



## A National Pandemic: Impacts on the Journalism Industry and Classroom Pedagogy

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a surge in audience growth for digital, print, and broadcast news outlets across the United States. This surge in audience numbers undoubtedly shows the desire for good local reporting, but the larger audience isn't producing financial gain for numerous news outlets like many might assume. Due to the massive impact on the economy, locally and globally, advertisers have pulled back or stopped advertising altogether.

In addition to the changing economic landscape of the industry, those journalists that find themselves in lockdown or quarantine areas find that social distancing is bringing about new and inventive ways to report while staying safe. As professors think of ways of teaching journalism students how to report on the story – and with indications that a second wave could impact parts of the world for some time to come – changing the way we teach our students to prepare for a “new normal” may be necessary.

One local television affiliate and one university in the state of Connecticut were observed for this case study. Connecticut is a state that borders the United States' original epicenter or “hot spot,” New York City; therefore, both student and professional reporters had to work under strict quarantine/lockdown measures that were put in place for the entire state.

### **How Quickly the Industry Changed**

The entire journalism industry was turned upside down by the spread of the virus COVID-19 within

a few short weeks in early March 2020. Ultimately, broadcast journalists (network and local) along with students in broadcast journalism programs across the country, had to quickly adapt to social distancing guidelines while still trying to report stories. In some cases, stay at home orders kept students from leaving their homes while still trying to report on journalism class projects.

Some companies like NBC Universal quickly made plans to begin making parameters for anchors and reporters to work from home. The NBC affiliate in Hartford, Connecticut, was the first in the state to move their weather anchors out of the building to work from home. NBC owns and operates 11 television stations across the country, along with several other TV divisions. The company was at the forefront of reducing staff in their buildings. Soon to follow were anchors working from home and reporters operating under strict social distancing guidelines. Many other broadcast outlets began following suit.

In the short time the pandemic began to shut down the country; the journalism industry, in general, has faced unprecedented change. The good news for the industry is that interest in the pandemic story has brought high numbers of viewers to local and network news broadcasts, and increased web traffic on news outlet websites and social media platforms. Nielsen, a company that measures television ratings, analyzed the top 25 markets in the country from February to early March as the virus began to spread. They found

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*A snapshot of NBC meteorologists broadcasting from home following the corona virus outbreak*

**Photo credit:** Nate Johnson,  
Director of Weather Operations, NBC Universal

that “local news viewing among adults 25-54 was up +38% in the San Francisco-Bay Area and news viewing in L.A. was +25% among the same age demo” (Adweek, 2020). That, of course, is the demographic that advertisers covet. Due to the demand for COVID-19 pandemic coverage, Rhode Island affiliate WLNE, for example, added a new 4 PM newscast. NBC Nightly News began re-airing its *Nightly News Broadcast* at 7:30 PM to supplement programming that, due to the nationwide shutdown, was no longer in production. The nightly newscast audience had dropped off in recent decades due to the 24-hour news cycle and a shift in viewer habits. All networks said they have experienced a surge in viewers since the pandemic began. For example, NBC Nightly News reported its highest viewership in the last 15 years, with more than 12 million viewers during a single newscast. (Washington Post)

With this new demand for news on various platforms, there is some irony that local newspapers along with some radio and television broadcast companies began cutting staff and salaries. Meredith Corporation publishes popular magazines like *People* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, along with owning television stations. The company announced it will cut staff and reduce salaries, with some salaries reduced by 40%. Newspapers are expected to get hit harder than the business altering recession in 2008. The cause? The pandemic has caused advertisers to pull back or cancel ads altogether, due to many industries either being shut down or seeing a dramatic loss of revenue. The length of the shutdown and economic impact

on the industry is not known yet. The dire headlines about layoffs and newspapers shutting down have garnered attention from lawmakers. More than half of the United States Senate sent a letter to the Trump administration asking to “increase advertising in local newspapers and on broadcast stations to help ensure they can continue to operate throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.” The letter went on to say that “Newspapers and broadcasters have particularly been hit hard financially due to decreased revenue typically derived by advertising sales. This comes at a time when they have increased coverage of daily news, alerts, and educational programs.”

While the economic changes were starting to occur and the journalists that remained working re-learned how to report the story, so too did students reporting in journalism programs in hard-hit areas.

### **The Learning Curve of a Lifetime: The Sudden Industry Change Alters Student Electronic News Gathering**

Central Connecticut State University’s Department of Journalism houses a broadcast sequence, which includes a *newscast practicum*. Students work in the practicum as a team to write, edit, produce, anchor, and report in a campus newscast. When the university suddenly shut down, students were forced to stay home, and international students boarded flights to get home before travel bans were implemented. The students began seeing local news transformed before their eyes. A Skype or phone interview used to happen only in rare circumstances. Now, reporters were forced to get interviews electronically, rather than in



*A WPIX News photographer practices social distancing while getting an interview in New York City.*

**Photo credit:** Jason Gonzales

person. If reporters were in the field, they had to remain at least 6 feet away from interview subjects.

Most instructors in colleges and universities across the country had to take a crash course in teaching on-line. Journalism professors, particularly broadcasters, were faced with the “new normal” for gathering news. Students in Central Connecticut State University’s Department of Journalism’s *Newscast Practicum* suddenly had to come up with a new set of “standard operating procedures.” Some students were able to grab needed equipment before quickly evacuating campus. Other students found themselves home with nothing more than a smartphone. In the *Newscast Practicum* class, students were told the newscast would go on. Newly issued guidelines issued by the professor on how to report stories from home factored in new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, guidance from the State of Connecticut, and the University president. Some students used video editing apps and shot video using their smartphones. The new way to interview was by using Skype or other apps, and computers to record interviews and gather soundbites. The ‘look’ of the newscast had to go on without a studio set, control room switchers, and the teleprompters they were used to operating. Students had to virtually work together to hold editorial meetings. The students realized their stories and newscasts were looking like what they started seeing on local news broadcasts. The new normal?

The goal for the course moving forward was to show students what will likely be the story of their lifetime. It was up to them to get creative in telling it. Students were told that this experience would be key talking points when interviewing for an internship or future position in the industry. They would be able to

say they went entirely mobile and were able to, like working journalists, rise to the occasion during the global pandemic and nationwide shutdown.

A link to one of the student broadcasts is here: <https://is.gd/UPs7Nw>

### Reporting on a Story Without a Clear Ending

Many questions still linger about the future of the virus and its impact on student learning, and the lasting impact and changes in the journalism industry. Do “home studios” become a regular thing? Are these changes going to make a Skype interview or use of a smartphone for a live-shot a new normal? Wearing masks on-camera in the field? Does the added sampling, higher ratings, and demand for news during this time eventually bring more revenue for the industry? Will advertising sales ever recover in time to save the business?

It is too soon to know if this is the new normal or just another chapter in the ever-changing journalism industry. Making sure J-school pedagogy quickly adapts to the “new normal” will be paramount in preparing our students with the needed skills to adapt to whatever the landscape becomes on the other side of the pandemic.

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*Ivy Milne, a student at Central Connecticut State University, reports for the campus newscast from her kitchen at home.*

Photo credit: CCSU News

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