Fund to a carbon tax, a government fee paid by companies per ton of greenhouse gases emitted. Sweden and British Columbia have embraced such a tax, but the idea has yet to gain acceptance in the U.S. Just as carbon is causing the climate crisis, dis- and misinformation are causing an information crisis, Aaron argues. The idea: Impose a government fee on activities that create socially harmful impacts, so the producer, such as Facebook, pays an amount equivalent to the harm caused.

Aaron's carbon tax analogy suggests another model: the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which requires oil and gas corporations to fund land and water conservation in exchange for the profitable extraction of fossil fuels from the Outer Continental Shelf, a resource critical to public health. The LWCF has spent more than \$4.4 billion on some 44,000 projects. If such a tax were implemented, Aaron says, mechanisms like those used at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) could be adapted to ensure quality of information, transparency, and accountability. Aaron, Downie Jr., Schudson, and Report for America's Steven Waldman all have argued that the CPB should be renamed and reframed as the Corporation for Public Media and focus on local news reporting. Critics say a platform tax doesn't begin to address the damage done by private companies that break or pollute public information ecosystems.

Aaron notes that in mid-March, the Maryland state Senate passed a bill that would tax tech platforms to help fund education. "We'd like to build in journalism,

Co-founders of City Bureau, a nonprofit civic journalism lab in Chicago, (from left) Harry Backlund, Andrea Faye Hart, Bettina Chang, and Darryl Holliday



too,” he says. “We’ve seen more momentum in the last six weeks than we’ve seen in the last 10 years. The emergency is so apparent, and people are looking for solutions. In some ways the rest of the world is ahead of the U.S., but everyone is wrestling with this.”

FUND JOURNALISM PUBLICLY

The U.S. spends vastly less on public funding for media than many other countries. Yet a 2017 poll found that three out of four people in the U.S., including two out of every three Republicans, support maintaining or increasing federal support for public TV.

The United States spends approximately \$1.34 per capita to fund public media, says Aaron at the Free Press, most of which goes to the CPB. CPB’s annual allotment of around \$450 million supports local public television and radio stations, the affiliates that often carry NPR and PBS programming.

In Europe, the U.K. spends more than \$80 per capita, according to Aaron, and Denmark more than \$100. In response to the pandemic, Denmark and Sweden announced that they will allocate significant emergency funds for independent news media, while the Canadian government has moved toward subsidizing journalism.

Denmark is a particularly interesting case. There, the government covers 75% of salaries, up to \$3,288 per month, for three months for employees who would otherwise be let go. In 2013, it broadened its system of press subsidies, giving online media equal access to funding alongside print and electronic news media. In 2018, the country’s center-right government reduced funding for public service broadcasting to increase funding for private media, primarily to benefit online and local media.

Globally, models of state media support include tax breaks, direct payments, and public-service advertising. Report for America and Free Press propose some \$1 billion in direct spending on public-service advertising in local outlets, especially those that are free or serving disproportionately vulnerable communities. In an April 21 letter to congressional leaders, the leaders of the congressional caucuses representing Asian Pacific American, Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities cited the disproportionate number of Covid-19 deaths in their communities “and the clear need for timely, and culturally relevant news that can help save lives ... [T]he reality is that African American, Latino, Asian Pacific American, and Native American communities need more news and information to stay healthy and safe in the ever-changing Covid-19 environment, not less.”

The problem of news deserts is not as pronounced in many European countries as it is in the U.S., says Victor Pickard, a Free Press board member, associate professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of “Democracy Without Journalism?” a call for a publicly-owned, democratically-governed media system. “My general sense is that in many of these countries they have signaled that they will provide gov-

ernment assistance to compensate for the journalism that’s being especially devastated by the new economic conditions ushered in by the pandemic. Although these market failures were already very much occurring pre-pandemic; the virus is merely an accelerant.”

Could a similar approach work in the U.S.? In a March 30 letter to President Trump and congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell, News Media Alliance’s David Chavern and H. Dean Ridings, CEO of America’s Newspapers, argued that “independent journalism and government action have an inherent and necessary tension, and we should look for solutions that maintain a separation of interests. But we also all have a mutual need to sustain local news publishing so that it can collectively get us through this crisis ... and the next one.”

In an effort to ensure that journalists could keep working despite stay-at-home orders, Chavern launched a campaign in the first weeks of the Covid-19 crisis to push state governors to publicly declare journalism as essential work. As of early May, some 44 states have done so. This is a timely designation as newsrooms apply for emergency support through “forgivable loans” of up to a million dollars. On April 24, President Trump signed a \$484 billion spending package, the fourth since March, totaling some \$3 trillion. For publishers with fewer than 1,000 employees, this means money for payroll, rent, and utilities — if their applications are successful. The Seattle Times, Tampa Bay Times, and Newsday were among those on the receiving end.

Pickard argues that few freedoms in the U.S. are as treasured as freedom of the press, and government support for journalism is often perceived as being antithetical to a free press. This belief system, says Pickard, stems from “the misconception that state tyranny is the primary impediment to actualizing democratic ideals rather than the private tyranny of concentrated corporate power.” But this longstanding conception of the press, he says, is shortsighted.

News organizations are struggling in Europe, too — autocratic leaders have cracked down on the press, tech platforms have crushed traditional advertising models, and now Covid-19 is accelerating those struggles. But around the world there are examples of media funded by government but independent from it. In the U.K., the BBC runs on license fees paid by everyone who watches television. In Germany, every household pays a monthly fee in support of public media.

Says Josef Trappel, professor of media policy and media economics at the University of Salzburg, Austria, and co-author of the 2018 “Comparative Media Policy, Regulation and Governance in Europe,” “Experience has shown over many decades that ... subsidies are unlikely to compromise journalistic work as long as their providers respect democratic rules and procedures.”

Respect for democratic rules and procedures, however, can no longer be taken for granted.

In Europe, public access to factual information often is discussed within a human rights frame, critical to the ability to cast an informed vote and, therefore, critical to democracy. Pickard says public media encourage



higher levels of news consumption; shrink the “knowledge gap” between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged; correlate with an increase in voting and democratic engagement; and better serve communities of color, women, and other groups and regions often underserved by media. People exposed to public media also have more social trust compared to those who consume sensationalized news.

In her research on local news funding, The Miami Herald’s Klas also found strong evidence that when journalism dries up, so too does voter turnout and civic engagement. Klas cites Rasmus Kleis Nielsen’s 2015 book “Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media,” which details empirical research suggesting that “even with its deficiencies, local journalism helps reduce government corruption, increases the responsiveness of elected officials to their constituents, and encourages public participation in local politics.”

Some public funding initiatives have started to appear in the U.S. In 2018, the New Jersey legislature passed the Civic Info Bill, creating the Civic Information Consortium, a nonprofit charged with revitalizing local news. Initially approved for \$5 million and then reduced to \$2 million, the idea was first proposed by Free Press with the goal of funding news for underserved, low-income communities of color.

To be eligible for a grant, applicants must collaborate with one of five higher-education partners and with a community organization or civic institution. This consortium will have a staff and a board of directors “dedicated to transparency and accountability.” The

consortium will attract grants and donations “to supplement and replenish the state’s initial investment and further its groundbreaking work in New Jersey.” “The \$2 million is in the budget,” says Aaron, “but now there’s a huge financial crisis,” and it has not yet been released.

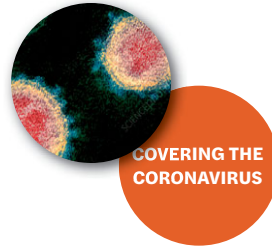
Meanwhile, Colorado and Ohio are considering similar approaches. State-level projects, Aaron says, could serve as models for Free Press’s proposed national First Amendment Fund.

Pickard acknowledges that it might take time to effect substantial policy change beyond immediate stimulus aid. But, he adds, “young people today are much less in thrall to the market fundamentalism that has misguided American core systems for so long, from health-care to media. There is no reason to be doctrinaire about what model works. These models can be overlapping and we need to embrace whatever experiments might sustain journalism. At the end of the day, we need a systemic fix.”

Until then, Mahoning Matters’ Jenkins is busy working toward building a local operation in Youngstown, Ohio that is community-centered and financially self-sustaining, “through experimentation with a variety of revenue models,” including email newsletter sponsorships and a Community Leaders Program, where local businesses underwrite content sections under an annual sponsorship.

“Lots of options hold promise for us,” Jenkins says, “and it will be a mix of approaches, tested and calibrated for our market, that will ultimately be what makes us self-sustaining.” ■

Funded by the American Journalism Project, Mississippi Today told the story of Shalonda Rollins, who died from coronavirus complications, to help tell the story of why black Mississippians are harder hit by the Covid-19 pandemic



WHAT ROLE SHOULD NEWSROOMS PLAY IN DEBUNKING MISINFORMATION?

When conspiracies pass a tipping point, newsrooms working collectively to push out strong debunks can slow the spread of myths and misinformation

BY CLAIRE WARDLE



THIS SPRING IN the U.K., at least three cellphone masts were set on fire, and telecom engineers trying to keep the network stable faced attacks and harassment. The reason: Some people believe 5G networks spread the coronavirus.

This conspiracy had been bubbling online for weeks, an offshoot of pre-existing conspiracies about the “dangers” connected to 5G mobile technology. This time people were connecting the fact that Wuhan is one of China’s smart cities with the spread of the coronavirus across the globe.

What caused this conspiracy to spike? While it's impossible to say for sure, it was very likely caused by a couple of high-profile shares of the conspiracy by celebrities, including the actor Woody Harrelson and the TV personality Amanda Holden and Olympic boxer Amir Khan in the U.K. (Holden subsequently deleted her tweet.)

This particular conspiracy is part of a number that have emerged during this pandemic. Others focus on how the virus started, some pushing a narrative that it was a bio-weapon designed in a Chinese lab, others claiming it's a virus created by Bill Gates in order to make money from a globally enforced vaccination program. There are other conspiracies designed to undermine the credibility of Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, some pushing the falsehood that certain types of people won't get the virus, and others that the virus is an attempt to derail the United States election.

As well as these conspiracies, there are many other types of misinformation online, from false and misleading claims about home remedies that could prevent infection or cure the disease, false claims about the Centers for Disease Control doing door-to-door testing, impending lockdowns, and army deployments.

While it's easy to dismiss the impact of these conspiracies and falsehoods, it seems we should be taking them more seriously. A survey published by Pew at the beginning of April found 39% of Fox News viewers believed the virus was created in a lab. And the real-world implications playing out over the 5G myth in the U.K. mean it's hard to ignore.

What role should news organizations play when it comes to online misinformation? Fact-checkers around the world are working together to debunk false claims about coronavirus. But is debunking something that newsrooms should do? Five years ago, the answer might have been a resounding "no"; journalism is about investigating the truth, not cleaning up the grubbier parts of the internet.

But things have now changed. Mother Jones ran a survey recently asking its readers where it could have the greatest impact. Thirty-one percent said that they wanted the outlet to debunk misinformation that threatens people or instills fear. This was the top response.

But knowing when to tackle these falsehoods and conspiracies is difficult. Many news outlets, particularly national or international ones, have significant audiences. Reporting on a rumor or falsehood circulating in niche or disconnected online spaces (which is where most conspiracies live) or debunking a falsehood can give it legitimacy and certainly more oxygen. Many more people hear about it than would have been the case previously.

And why is this a worry? Because many psychological studies have shown that unless a debunk is done appropriately — or when people don't read the explanation, just the poorly worded headline, tweet, or Facebook post — our brains are more likely to remember the falsehood.

Familiarity and repetition play a significant role in

what and how we remember information. So when you've seen the falsehood and conspiracy multiple times online, and then you see a major news outlet repeat the falsehood as they explain why it's not true, our brains struggle. This doesn't mean newsrooms shouldn't run debunks, we just need to be careful about how we do it.

At First Draft, we talk about the tipping point. Our work tracking misinformation in countries around the world has shown if you debunk a rumor too early, you can give it oxygen. If you leave the debunk until too late, the falsehood and conspiracy takes hold, and it's almost impossible to slow down its spread or to convince people it's wrong.

When we've run trainings on this subject, we've always used the Pizzagate conspiracy theory as an example. Even though many journalists knew the conspiracy was being shared online, no one wanted to give it legitimacy. But by the time a man drove to the Comet Pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. from North Carolina and shot a gun inside, it was too late to squash the conspiracy. Too many people believed it.

With the 5G coronavirus conspiracy, I think we're at the tipping point moment. As James Ball, global editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism stated on Twitter: "This is getting deeply dangerous. It needs more mainstream coverage, and some prime-time myth busting."

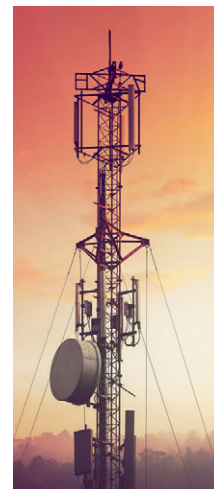
During two election campaigns, in France and Brazil, journalism collaborations we led did exactly this. When rumors passed the tipping point, multiple outlets pushed out strong debunks at the same time, and it did appear to slow down the rumors and conspiracies.

There needs to be a collective response by newsrooms to the dangerous rumors that are emerging around the virus. There is going to be real-world harm from misinformation connected to Covid-19. For the past three and a half years in the U.S., the focus has been on political disinformation on Facebook. And while there were certainly concerns that these campaigns might drive down trust in the electoral system, there wasn't a sense that there was going to be a threat to life.

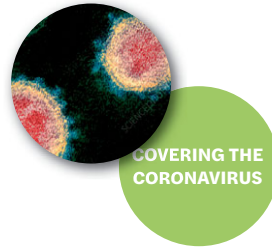
Most of the problems in other parts of the world were about real-world harm, whether that was science or health misinformation about food or medicine, or home remedies, or disinformation about groups of people based on race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

We need to take lessons from these examples about the need to take misinformation seriously. We need newsrooms to work collectively to push out consistent messages around false and misleading information. We need responsible headlines that don't use SEO for clicks that can then reinforce the rumors.

Journalism schools don't teach how to work responsible debunks, and we need to start integrating those lessons. For any journalists who want to understand best practices for slowing down misinformation by reporting, we just launched a course. The third section is all about how to word headlines, choose images, and effectively report on rumors, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods. Newsrooms need to start updating their skills and knowledge for these new challenges. ■



If you debunk a rumor too early, you can give it oxygen. If you leave the debunk until too late, the falsehood and conspiracy takes hold



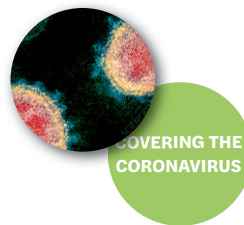
THE FUTURE IS NOW

Speculative journalism can help audiences think about issues, like pandemics and climate change, that seem too remote or complicated for straight news stories. But it can also feed conspiracy theorists and open itself to accusations of fake news

BY ERYN CARLSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY YUKO SHIMIZU





BACK IN EARLY 2019, nearly a year before the coronavirus outbreak began to dominate headlines, the team at “Science Vs” podcast was hard at work on an episode aptly named “Pandemic!!!” The episode previewed the question many are asking in 2020: If a potentially fatal disease was rapidly spreading around the globe, how bad could it really get?

To answer that question, the team behind the Gimlet Media (a Spotify company) podcast decided to stray from their usual facts-first fare, dis-

secting myths, fads, and trends through a scientific lens. Instead, according to “Science Vs” host Wendy Zukerman, they decided the subject of pandemics deserved a more creative approach. “We thought it would be interesting to explore a pandemic in a modern world and, instead of talking about Biology 101 of viruses or how [scientific] modelling works, we could really take people on an adventure,” says Zukerman, a science journalist who originally created “Science Vs” for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. “We could explore the science, make it really mean something for listeners, and, at the same time, poke holes in Hollywood versions of pandemics.”

To do that, “Science Vs” transported listeners of the October episode to an imagined but not-so-distant future where a deadly virus — H7N9, a particularly deadly strain of the flu — has mutated and is quickly spreading among humans worldwide. Over the course of five scenes set over seven months, fictional journalist Mindy Tuckerman narrates the progression of the pandemic, from interviewing experts at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) soon after the initial outbreak — which, as in the case of the coronavirus, began in China — to visiting overwhelmed hospital wards in the U.S., where some patients are being turned away or denied ventilators due to lack of supply.

Sound familiar?

THE “SCIENCE VS” scenario is fictional but it isn’t a narrative that’s outside the realm of possibility, as we’ve all experienced with the coronavirus pandemic.

The people behind “Science Vs” did their homework to make sure the global health crisis they depicted was rooted in reality. “The big concern was getting the balance right between accurate science and having a compelling story. There were a lot of conversations asking

questions like, ‘Is this over the top? Would this actually happen?’” says Zukerman.

Along with researching pandemics like the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, the “Science Vs” team consulted with more than 20 researchers from the CDC and the Institute for Disease Modeling to make sure the scenarios they were positing were indeed possible. They even ran their narrative by Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who has advised President Trump on the coronavirus. Citations were posted with the transcript online, and Zukerman, referencing the 2011 sci-fi drama about a mysterious global pandemic, told the audience to “think ‘Contagion,’ but with citations.”

Listeners could also think of “Pandemic!!!” as an example of speculative journalism. The term isn’t strictly defined, but it’s often used to describe works of journalism about imagined futures, pieces where science fiction is entwined with facts and even original reporting to elucidate likely, or at least possible, future realities. Independent journalists and legacy news organizations alike find value in the form. Examples can be found in independent magazines like High Country News or on podcasts, such as



“Bellwether” and “Flash Forward,” as well as in The New York Times, with its “Op-Eds from the Future” series.

By illustrating future worlds, speculative journalism can help audiences think about what might be to come in more concrete terms. Take the coronavirus: Before the pandemic, few people could have imagined themselves quarantined at home, living in constant fear as the economy tanks, field hospitals are erected in sports arenas, and TV journalists are broadcasting from their living rooms.

But listeners to Science Vs’s “Pandemic!!!” could.

There are risks in speculative journalism, too. Some reporters argue that prediction and projection have no place in news reports, in part because they can be easily labeled “fake news.” While journalists have regained some of the trust lost in recent years — bouncing back from a historic low of 32% of Americans having “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in mass media in 2016 to 41% in 2019, according to Gallup — speculative journalism could complicate perceptions of trust at a time when facts are already under unprecedented assault.

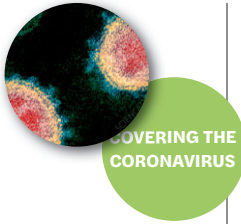
Radio producer and reporter Sam Greenspan, who calls his new project “Bellwether” “a podcast of speculative journalism,” considers speculation just another

reporting method. “It takes as a point of departure that a reporter can use the tools of sci-fi, futurism, strategic foresight, and forecasting as any other tool in journalism — just as one might use computer-assisted reporting or database reporting,” says Greenspan. “It’s just a different toolset that a lot of other industries have been using for a long time,” such as economists, fashion designers, and automakers, to name a few.

Of course, financial and political reporters deal in hypotheticals all the time to help audiences understand everything from what the New England Patriots might look like without Tom Brady to how the coronavirus — even after the pandemic has subsided — will shape the future of the workplace and corporate culture. However, speculative journalism typically goes beyond reporting that includes predictions to works that use the techniques of science fiction to paint vivid portraits as a way of making real conditions that seem too distant or implausible.

Speculative nonfiction may be an outgrowth of the popularity science fiction has enjoyed in recent decades, but it’s also, perhaps, a product of journalist’s anxieties about “getting it wrong” in the past — as was the case with the 2016 presidential election.

By illustrating future worlds, speculative journalism can help audiences think about what might be to come in more concrete terms



Donald Trump’s election inspired Marie Gilot, head of the J+ training program at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, to start writing science fiction. While she was writing more as a personal means to understand what the election meant for journalism and its relationship to truth, she does see combining science fiction with journalism as an effective way to shed light on issues that are largely based, for the time being, in the theoretical.

“I think that speculative fiction approaches are particularly useful when covering issues that are more abstract, like climate change or policy changes. Those are issues for which journalists need some imagination,”

says Gilot, who has given talks about what journalists can learn from science fiction. “What will happen when downtown New York is underwater? What would happen if we passed Medicare for All? Of course, these kinds of exercises should be properly labeled as speculative analysis or opinion, but I think these types of explorations are informative and useful.”

Issues that are abstract but have potentially devastating ramifications — think global pandemics, like the one depicted in “Science Vs,” but also massive natural disasters or the devastating effects of climate change — have been the most popular uses of speculative journalism.

Take “The Really Big One,” Kathryn Schulz’s Pulitzer-

JOURNALISM AND PREDICTION

Journalists are trained to stick to the facts.

But when reporting on a pandemic, responsible predictions are essential to fully informing the public

BY OLIVER ROEDER

The “flatten the curve” diagram, first popularized by *The Economist*, demonstrates how Covid-19 infections can be delayed and diminished with protective measures such as social distancing

SOURCE: CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL

Without protective measures



With protective measures



Healthcare system capacity

IN THE NORMAL course of human affairs, journalism is the first rough draft of history. In a pandemic, however, journalism is the first rough draft of the future.

We are all sitting alone in our homes. We are also sitting somewhere in the mathematical foothills of coronavirus’s epidemic curve, staring up, wondering where the summit lies.

As I write on March 17, there are around 4,200 confirmed cases of coronavirus in the United States. This seems an insignificant pittance, given that almost every major event in the country is canceled or postponed, that the stock market suffered its worst losses in decades, that President Trump is seeking \$850 billion in stimulus, and that San Francisco and other communities are under stay-at-home orders.

But we understand these extreme reactions because we loosely understand how those 5,000 could become 500,000 could become 50,000,000. It is the journalist’s job to bolster this understanding.

“At the beginning of a pestilence and when it ends, there’s always a propensity for rhetoric. In the first place habits have not yet been lost; in the second, they’re returning,” Albert Camus writes in “The Plague.” “It is in the thick of the calamity that one gets hardened to truth, in other words, to silence.”

We are in the thick of the calamity. But we journalists don’t have the privilege of remaining silent. We must predict, using the best available scientific and epidemiological data.

Scientific prediction is how the population will translate the present into the future, and act accordingly. And prediction is baked into the study

and understanding of infectious disease. In the normal course of human affairs, the journalist might be loath to predict, to adopt the role of diviner over that of reporter. But in a pandemic, forecasting is what’s called for. Informed divination gets at the real truth of the matter: that the present will become the future, and that the future will be very different indeed.

“When you’re dealing with an emerging infectious diseases outbreak, you are always behind where you think you are if you think that today reflects where you really are,” Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said.

Indeed, journalists have long known that tomorrow things will change, and that indicators lag. Prediction has been the purview of empirical journalism for decades, at least since the early computer UNIVAC shared a CBS News stage with Walter Cronkite to help predict the results of the 1952 presidential election. (The computer picked Eisenhower over Stevenson early on.) These predictions have crescendoed at a small handful of contemporary publications, most prominently *FiveThirtyEight*, where I was a staff writer from 2014 to 2019.

But predictions aren’t made in a vacuum.

For example, a recent paper in the *Journal of Politics* found that such popular electoral predictions can confuse and demobilize voters, giving them the sense that races are less competitive than they really are. These are criticisms that *FiveThirtyEight* and others had faced long before they reached the academic literature. If races are seen as less competitive, the argument goes, would-be voters might not vote. “We cannot say with certainty,” one of the study’s authors

winning New Yorker article about what a totally-unprepared Pacific Northwest will look like if — or really, when — a major earthquake and subsequent tsunami wreaks widespread destruction. Schulz’s sobering piece, much of it written in future tense, incited policymakers to review and update local emergency preparedness and management plans. Since that article was published in 2015, many media outlets have tackled future disasters, such as “The Big One: Your Survival Guide” podcast from Southern California’s KPCC that imagines what would happen to Los Angeles if a major earthquake hits. Publications — including McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern — have dedicated entire issues to speculative climate change writing, and

Bill McKibben’s piece of speculative journalism imagined for Time magazine what Earth will look like in 2050 if we succeed in avoiding — by a massive change in our lifestyles — the worst of climate change.

At High Country News, an independent magazine that covers issues facing the American West, experimenting with speculative journalism was seen, in part, as a creative way to fight information fatigue about climate change — for readers, but also for journalists.

When the Fourth National Climate Assessment, a 1,500-page, two-part congressionally-mandated report from the U.S. Global Change Research Program, was released in November 2018, High Country News editor-in-

told Slate. “But given how close the [2016 presidential] election was in some states, it is entirely possible that forecasts could have flipped the election in favor of Trump.” In Michigan, for example, Hillary Clinton was a 79% favorite in the FiveThirtyEight model; she lost the state by 0.3 percentage points.

Predictions have consequences. They may alter the behavior of the participants in the very event being predicted, and therefore the outcome of that event, and therefore the well-being of those participants. You can’t predict something without affecting it.

Maybe that can be a good thing. Forecasts of a pandemic’s severity affect behavior, too. And journalists ought to embrace that fact rather than shun it.

“The virus will always get you if you don’t move quickly,” said Michael Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization’s Health Emergencies Programme, at a press conference discussing lessons learned from Ebola responses. “If you need to be right before you move, you will never win. Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection. The problem we have in society at the moment is everyone is afraid of making a mistake. Everyone is afraid of the consequence of error. But the greatest error is not to move.”

Journalists, more than many, are afraid of the consequence of error, appended as those errors may be onto the bottoms of our articles. But perhaps, for our profession, too, perfection is the enemy of the good when reporting on pandemics.

On March 13, The New York Times reported, based on Centers for Disease Control scenarios, that as many as 200,000 to 1.7 million people in the U.S. could die. Days later, the paper reported, based on work by an epidemic modeling group at Imperial College London, that 2.2 million people in the United States could die. ProPublica’s modeling of hospital beds, based on data from the Harvard Global Health Institute, was similarly — and appropriately! — scary.

First, the success of these reports is a sense of scientifically informed future scale. The predictions are certainly not perfect, but they orient the reader’s understanding of what could be to come. They provide a loose map to translate the present into the future. Scale is all-important here. Exponential growth — 5,000 to

500,000 to 50,000,000 — is a sensitive, powerful, and often misunderstood thing. It ought to be treated as such.

Worst-case scenarios may often be “incorrect,” but they are precisely what we want to be able to insure against. I won’t often have a heart attack, but I should understand what happens — and what it costs — if I do. Thereby, perhaps I’ll eat better.

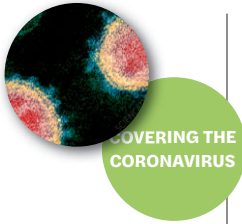
Second, in looking to the future, journalists ought to embrace the observer effect. We ought not to be shy in presenting worst-case scenarios, based on the soundest scientific thinking available, but we ought also to augment these scenarios with alternatives. What might happen if you, the readers, alter your behavior en masse? The Imperial College London report, for example, presents its results in a variety of scenarios, from “do nothing” to “case isolation, home quarantine, and social distancing.” Scale within the scale.

One wonders here what the results of the 2016 election might have been had FiveThirtyEight presented a variety of scenarios concerning its readers’ voting responses to its declaration that Hillary Clinton was a heavy favorite on Election Night.

You can’t predict something without affecting it.

In some ways, the coronavirus pandemic has proven the sheer power of visual and empirical journalism. The “flatten the curve” diagram, popularized by The Economist and then everywhere, has become an international rallying cry, a potent visual shorthand for the importance of social distancing. And The Washington Post’s popular infection simulator illustrates the mechanism underlying a flattened curve. And the Financial Times is graphing the virus spread by country, highlighting the effectiveness of various early, severe policies in places such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Still other publications have already embraced this move-first spirit in a more qualitative way. The Atlantic, for example, ran a piece titled “Cancel Everything.” And almost everything got canceled.

It’s easy to say that prediction is a fool’s game; it often is. But pandemics are *sui generis* in human affairs. An invisible force meddles in the world, often unfelt, driven solely by sensitive epidemiological mathematics and our collective behavior. To the extent that journalists can unspool the math and nudge the behavior, they ought to. ■



COVERING THE
CORONAVIRUS

-chief Brian Calvert asked his editors to consider how they should cover it. He asked the same questions he normally would when a big federal report drops: How can we apply it to our content?

The response from Calvert's staff was a groan. "The reaction from all of us was like, 'Oh God, okay,'" says Calvert. "We thought it was really important to pay attention to that reaction, because there's a lot of information out there on climate change, and I think we were all feeling some information fatigue."

That's what prompted Tristan Ahtone, who was then associate editor for indigenous affairs at High Country News, to propose bringing science fiction into the mix. "None of us were entirely jazzed about doing a whole issue about the climate assessment," says Ahtone. "At first, we started joking around about stuff we could do, but then we started thinking about it — what if we could project [the report] 50 years into the future and place stories in that future?"

The suggestion wasn't totally out of nowhere considering that the publication's first online editor Paolo Bacigalupi is a winner of the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards for science fiction and fantasy and a National Book Award nominee for "Ship Breaker," a young adult novel set in a post-apocalyptic future.

Writers were asked to frame their stories as if they were being written by journalists 50 years from now. Some element of each story had to come from or be inspired by the federal climate change report. Science reporter Maya Kapoor tracked down climate scientists, hydrologists, rangeland ecologists, and other experts for each writer to talk to in order to write about climate science-based scenarios that had outcomes that were entirely reasonable. "It wasn't a last-minute fact-check, like, 'Can we fact-check this with you?' It was, 'Can they talk to you as they're crafting their story?'" says Kapoor. "We used our normal fact-checking process, as well as this extra step of checking with the experts about the worlds that we were building, how realistic they were."

That means they had "an early BS test about, 'Is this plausible?'" says Calvert. "We used that to green-light each of these stories. Is it within the realm of possibilities in that field of research? The story building and some of the different textures in each story, those are made up, but the premise we used for each story — those were vetted with facts."

The result, published in August 2019, was "2068: The Speculative Journalism Issue." Wholly dedicated to science fiction imagining what the West — ravaged by changes from global warming — could look like in 50 years and how journalists will cover it, the issue began with an editor's note from Calvert that ended, "None of these stories are true, but any of them could be. The fact is, we don't really know what climate change will bring ... but we do know that enormous challenges — and opportunities — lie ahead. Our chance to change the future is now, but we'll need a better story first."

Stories in the issue ranged from a piece about the mayhem ensuing at the last remaining ski resort in the continental U.S. to a Q&A with a wildland firefighter — drafted by the U.S. Fire Service now that the West is experiencing

forest fires year-round — who has deserted his post. Some imagined the future West amidst catastrophe, while others were hopeful; each piece had story notes and sources. Also included was a section where readers opined about what their hometowns will look like in 2068.

Ahtone says High Country News received mostly positive reactions to the issue, including from the scientist community, and they weren't particularly worried about people accusing them of peddling misinformation or taking fiction for fact. "I think we were comfortable with it because we had a lot of scientists who were able to talk us through our ideas, and we could have a grounding in climate science," he says. That said, he and Calvert say they probably wouldn't try using a speculative approach on a topic other than the climate crisis.

Amy Webb, a quantitative futurist with a background in journalism, thinks they're right to be wary. "Speculative journalism makes a good opinion column. But I wouldn't put it in any other beat or section of a publication," says Webb, who points out there is a difference between what trained futurists do using a methodology and what journalists practicing speculation do, which can often amount to little more than guesswork. Whether speculative journalism is responsible journalism during a time when misinformation is rampant and technology blurs the lines between what's real and what's doctored is a valid question, says Webb: "If we weren't already contending with widespread misinformation in general, confusion about Covid-19, a splintered internet, Russia's deliberate attempts to seed mistrust, and China's quest for cyber sovereignty, then speculative journalism might be on better footing."

Critics also point out that, even if speculative journalism is not mistaken for fact, it could inadvertently feed into paranoia and conspiracy theories.

Christy Wampole, a French professor at Princeton and critic of speculative journalism whose interest stems from research for a book about the contemporary French novel, which often integrates realism and science fiction, argues that prediction doesn't align with the mission of journalism. "One problem is, once you sort of see these potential speculations, there's no real way to go back after the fact and be accountable for those predictions, whether they were right or they were wrong," Wampole says. "To me, that's not journalism's goal. Perhaps we do need a class of people whose job is just to guess what will happen next based on evidence, but I'm not sure the journalist is the right person for that role."

THERE ARE PLENTY of speculative journalism efforts that don't use science fiction techniques to hype up disastrous futures with a journalistic angle, including "Bellwether," Greenspan's podcast where two "data archeologists" — one human, one AI — of the distant future are looking back on radio broadcasts of real 21st-century news stories, searching for clues about what happened to their world.

"In a certain sense, sci-fi is not about the future but about the present," says Gideon Lichfield, editor-in-chief of MIT Technology Review who studied the intersections

of sci-fi and journalism as a fellow at the Data & Society Research Institute in 2014-2015 and has written sci-fi stories for Quartz, like one about the future of automation at Amazon warehouses. “What sci-fi does is take society as we know it today and applies — you might call them filters — new technologies, new situations, and asks what is it about human society that would stay the same and what would change under these new circumstances.”

In The New York Times’s “Op-Eds from the Future” series, writers — science fiction authors and scientists as well as journalists, futurists, and philosophers — opine from the future, whether that’s 10 or 20 years, or even a century, down the road. “The challenges they predict are imaginary — for now — but their arguments illuminate the urgent questions of today and prepare us for tomorrow,” reads the editor’s note atop each piece.

Pieces range from privatization of the U.S. military to “evergarchs” — billionaire oligarchs who can extend their lives indefinitely — and the tone ranges from humorous, such as one by novelist Fran Wilde about bioprinters, which toy manufacturer Fisher Price Waterhouse will soon be selling, to grim and seemingly prophetic, including one by Lucy Ferriss in which new legislation threatens the legal status of abortions in New York, the only state that still allows them.

Such wide-ranging topics are also a feature of “Flash Forward,” a podcast hosted by Rose Eveleth about “possible and not so possible futures” that launched in 2015.

Over the course of five seasons, “Flash Forward” has taken on futures that are plausible and even very likely (such as one where China has replaced the United States as the global superpower) to ones that are decidedly less so (like one where a coalition of concerned mothers convinces the U.S. government to shut down the internet). Episodes that are just a few years old, including one about a future where facial recognition is so powerful it can grab an image of someone’s face from anywhere and link it to their identifying information, are eerily prescient.

Regardless of the topic, though, Eveleth makes sure to distinguish between the fictional scenario that starts each episode and the second half, where she interviews experts to discuss the likelihood of each imagined future. “In the top of every single episode I say, ‘First we’re going to do fiction, and then we’ll do the real stuff,’” says Eveleth. “Sometimes longtime listeners will email me and be like, ‘We get it, you don’t have to say it every time,’ but I have had people — when I was first piloting the show before it came out and I didn’t say that — that thought I hired actors to be the experts in the piece.”

Even with the disclaimer, Eveleth has had her invented material mistaken for fact. Early on, she did an episode about a future where humans are genetically engineered to try to limit each individual’s carbon contributions. It was inspired by a 2012 paper published in the journal

Ethics, Policy, & the Environment asking if humans could be engineered to be more energy efficient, i.e., to be smaller, to be meat intolerant, etc. “This is a very provocative and ridiculous paper, mostly to get people talking. They were not really proposing it,” says Eveleth.

In interviews, bioethics philosopher S. Matthew Liao stressed that he and his co-authors weren’t advocating for any particular human modifications or even human engineering in general; rather, they were introducing it as one possible solution to mitigate climate change. The “Flash Forward” episode reflected that. “It was essentially a takedown of all the proposals, being like, ‘This makes no sense. This is dangerous. We should definitely not do this.’ That was the episode,” says Eveleth.

However, the Gizmodo post about the episode (the first season of “Flash Forward” was in partnership with Gizmodo and was called “Meanwhile in the Future”) was headlined “To Stop Climate Change, We Must Genetically Engineer Humans.” Rush Limbaugh got wind of it, and he ranted on his show about liberals wanting to genetically engineer babies to be less climate-intensive.

“If you had listened to the episode, you would know that this is not in fact endorsing such a thing. But it didn’t really matter, because the way that people consume news these days is they read headlines. They don’t listen to the whole 25-minute podcast,” says Eveleth. “I had contributed to the exact thing that I’m talking about now — this thing where people will read a headline and

they don’t really understand the difference between speculation and reality.”

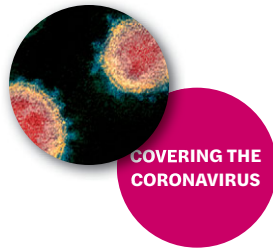
Even if speculative journalism is not mistaken for fact, it could feed into paranoia and conspiracy theories

Critics point to this sort of situation as one of speculative journalism’s risks, and something those who practice it must address. “Media literacy is quite weak in the United States. When something is speculation, it should be marked as such,” says Wampole.

The incident made Eveleth change the way she markets the show — she no longer puts clickbait-geared claims in her headlines when posting episodes online — and is perhaps part of the reason Eveleth is hesitant to use “speculative journalism” to describe her work. “It’s not a well-defined term. People use it to mean lots of different things; that makes it hard to talk about in general.”

That said, Eveleth does find value in integrating fiction and future-forecasting into journalistic work; she considers it to be especially effective for topics where personal and public safety is a factor, as it was in Schulz’s “The Really Big One” about the Pacific Northwest’s impending mega-earthquake and as it is now with the coronavirus pandemic. “It’s in those situations where you really want as a reporter or as a storyteller to be able to get someone to put themselves in the shoes of their future selves via characters,” says Eveleth. “That’s the thing fiction does — it’s transportive. It helps you think through what you would do in that situation if it was you.” ■



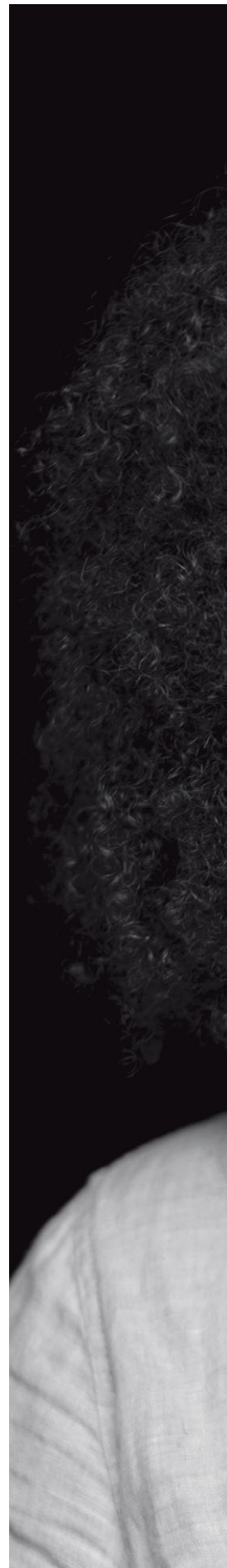


THE MEANING OF MILWAUKEE

“This is Milwaukee” explores citizenship
and representation through deep listening
and community engagement

BY MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER
PHOTOS BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI

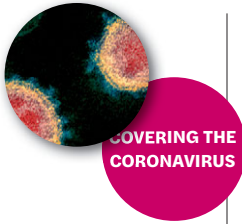
BEFORE THE CORONAVIRUS pandemic gripped the world, people in Milwaukee had another unprecedented preoccupation: the 2020 Democratic National Convention. The four-day event — still slated to take place here, though postponed from July to August because of the health crisis — had promised to bring tens of thousands of visitors, economic impact, and a hot white spotlight to this city. That meant new restaurants, public art projects, and hotels rushed to completion, and Airbnbs outfitted for imminent demand.





“Has this idea of democracy ever existed in the way that we thought it did, or have we just now gotten to the point where we’re starting to see through the cracks?”

DOMINIQUE SAMARI



Not so many weeks ago, before Mayor Tom Barrett held briefings about the health crisis, he loved to talk about how there would be more journalists here during the DNC than in the history of Milwaukee before then.

It was that kind of heightened anticipation — and also the deep political polarization that exists in our battleground state — that motivated me and artist-photographer Kevin J. Miyazaki to start working on a project called “This is Milwaukee” about a year ago. We wanted to consider what Milwaukee, one of the most racially

forms of difference, including political difference.

Miyazaki makes a black-and-white portrait of each subject, and I conduct an audio interview, asking four questions. In addition to the question about democracy itself, I ask:

“To what extent are you optimistic about the future of the country?”

“What are the qualities you care about in political leaders?”

“What are Milwaukee’s most pressing issues today?”

Before the pandemic hit, some of the interviews took place in Miyazaki’s studio, but many were done in people’s homes or places of business, where we sought out small, quiet rooms where I could get good audio. Miyazaki fashioned a homemade photo booth from PVC pipe, a piece of black velvet and a light. The whole kit can be set up in about five minutes.

The interviews have been intense and, at times, surprisingly tender.

Howard Leu, a marketing strategist and the very first subject selected for “This is Milwaukee,” came to the U.S. when he was 5 years old, settling with his family in a small town in Alabama with about 15 Asian residents. His father opened a Chinese restaurant there and died before he could truly enjoy the fruits of his labor. This was the context for how Leu, who had just sworn the oath to become a U.S. citizen, answered our question about democracy.

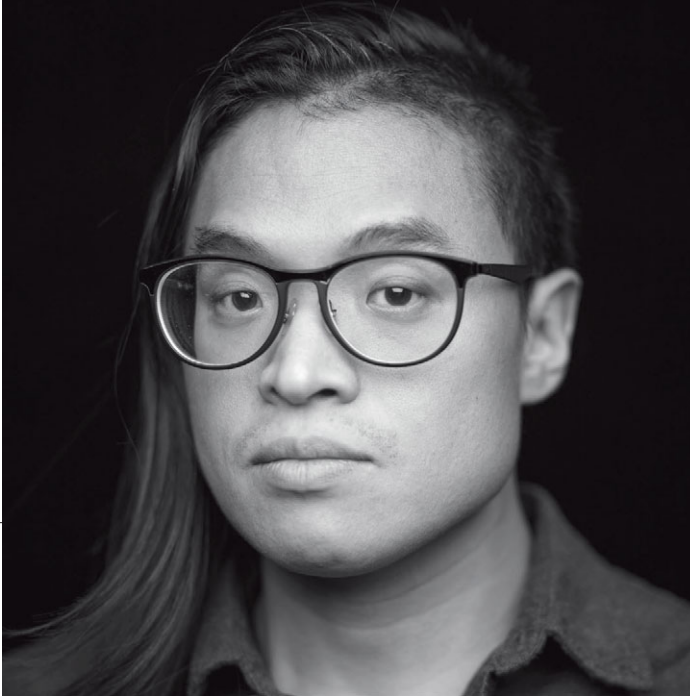
“In my own identity, I often thought about where should I live and where should I pursue my dreams,” Leu said, haltingly.

“I think about my father, and I think about [how] this was his dream, and for me to fulfill his dream of becoming American ... I think that is democracy for me.”

The day we visited Willie Weaver-Bey at his home in the Metcalfe Park neighborhood on Milwaukee’s north side, his garage had just been broken into and his lawnmower stolen. He assumed neighborhood kids had taken it. It’s the kind of thing that happens on his block, he told us. Part of doing good for his neighbors, especially young people, involves radical empathy and forgiveness, he said.

“I get real emotional about seeing people suffer because there’s no reason for suffering in a country that’s supposed to be the home of the brave and the land of the free,” said Weaver-Bey, an artist, veteran, and community leader who first picked up his paint brushes while spending 40 years in a federal prison on drug charges. “We’re supposed to be the greatest country in the world and yet we don’t act like it. We’ve got so many have-nots, because the haves are so greedy.”

Indeed, many of our subjects spoke about democracy in terms of its fragility. Dominique Samari, who co-founded P3 Development Group, which helps organizations build environments of equity and inclusion, wondered aloud about this: “Has there been a thin veneer over this



“I think about my father, and I think about [how] this was his dream”

HOWARD LEU

and economically segregated cities in the U.S., might contribute to the national conversation at a historic moment for our community.

Our core question was designed to inspire people — our subjects, our audience, and ourselves — to reflect on democracy in a deeply personal way. Among the four questions we pose to all of our subjects is this: “What is democracy, for you?”

We wanted to cut through the noise, the horse-race journalism, and the firehose of breaking political news out of Washington, and get to a meaningful and focused exploration of democracy and citizenship.

Over the course of many months, Miyazaki and I identified more than 300 people who embody the notion of citizenship, people who contribute to the public life of the city, in ways that might be high-profile or nearly invisible. We narrowed that list to about 100 people to include in the project, including pastors, schoolchildren, philanthropists, teachers, refugee advocates, journalists, restaurant owners, community gardeners, kind neighbors, caregivers, and others. We don’t ask people their party affiliation, but we’ve taken pains to ensure as many Milwaukeeans as possible will see and hear something of themselves in our nonpartisan work. That’s meant including people across various

entire thing for as long as I know and it's just now starting to crack? Has it ever been what I thought it was? Has this idea of democracy ever existed in the way that we thought it did, or have we just now gotten to the point where we're starting to see through the cracks?"

The portraits and audio are married together and shared regularly via Facebook, Instagram, and our website. It's a very direct — even stark — encounter with Milwaukeeans worth listening to.

One of our earliest goals was to reclaim space online, where people were overwhelmed and politically manipulated even before Covid-19. Now that so many of us are huddled together online, finding connection but also confusion and stress, we hope our project might be an antidote to — or at least a respite from — the web's worst, anti-democratic tendencies.

As the worldwide Covid-19 crisis took hold, we wondered if we should set our project aside. Would people really want to talk about democracy while worrying about a deadly virus? Would the nearly 100 interviews we had gathered, which we had planned to unfurl in the weeks leading up to the DNC, sound ancient, from some far-away, pre-Covid era?

By mid-March, about 10 days before Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers issued his safer-at-home order, as most Americans were still adjusting to a rapidly altering reality, we noticed something. Our interviews started running long. That meant our subjects, many of whom hold wildly divergent political beliefs, sometimes met as appointments spilled into each other.

And people had a lot to say.

"You and I are sitting here on a day in which it feels that America is being canceled," said Charlie Sykes, a longtime conservative talk radio host in Milwaukee who is an NBC/MSNBC contributor. "What we are facing now is a crisis of citizenship because ultimately all of the problems we have come back to — are Americans willing to be responsible for their role in a democracy?"

Even a 10-year-old girl understood the stakes. She cried when I asked her about democracy, took a moment to gather herself, and insisted on continuing when I told her we could stop the interview.

"I feel like we could make the United States a great country," said a tearful Mimi Zippel, who is in the 5th grade at Highland Community School and who was nominated to our project by her art teacher for being a good listener and caring about her classmates. "But I also am scared of what could happen, of what they're doing about illnesses and urgent matters like the coronavirus."

During those March interviews, we quickly realized that the conversations we were provoking at the start of this project, which felt meaningful in a time of coarse political discourse, felt more urgent. We were witnessing answers to those questions as citizenship plays out in Milwaukee's response to Covid-19, as the world grows more local and collaborative.

By the time we were officially sheltering in place, many of our plans — including an exhibit at City Hall scheduled for June and the distribution of a newspaper-like publication — were uncertain.

We've had to discontinue in-person interviews, but

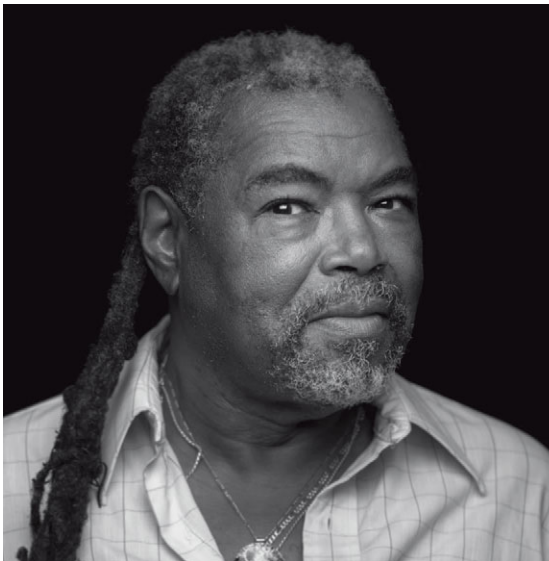
we've started experimenting with delivering our audio recorder to people's doorsteps and then interviewing them via Skype or FaceTime. We may also mail the recorder to subjects, one at a time, to keep the project moving. We're also adding more people to our ever-growing database of potential subjects, including health care workers and those who worked the polls during the primary election.

"This is Milwaukee" has been a return to the core values of journalism — deep listening, shoe-leather re-



"You and I are sitting here on a day in which it feels that America is being canceled"

CHARLIE SYKES



"We're supposed to be the greatest country in the world and yet we don't act like it"

WILLIE WEAVER-BEY

porting, and thoughtfulness about how our community is represented. It's a slow, independent, noncommercial, and open-ended project that involves more risk and experimentation than most newsrooms could tolerate these days, especially as regional media struggle to survive, furlough journalists, and focus principally on breaking news.

As proud as I am of my career as a newspaper journalist, this project has been powerful and of use to my community in unexpected ways. The experience has led me to wonder — in this time of media disruption and pandemic — what forms of journalism could be incubated from small, agile experiments like ours. ■

Privileging the Human Voice

Active listening is a powerful way to come together, even as the coronavirus keeps us apart

BY CARRIE JOHNSON

I spent my childhood in a tiny pink house in suburban Chicago, surrounded by noise. The television blared theme songs from my grandmother's soap operas. My grandfather's fire department scanner interrupted with scratchy reports of people in distress. Aunties entered through the squeaky front door to dish out their own news.

By dinnertime, though, the disparate characters in our household came together in silence to watch the evening news. Voices carried in our rollicking ethnic family, and it was bad form to get in the way of a good story. In those days, in the mid-1980s, the broadcasts veered from hard-nosed investigations of municipal graft to live shots from fields where the authorities excavated in search of missing mafiosi. My grandparents shushed me. My imagination soared.

As I entered my teens, I discovered "The World According to Breslin" on the sale rack at Waldenbooks. Jimmy Breslin's columns swaggered off the page. He sided with underdogs — and mocked authority figures who failed to act in the public interest. He used his big voice to tell the stories of people who struggled to make ends meet, just like my grandparents.

Those stories inspired me to build a career covering law and justice. Reporting about corrupt public officials and shady executives seemed like a natural progression for an outspoken kid who liked to call out unfairness on the playground and in the classroom.



As we are finding other ways to come together, none is more powerful than the sound of the human voice



All these years later, my heart still sings when I'm in a courtroom to chronicle the trials of corporate scoundrels and governors on the take. But the stories that I love most now feature people who may never before have encountered a reporter. They're families with a sick loved one behind bars, or whistleblowers who muster the courage to report government wrongdoing. They're people trapped in systems that are failing them.

When I made the transition from newspapering to radio a decade ago, I learned to privilege the voices of the people I interview. This means giving them time to share their fears and their ambitions. It requires a patience that doesn't come naturally. The kinds of sounds I make in normal conversation to indicate delight or disgust get in the way of a radio recording. Eventually, I learned to keep quiet, and use my face and my hands to react to what I was hearing.

I believe that sort of active listening, practiced while sitting across from a recently released prisoner on the floor of an under-furnished apartment, or in front of a steaming cup of coffee offered by a grieving widow, carries a powerful message: I want to understand you and to share your story. I can't imagine a better antidote to cynical cries about "fake news"

in this essential, troubled business of ours.

As Hannah Arendt once described it, that kind of imagination allows us storytellers "to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair."

The things people choose to share can be unexpected. There was the man in chains in New Jersey who once told me his greatest dream after incarceration was... to launch a business making dentures. (Dental health is not a priority in prisons.) An FBI whistleblower described the anguish of being reassigned to an empty floor of a skyscraper in lower Manhattan, alone in a sea of 130 desks. A former U.S. attorney general confided that his secret wish after leaving the job was to drive his own car again, well above the speed limit, without an omnipresent security detail.

During the first seven months of my precious time at Harvard, I scribbled notes during classes at the Divinity School and the Law School, taking in the lectures, scanning the faces of students, drafting questions, listening. After Covid-19 moved learning online, I continued to listen, thanks to technology.

One morning, I watched a cardinal perch amid the pale green buds of the tree outside my window as a professor sang a Stevie Wonder song on Zoom to illustrate the Great Migration. A few weeks later, on a short walk, my dog planted in her tracks, intent on stalking a rabbit on Garden Street. I didn't mind the wait because my phone was playing a video of Harvard President Emerita Drew Gilpin Faust reading a poem by Seamus Heaney:

History says, *don't hope*
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme

The Harvard Office for the Arts distributed the video, part of a series to soothe and connect us at an uncertain moment.

At a time when we've been forced to keep ourselves at a physical distance from others, even the fellows we've grown to love, we are finding other ways to come together. None is more powerful than the sound of the simple human voice as it shares its dreams. ■

Carrie Johnson, a 2020 Nieman Fellow, is a reporter for NPR



Jerry Mitchell, whose stories for The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi have helped lead to the convictions of Ku Klux Klansmen, speaks at Lippmann House in 2020

NiemanReports

Covering Covid-19

How are journalists and news organizations around the world responding to the coronavirus pandemic? Nieman Reports's Covid-19 coverage continues online, with original pieces — including many by Nieman Fellows — looking at how the pandemic is being covered in countries ranging from Europe to Latin America, how this public health crisis is highlighting the crucial role of local news, what lessons can be learned from coronavirus coverage, and more.

Live@Lippmann: Radio Ambulante

Since Carolina Guerrero and Daniel Alarcón launched “Radio Ambulante” in 2012, growth of the Spanish-language podcast, which features longform stories from Latin America and, since 2016, has been distributed by NPR, has skyrocketed, with a devoted audience of listeners around the world. In a February visit to the Nieman Foundation, Guerrero and Alarcón discussed the importance of Latino stories, audience engagement at “Radio Ambulante,” and about how they went from not taking a salary to having a successful organization built around the podcast.

NiemanLab

The Coronavirus's Devastating Impact on Local News

It may be the most important story many news outlets will ever cover, but the coronavirus is wreaking havoc on the already enfeebled local news industry, gutting local advertising and canceling in-person events that many independent outlets rely on. In several Newsonomics columns, news industry analyst Ken Doctor reflects on how Covid-19 has accelerated publishers' strategies — from cutting print days to corporate consolidation — to save local news outlets, and what the pandemic means for the future of local news in the U.S.

NiemanStoryboard

Annotation: Dan Zak's “Why Iowa?”

A few days before 2020's first Democratic caucuses, The Washington Post's Dan Zak headed to Iowa in search of the state's “soul” — or, at least, its character. Zak traveled 800 miles over five days to explore the real Iowa, the one behind the political headlines and cultural clichés, and an annotation of his resulting piece provides a valuable study for anyone writing about the character, history, and contradictions of a place.

“We, as a democracy, desperately need journalism. We have to have it. We can't really operate without that information. Without it, we're lost”

Jerry Mitchell

Investigative journalist

NiemanReports

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TO PROMOTE AND
ELEVATE THE STANDARDS
OF JOURNALISM

