

Global Journalist: Photojournalists on working through a pandemic

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Abstract: In these highlights of a March, 20, 2020 webinar, three photographers for West Coast news outlets discuss the challenges they face to keeping the public informed and themselves safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

COVID, coronavirus, newsroom, journalists, photograph, reynolds journalism institute, pandemic, adjustment, photojournalist,

HOSTS

- Kat Duncan
- Trevor Hook

GUESTS:

- Kent Porter
- Paige Cornwell,
- Carlos Gonzalez

Trevor Hook 00:05

Welcome to Global Journalist, the show by for and about journalists and those who depend on our work. I'm Trevor Hook one of the show's producers.

Paige Cornwell 00:15

It was one death and then it was two. And then suddenly it was 10.

Kent Porter 00:19

We've been going nonstop probably for a good week and a half to two weeks they shut our city down,

Carlos Gonzalez 00:25

And it was just a matter of diving into it completely. When we finally realized we couldn't keep going back to our, our newsroom in San Francisco. It was just too much of a too much of a risk.

Trevor Hook 00:41

Those were the voices of three photographers who are in the middle of covering the coronavirus pandemic, Paige Cornwell, the Seattle Times Kent Porter, the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, and Carlos Gonzalez of the San Francisco Chronicle. They spoke with Kat Duncan of the Reynolds Journalism Institute a few weeks ago, and while a lot has changed in the world, since then, the perils these journalists face haven't. Like many, they're worried about their jobs, their finances, and what this might mean for the future of their industry. We wanted to share this conversation with you to give you a look at yet another way life is changing during this pandemic, and how it's affecting those who give you the information you need to stay informed. We'll start with Paige Cornwell talking about some of the biggest changes in her day to day life as a photojournalist.

Paige Cornwell 01:37

I think the biggest adjustment is this that no one is in the newsroom before you know there were people there sort of running the mothership and now it's just figuring out where where people are. It's also been very kind of — a reaction more than an adjustment because I'm often you know, in other places, but the fact that there aren't nice businesses open anymore, so there are no no coffee shops for me to file from. I have to file everything from my car, we're definitely still kind of running on a oh-mygod, all-hands-on-deck. So organization-wise, it's not probably what we would like it to be. But we're still managing to get stuff out but certainly not as organized as we normally would.

Trevor Hook 02:21

Kent Porter of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat says it's just a matter of time before newsrooms everywhere are faced with the same challenges.

Kent Porter 02:28

It's coming your way. It's just not a matter of if it's when, and if you can test these things now and get this stuff down to to a science, you're going to be much better off. I know that Seattle has done it for a long time. And they're just I mean, they're just kicking everybody's butt and they're just doing a great job. And we've kind of I've kind of looked at their coverage like okay, that's what I could be doing.

Trevor Hook 02:52

Carlos Gonzalez at the San Francisco Chronicle says news outlets on the West Coast have an advantage due to a lot of practice with disaster recovery.

Carlos Gonzalez 03:00

I think that one of the things that really prepared us for this was the inordinate amount of wildfires we've had to cover lately and earthquakes. And we've had disaster planning in the works for years based on, you know, the big one, as they say, you know, this large earthquake that we've been waiting for for 50 years,

Trevor Hook 03:18

Gonzalez says the move to portable computers has been crucial in keeping news operations running.

Carlos Gonzalez 03:24

We're just extending services we already had in place using apps like Slack that allows us to be, you know, communicate without being in the same room or even in the same part of the newsroom. It's just, we're now doing it from our homes, our living rooms. A few years ago, the company started changing out the big desktop computer that said, you know, on your desktop, like a monolith and started replacing them with laptops that that everybody could just plug their monitor into. So everything they needed, they could literally pick up and walk out with and that was just something that I don't know if they you know, just fortuitous or, you know, whatever, but it's it's really helped out quite a bit.

Trevor Hook 04:04

Kat Duncan is a senior editor at the Reynolds Journalism Institute's innovation and futures lab, and is a photojournalist herself. She put together this panel.

Kat Duncan 04:13

Going into our next question then about equipment is what new? Or more complicated safety procedures are you guys undergoing every day to make sure that you're safe? Are you sterilizing equipment after a reassignment? Are you only interacting with the public outside kind of how have assignments changed in the current situation?

Carlos Gonzalez 04:33

It's tricky because there are times when, when you're out there, and I mean, for me, it's hard not to shake people's hands or, you know, be you know, a little bit more personal and getting in close with a camera to be a little more intimate. It's, it's tricky. And, you know, I found that I'm a little more concerned now about even putting my cameras down when I'm on an assignment. And just the other night I was photographing the closing of some of the last bars in San Francisco and I was at this place. place that on any given day might have been quite as clean as it should have been. And I felt I feel terrible saying that but it started to really kind of like question whether I should set my second camera with my long lens down in that place. And, you know, just because you don't know if you know, there's people coming in, in their, you know, might have been exposed to it or I might have been exposed to it and all of a sudden you're, you're picking this camera up and they're right in front of your face right in front of your nose and mouth and it's a little bit you know, disconcerting to you know, start doubting like that. And so I've been carrying around a one of those tubs of Clorox wipes and trying to disinfect as often as I can, even between assignments or locations. I know it might be a little bit overkill, but like I was mentioning earlier, I'm a little bit susceptible to respiratory infections and might be in a little bit of a higher risk group because I have asthma as well. So and I also know that I sometimes I slip and I shake people's hands as well. But yeah, anytime I can wipe that stuff down or be a little bit more careful with it, I'm, you know, keeping certain things out of certain parts of my car so that I know that that I'm maintaining a, you know, kind of a space that I can clean a little bit more easily, if that makes sense.

Kat Duncan 06:26

It does. So has the Chronicle instituted any, like mandatory precautions? Do you guys have to wear masks or gloves, clean equipment a certain amount of time? Has anything like that happened yet?

Carlos Gonzalez 06:38

Not yet. I mean, we're basically basically been told to maintain a distance from subjects and also not to go into places where people might have you know, be testing positive. Shoot from a little bit of a, you know, safe space, so to speak. And, but nothing where you know, we are, you know, restricted from doing our assignments are whatever, it's a — you know, it's so fluid. I mean it changes from day to day. And I think we just have to step up our own precautions, you know. But being out and about in in as photographers we don't have the luxury of being able to do our jobs from the security of our home. And so we have to just kind of like gauge the situation and be be ready to kind of respond to it a little bit more carefully.

Paige Cornwell 07:26

At this point now if you are going to be going anywhere that has had like a considered a high risk area and say a hospital and you're interviewing someone who's tested positive you have to get approval from an AME — assistant managing editor. So higher up ranking and they are the ones who are weighing the you know, the pros and cons of of that, and certainly the handshaking has been a very kind of weird adjustment, but people are aware of it. We also found that during press conferences, especially a news briefing, people are very all up in each other's business. And at some point, we all — the main people who've been outside nursing homes — realized that okay, we can't do that anymore. We need to stay away. And we can all just shout. That's been an adjustment too, but it hasn't been, I think, as difficult as in other places, because people here are so aware of it already.

Kat Duncan 08:28

Ken, has your newsroom, installed any new precautions or asked the staff if they needed anything specific?

Kent Porter 08:36

You know, we don't we were given a list of things that you know, we should probably do on assignment. And I'll echo what everybody else said about you know, we're just a little bit more careful about how we go out into an assignment. But we I've only worn my mask twice, because I went into one area that I was a little suspect tonight and we're preparing food, so I realized that I probably should wear a mask, just to be conscious of the fact that I could be carrying. You know, I think we all have to be proactive like that. But mostly I don't but I gotta tell you, I have a, I have a system that when I when I go out and assignment, it doesn't matter what assignment it is, I get back to the vehicle. I wipe down the handle of my truck, get into the vehicle, I wipe down my steering wheel and my gear shift and everything else around me and then I take another wipe out, another two wipes out I wipe down every part of my equipment, both cameras, I'm just using one camera now I was using too. So I wiped down my wide and my zoom and once in a while a 300 and I have a very deliberate thing that I do. So once I do that, I get back out of the vehicle, and I have bottled water and I have soap in my truck and I wash my hands and I don't just wash them I wash them all over and I wash up most of the time up to the middle of my my forearm and I do that all day. All, all day long because you know I've got family I don't want to infect and I've got friends I don't want to infect anybody and I don't want to infect the people I go out to but everybody has a little different standard, you know, I carry bleach with me, I - I even bleach the bottom soles of my feet. I take off my shoes before I get home. And I bleached the soles again, after I walk. And then when I get inside, I take off my clothes. I know it's really risque. To take off my clothes, I put them in a bag, I take them to the washer, I dump them in the washer and sanitize all my clothes that

I've worn that day. I immediately go in, take a shower, wash down really well. You know, washing my body really well for the first part and then washing my hair in my face. You know, you have to be just you know, I'm super paranoid about it. I you know, obviously you don't want to get it but it's part of a responsibility of being a journalist to photo journalists is that you know you were in close contact with people all the time and lens wise I backed off quite a bit my shooting routine, I'm shooting a lot more long stuff now than I was wide. And and I maintain that six foot distance. So I'm very, very, I'm hyper aware that as journalists, we're, you know, we're, we're considered essential. So we need to be able to go out and report these stories without getting without getting ourselves sick and crippling our news coverage and then getting other people sick. I think it's just it's just something as a journalist that you just really need to do and being hyperactive about it. I don't I don't think it's overkill, really. I'm wasting a lot of stuff but I'll tell you what, I feel good. And I feel good about like how I clean myself.

Kat Duncan 12:04

So let's talk a little bit about self care and support. What are you guys doing to take care of yourselves? What are your fellow journalists doing? Are you a part of Facebook groups? What are you doing to make sure that you stay healthy and sane, so that you can keep working? Why don't we start with Carlos?

Carlos Gonzalez 12:24

I call people I talk to friends and family. And you know, I know that it's difficult to sometimes to go through something like this when your family might be a risk. My parents are both over 80. My mom's birthday was on Monday and I couldn't even go see her. So lots of phone calls, you know, telling them it's going to be okay. I know that our responsibility is to be out there. And I know that we have to keep people from pushing the panic button. So if it doesn't help if we if we push it first, you know, I'll be honest, I did have to call my doctor and asked whether I should be tested because I started having some, some questions about you know, Some, some symptoms that I was having that I felt should be addressed because I did come into first person contact with the young woman who had to come back from Italy. And from near the area that was first, first quarantine. I've gotten better, but I just didn't want to take a chance and don't want to be a vector for this at all. I don't want to put some somebody else's life at risk.

Trevor Hook 13:22

Paige Cornwell of the Seattle Times.

Paige Cornwell 13:24

One thing I've done is even just for an hour, not have any screens not have my phone on my laptop, even one hour, I get super anxious about it, but even just that I will really help. I'm taking walks, I found that I wouldn't be in my apartment and I would think oh my gosh, it's the apocalypse The world is ending, you know, freaking out and then go outside and realize, okay, there are still people outside. Most of them are social distancing. The world is not ending yet. That's really helped and also hearing from readers and you are thinking us and kind of reminding myself of our duty. And how we are one of the reliable places people can go to now. That's been really helpful as well.

Trevor Hook 14:06

Kent Porter of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat.

Kent Porter 14:09

Well, when I when I get back to the to my place I put I put the phone down and and I don't, I don't read it for probably a good two hours and after I get all settled down and eat, I just decompress from all that stuff. Last night it was a little difficult for me, cuz I was so busy yesterday, but I put the phone down and put the computer down. And I turned on Netflix and I watched the comedy specials. I need to laugh. I found that I needed to laugh. A lot of people's lives are being disrupted but getting out and taking deep breaths and just kind of looking at your surroundings and realizing, Yeah, we're in this. It's going to be deep for a while but you'll come out on the other side. And there's hope. Your goal is to to report as a marathon, not a sprint and you have to live your life like that, you know, and I've really had to, especially with this really learn to really, really get my head out of my job when I get home because it is rarely very, very tough to do that before I go to sleep, it sounds funny, but I hook up the computer and do that, those rain sounds and the waves and the river sounds and it puts me right to sleep. It's great.

Trevor Hook 15:27

You're listening to Global Journalist on KBIA at 91.3 fm. If you want to listen back to this show, or jump into our archives visit KBIA.org. On this episode, Kat Duncan and the Reynolds Journalism Institute is speaking with Paige Cornwell of the Seattle Times, Kent Porter of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat and Carlos Gonzalez of the San Francisco Chronicle. All three are photographers who are currently covering their respective areas right now, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here's Kat.

Kat Duncan 15:57

Are you guys still going into people's homes and interviewing them photographing them now. Has that changed at all in assignments?

Kent Porter 16:06

I can tell you that, from what I've seen, people aren't getting miked up as much as they used to be. But I think that there's just a certain amount of precaution that you've got to take, you know, sticking a microphone on somebody right below their face, that you've handled, and then that they're going to breathe into, I think it's just, you know, you can use a boom mic if you need to, if that's if that's your, you know, if that's your, if that's your preference, or you can go in a room that's got a little bit of echo to it, and you can probably get a little bit more sound out of it.

Carlos Gonzalez 16:35

Typically, if someone has said that they are being tested or, you know, has symptoms, we do not go into the home. And I was actually asked to go shoot an assignment up north, in Ken's neck of the woods on somebody who was, you know, feeling that they had symptoms and couldn't get a test and was specifically told not to photograph inside the home by my you know, managers because they don't want us to get exposed. In other cases when we're when we're doing stories. about, you know, vulnerable communities, we do go inside, but you know, only when it's they've confirmed that they're not having any symptoms or any having any issues. You know, I'm trying to maintain a distance on a personal level anyway because I, I don't know where I've been might, might I might have might have picked up something or whatever, and they don't want to bring that into somebody's home as much as

possible. So, you know, it's a mixture. At this point, it's about, you know, having, having good judgment, you know, about where you've been, and you know, what you could potentially either come in contact with or put others in contact with.

Paige Cornwell 17:37

There's been a lot of shooting from outside a window and taking photos that way. It's definitely been us but then also people who don't feel comfortable with that, and I've been doing a lot of like the six foot interviews to where you kind of have to project to answer — to get your questions answered. Which has been an adjustment as well.

Kat Duncan 18:01

Ken, maybe you can start us off with our next question. Is there anything you wish that had been done to be for your newsroom to be better prepared? Do you have suggestions for newsrooms who are about to experience this?

Kent Porter 18:18

I would test — I would test everything that you have. And make sure that and do dry runs, you know, it might take a little bit longer it might add to your day, but, you know, here's how you gotta look at it. You know, when we cover wildfires, you know, we, you've got to, you just got to have, you just have to know that. If it's going to hit the fan, it's going to hit the fan and you got to be there for it. Now with us with something like this. If someone gets sick in your newsroom, and everybody's there, your newsroom's done. You're not going to be able to communicate with the public at all. You're not gonna be able to get your newspaper out and have a go. I mean, you know, we're all working very closely together. We got to we have budget meetings together, we have stand up meetings together, you know, we're touching paper all the time or touching computers. If one person gets sick test positive for COVID in your newsroom, then it puts everybody at risk. So you cannot make — you have to make sure that these test runs work great. And we, you know, we've been pretty good about it. Because we've had so many disasters in the last five years, that we've gotten really good about being remote and doing our jobs from our cars or from our homes. That's not a problem. But for the companies that think that they shouldn't, you know, I mean, you got to treat it like you're going into sort of like a war, you got to take precautions, and you've got to be able to make sure that all your people are on the same page that you get it ironed out beforehand.

Kat Duncan 19:46

Have any of you wrestled with new ethical considerations or issues as your coverage has changed during the pandemic? What have those ethical questions been and how have you dealt with them?

Kent Porter 19:59

On any story that we're doing, we're, you know, we're we're double sourcing, triple sourcing almost everything, we're trying to get confirmation on everything. Because we don't want to add to the hysteria that's out there. We want to, we want to you have to make sure that your facts are correct before you do anything.

Carlos Gonzalez 20:14

We're being very careful about, you know, we photographed wearing masks, kind of not trying to leave, you know, kind of a defining, you know, image of, you know, Asians wearing the mask all the time. So, that, that that, you know, suggestion came from our editors a couple a week and a half ago, just to be aware of how we might be, you know, profiling, certain races. The other thing that I've noticed as well, is that this, this emergency doesn't have, you know, big visual warning signs. I mean, there's not, you know, huge amounts of smoke on the horizon. There's not rising floodwaters, there's not, you know, crumbling buildings that we normally cover. How do we, you know, how do we photograph something, you know, show that it's, it's is different than how things were before. Rather than it just being a daily part of life. I mean, the other day, I photographed a single car going across the Bay Bridge. And, you know, I set up there and waited for 15-20 minutes to see if the traffic was lower in general. And it was from my experience. There's empty streets all over the place. I mean, California street in the financial district, I mean, we're looking at the Embarcadero in San Francisco; Market Street is empty. I mean, we're talking about I haven't seen those areas that empty since 9/11. And the bridge, I haven't seen that empty since they shut it down about 10 plus years ago to to rebuild a section of it. So you know, those, those are very distinct things that I visually can remember. And, you know, from my perspective, I can say this is different enough, but there are questions about other things we photograph, whether that is just something that we're seeing every day, or if it's related to the virus because again, it's not by This isn't something you can see.

Paige Cornwell 22:01

We're seeing a lot of , call them parachuting journalists of the national journalists coming in, there was a foil, I say, scenes in Seattle, and they were a few, like, look at this graffiti that is showing. Like, you know, people are graffitiing the walls because they want to show that we're in a state of emergency. But that's graffiti was already there beforehand, and it was about climate change from a year ago. So those those sorts of things. You're right, like you need to have, have the context or else you are sometimes, you know, standing, fanning the flames.

Kent Porter 22:39

We've had a really, really difficult time of getting some of our hospitals to go on record, saying what they have and even saying how many people they have in their hospitals. I mean, it's just been very tight lipped. It's, it's very frustrating to try to get that information out there and you're met with, you're met with a lot of resistance on people need have a right to know what's going on in the community.

Trevor Hook 23:02

These journalists noted an irony that at a time when their work is in very, very high demand, money is short. That's partly because a lot of readers and viewers are getting their news for free. And partly because many of the businesses that advertise in newspapers are shut down.

Paige Cornwell 23:17

Our subscriber base has done very, very well. I think in the last month, actually, I don't know exactly how much but it was much higher. And in some cases, our pageviews have doubled, tripled, even, you know, eight times what we normally would, but on the same, the other side of the coin is that businesses are really hurting, so advertising is down. So I don't know how exactly that's going even now, we're going to be saved by the number of subscribers or if we're going to be hit by the lack of

advertising, which has been an issue for obviously very long time. So I think people are recognizing, okay, there's something to be said for person to person contact. But it is interesting that we do know now that we can get out of paper when everyone is outside of the newsroom. So it might strengthen our options in the future. But I don't think that this is like the be all end all.

Kent Porter 24:22

We're having a huge, you know, our advertisers are really, have really backed off. And we're being hit real hard. But on the on the other hand, as journalists, I'm looking at our page views and there's through the roof and you know, we've had some big events here. And just in the past three years, and our pageviews are just going through the roof with people coming on and looking at because we've opened up our paywall, like everybody else has for the voronavirus coverage. And but yeah, we're going to get hit hard. I think all media industries are going to get are going to get hard pressed, especially you know, they've having a tough time anyway, but I do like that. camaraderie that I get from a newsroom. There's a certain amount of —It's a family. I mean, it's, you know, it's, it's part of your second family, you know, you just have to —You work so closely together. And I do miss that. Because I like, you know, I like being involved in the daily life of a newspaper. And, but yeah, I think, you know, I think you're gonna find the general consensus is that people are going to want to be around each other again,

Carlos Gonzalez 25:29

You know, right now we're seeing our digital subscribers, climb our us going through the roof, I mean, you know, doubled in some cases, you know, more and more. In some cases. You know, we're still putting out the daily paper too, which is, you know, which is decidedly trickier when you're all in different locations. I do think our digital subscriptions will stay high and I'm not sure if our imprint subscriptions will remain the same because I think people are seeing how, how much you can get and how quickly you can get it from from a digital subscription. You know, advertising is going to be an issue when there's so many businesses that might have closed down or have, you know, had to lay off, a lot of people are going to have to ramp back up to their normal, you know, sales that's going to be tricky for them to be putting money into, into print ads. I've been around newsroom since I was eight years old. And I love the hum and the buzz of being around people who are all kind of like, you know, pushing the train in the same direction. And I miss the newsroom. You know, it's hard because I, you know, had to, you know, we work remotely as you know, as, as, as our norm and to have, you know, been out of the newsroom as much as we have been, you know, as photographers for a while, all of a sudden, I'm realizing now I can't have it, you know, and that's, that's kind of like the tricky part. And I will miss it, you know, until we get back together and have a nice big sheet cake, you know, or, you know, Election Night pizza. Yeah, that'll be — I'm looking forward to that again.

Trevor Hook 27:17

That's it for this edition of Global Journalist. The guests for this episode were Paige Cornwell of the Seattle Times, Kent Porter of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, and Carlos Gonzalez of the San Francisco Chronicle. Special thanks to Kat Duncan and the Reynolds Journalism Institute, and everyone who submitted questions for the journalists. Some of the music in this episode was provided by Blue Dot Sessions. For previous local coverage of the Coronavirus and to catch upcoming episodes

of global journalist. Visit KBIA.org. For all of us, at Global Journalist, I'm Trevor Hook. Thanks for listening