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Eyes on Research: Photojournalism under COVID

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due to her restricted mobility on hospital campuses. “This kind of assignment is really difficult if the news agency hasn’t cleared it with the hospital or other places ahead of time,” O’Hara emphasized.

This inability to access hospitals and patients was widespread, with both freelance and staff photographers across the country experiencing frustrations and limitations. Stephen M. Katz, a photojournalist with The Virginian-Pilot, says he is well-versed in photographing medical facilities and procedures, “but during COVID-19, patient privacy has been at a level I’ve never seen. Even the standard ‘from behind’ non-identifying shots were prohibited,” Katz said.

In addition to struggles of limited access, news photographers were forced to grapple with the threat to their families and their own health presented by every photo assignment. While most of those surveyed (54%) claimed they would take assignments despite safety concerns in order to pay bills and otherwise survive, the results underscored a tension between a willingness to work and feeling unsafe while working. When asked if they felt supported to safely work on assignment, a vast majority (75%) of photographers expressed they had some to a lot of concerns, with 20% saying they definitely did not feel able to photograph the crisis safely.

O’Hara acknowledged she was afraid to take assignments inside hospitals and was frequently worried about how her work on assignment might affect her own health or those she lives with. “I have been afraid and anxious much of the time,” she said. “I don’t have health insurance and I also don’t have enough saved up to not be working at the moment.”

These concerns were reflected in the survey results where many photographers expressed vulnerability regarding their health and wellness. Nearly 30% of photographers lacked health insurance. Fourteen percent identified as being immunosuppressed or immunocompromised and 27% indicated that they lived with people who had “underlying health issues or who might be particularly susceptible to the dangers of COVID-19.”

Visual journalists interviewed for this article expressed a variety of views on how to visualize COVID’s impact to inspire more public understanding of

METHODOLOGY

A 49-question exploratory survey was distributed through partner organizations to 712 online respondents. The questions included simple yes/no responses; scaled 5-point responses to statements (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree, etc.); or where respondents could “click all that apply”; and open-ended questions. We asked questions to determine demographics, including: gender; race/ethnicity; approximate age; nationality; country of current residence; and if respondent identified as being in a marginalized group. Other questions polled the participant’s professional specialties and identity such as: focus and general specialties in visual communication; types of work produced; and approximate income level.

A majority of the items explored wellness, professional situation and stability both before and during the COVID-19 health crisis. Questions also included inquiries into their health insurance; feelings of wellness; available resources for working safely; estimates of financial losses; pressures to work despite risks; financial stability; and client payment terms. Finally, respondents were invited to submit their thoughts on useful emergency resources, their engagement and support within the professional community, and bright spots and sources for hope in the present situation. These survey questions resulted in a wide array of information around the experiences of mostly independent photographers before and during this unprecedented crisis.

its severity. Ultimately no photograph can show the real toll this virus takes on the body as it destroys from the inside, according to Amaria.

“I think this is where we are pushing up against the limitations of a news photograph,” Amaria said. “The news photograph can show you grief, stress, health-care workers searching for answers, EMS teams responding to house calls, morgues filled with carefully wrapped bodies, but it cannot show you what it feels like to suffer from the coronavirus.”

BUILDING COMMUNITY UNDER COVID

Some positive news in the data was that most people (78%) expressed feelings of social support and that sentiment was reflected across the experiences of many

visual journalists we spoke to.

“Watching my community take care of one another and imagine the kind of community we want to live in has been really inspiring,” O’Hara said of what she saw happening in her neighborhood.

Others produced the kind of community they wanted to see, such as Women Photograph’s The Journal project which both created a new space for photography made under COVID and forged new connections across the world. Conceived of and coordinated by photographers Charlotte Schmitz and Hannah Yoon, The Journal was an opportunity to support women photographers in using the time during COVID to make work, find support and depict a global perspective on the pandemic.

“We also saw intimacy and vulnerability in a lot of the work,” Yoon said. “I believe it built a strong community among women photographers and united us during a time that was very uncertain for most of us.”

Independent photojournalist Danielle Villasana saw a similar shift in her colleagues’ work. However, she sees it specifically in contrast to the ongoing problem she identifies of not enough journalists telling the stories of their own communities. She says this parachute journalism is often produced from primarily homogenous viewpoints that run the risk of relying on stereotypes, but recently she’s seen how COVID’s limitations might be encouraging the photojournalism industry to move beyond such practices and hire more locally.

“What’s interesting about the pandemic is that it affects everyone — journalists are telling stories from their own (communities),” Villasana said. “It’s been incredibly interesting to see how the narrative has shifted to make space for imagery that is more personal, intimate, quiet, and reflective.”

RECKONING WITH RACIAL REALITIES

What became apparent in our research is that the photojournalism community is affected by COVID in all the same ways as the general public: safety and health concerns for themselves and their families; financial vulnerability exacerbated by the pandemic’s economic uncertainty. The industry also reflects the racial disparities that are made all the more apparent by coronavirus.

“The (medical) data tells us that Black, Latinx and Native communities are over-represented in the death rates of the virus. Many people in these communities are also hardest hit economically, and these communities will have the hardest and longest recoveries,” Amaria said.

As we see Black and Indigenous communities hit the hardest by COVID in the U.S., how do we consider the relationship between that disturbing reality and the photographers of color working and living in these communities? Very little scholarship has been done around the race, ethnicity and socioeconomic realities of photojournalists, even as these are the topics we so frequently photograph in an attempt to bring light to the world’s injustices. The results from our survey highlighted a clear problem of economic inequality along racial lines in photojournalism.

Of all represented racial identities in the survey living in the U.S., photographers identifying as Black/African American reported the highest financial precarity before the pandemic. Twenty-six percent of Black/African American photographers expressed feeling little to no financial stability before COVID.

Both Black/African American as well as Hispanic/Latino photographers indicated significantly greater concern about their potential ability to pay for housing when compared with white photographers. Survey data showed that Indigenous photographers were significantly more likely to earn less than \$25,000 a year when compared with all others. Respondents identifying as a person of color were far more likely to earn less than \$25,000 a year compared with other photographers.

Statistics such as these underscore criticisms of the news photo industry that point to a lack of financial and assignment equity along racial lines. “It was disheartening to see the first half dozen major photo features to come out of the pandemic exclusively photographed by white men,” said Daniella Zalzman, an independent photojournalist and co-founder/executive director of Women Photograph. Zalzman analyzes major news photo bylines for photographer race and gender.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of our survey explored the health and safety concerns and economic difficulties presented by COVID for photojournalists that often complicated their

These survey findings clarify a picture of a profession in crisis – one that is not only systematically sustained but increasingly of a dire nature. It also reveals an implicit sense among the visual storytellers of a near-constant state of uncertainty and precarity in their industry.

ability to document the virus safely. Other items underscored the existing financial precarity of freelancers before the virus and highlighted the photojournalism industry’s financial inequality along racial lines.

These survey findings clarify a picture of a profession in crisis – one that is not only systematically sustained but increasingly of a dire nature. It also reveals an implicit sense among the visual storytellers of a near-constant state of uncertainty and precarity in their industry. The data suggests that those who were vulnerable before the COVID-19 public health crisis are even more at risk now and are highly vulnerable in both their wellness as well as their financial stability.

Scholars of visual media frequently study the effects of images on the public; the public’s interest in images; the photojournalist’s perception of their work; and the relationship between photographers and those they depict. In order to truly understand any of these things, we must actually consider photojournalists’ lived experiences and identities: how they informs their work and approaches to those they document and how these things become written into news images and thereby the public visual narrative – especially addressing the health and social crises of our current time.

“COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color across the globe, highlighting already stark disparities in access to basic healthcare and other social programs,” Zalzman said. “In the US, COVID is a particular threat in immigration detention centers, in prisons, on Native reservations — and applying the same singular lens that we have used in so much of mainstream news coverage is not enough to give us a nuanced, contextualized understanding of how the pandemic is affecting each of those communities.”

While the survey and anecdotes from visual journalists underscored myriad

ways in which COVID affected photojournalists and therefore coverage of the pandemic itself, continuing research and industry introspection during and beyond the COVID crisis is necessary to understand how it has affected our community. This historical moment demands a critical analysis of photojournalism practices in the field and the newsroom. To understand the global crisis, we must first understand the crisis in our industry. ■

Tara Pixley, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of journalism at Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles) and an independent visual journalist. Her scholarship considers the lives of visual journalists within and beyond the newsroom and the photographic field, especially as it relates to marginalized photographers’ experiences, perspectives and knowledge. During her 20-year photojournalism career, she has been a photo editor for Newsweek and CNN and published images with the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, NPR, ProPublica, HuffPost, and ESPN Magazine, among others. She was a 2016 Visiting Fellow at Harvard’s Nieman Foundation for Journalism and a 2019 recipient of the World Press Photo Solutions Visual Journalism Initiative for her work on Latin American asylum-seekers on the border. She has been an NPPA member since 2017.

Martin Smith-Rodden, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of journalism at Ball State University (Muncie, IN). His focus as a researcher is that of a cognitive psychologist, exploring the practice and scholarship of visual journalism with a scientifically informed and research-based approach. Much of his research focuses on how human behavior interacts with media content and technology, including media effects. Other interests include development of evidence-based practices, topics in visual ethics, diversity and inclusion in the field, as well as opportunities for advocacy or solutions-based photojournalism. He was a professional visual journalist for 30+ years in three markets, including work at The Virginian-Pilot, from 1986 to 2015. While there, he held positions as staff photographer, news photo editor, daily sections photo editor and was a member of the staff’s photo leadership team for nearly a decade. He has been an NPPA member since 1980.