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Eyes on Research: Photojournalism under COVID

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In this issue, Eyes on Research distills findings from the Visual Storyteller's Survey that queried the experiences of photographers during the pandemic. Usually this column is shorter, but given these times we're breaking the rules a bit to present a lot of information.

This column is the result of discussions between Kevin Moloney and Martin Smith-Rodden, two long time photojournalists now in the academic world. If you have research that professionals can put into action, with results that can be outlined in 700 words, we would love to hear from you at ktmoloney@bsu.edu or magazine@nppa.org.

Financial insecurity, racial disparities, access and personal safety all are heightened stresses in the coronavirus era, survey shows

COVID-19 turns up the heat on issues simmering in photojournalism

By Tara Pixley, Ph.D, and Martin Smith-Rodden, Ph.D.

Often, the news events we cover as photojournalists are experiences and dangers outside our own lives that we choose to document and depict. In the case of COVID-19, journalists were part of the unfolding news event, very much affected by the ramifications of a global pandemic.

In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, Martin and I wrote and circulated the Visual Storyteller's Survey in conjunction with several organizations (including Authority Collective, Catchlight, Color Positive, Diversify Photo, Everyday Projects, Juntos Photo, and Women Photograph). More than 700 photographers responded to the exploratory survey that queried visual storytellers' experiences of working during COVID-19, trying to gather knowledge around financial uncertainty, health and safety, and the impact of identity on access, resources and professional security in the visual media industry.

What became apparent from the survey responses was an overwhelming sense of financial and health precarity among photographers, suggesting a potential impact on the visual narratives of COVID-19.

THE LIMITS OF COVERING COVID

Results from our survey indicated many American photographers regularly experience financial precarity that was only exacerbated by the pandemic. The limits of access to personal protective equipment for freelancers met the lack of consistent assignment work under COVID's economic lull, resulting in a work environment that was often unsafe and uncertain for photojournalists.

As many news organizations worked to respond to the extensive limits and variables introduced by COVID (while doing justice to coverage of a global pandemic), photo editors struggled to balance the health and safety of photographers in the field with their overstretched budgets. Kainaz Amaria, visuals editor at Vox, acknowledged this was one of the main difficulties she experienced in covering coronavirus. "There were a lot of unknowns in the early days, so I really had to rely on the wires to support our journalism," Amaria said.

That uncertainty in newsrooms and other revenue-generating outlets for

photographers translated to a crippling amount of lost wages. Of those who indicated lens-based work is most of their income, 72% said they lost more than \$2,500 in wages due to coronavirus. A majority estimated that they lost \$2,500 to \$7,500 "since the onset of quarantining and other COVID-19 preventative measures" at the time of the survey. Beyond that, another 14% reported losses of \$7,500 to \$10,000, and 20% reported lost income of more than \$10,000. Relatedly, more than half of the photographers surveyed (67%) also expressed some to a lot of concern that they might not be able to pay their housing costs for the next month.

Atlanta-based freelance visual journalist Dustin Chambers says he was very worried when scheduled jobs started drying up in March due to the pandemic. "Just paying rent is really difficult for a lot of (photojournalists) and certainly COVID has brought that to the forefront," Chambers said.

Twenty-four percent of all photographers surveyed expressed little to no

contact believe

financial security before COVID. The data indicates many news photographers have been facing difficult financial choices and operating in a state of vulnerability even before the economic effects of coronavirus. Chambers points to the constant financial concerns of many independent photographers, saying, "We do our best to push it out of our heads when we're day-to-day trying to make it work, but our profession is a clearly fragile balance, and for most people the wages do not offer a cushion. If we don't get jobs in the next month, it's just not going to work."

While he counts himself lucky to have been able to maintain a steadier than expected flow of news photo work during COVID, he also spoke to the reality of losing all commercial work under mandated restrictions due to the pandemic. "Whether it be weddings or headshots, etc., those commercial jobs on the side can sustain the work of a freelance journalist," Chambers explained. With all commercial work at a standstill for several months, even

those who are able to maintain through editorial assignments may have seen a devastating drop in income.

Of all the specialties where respondents pulled their income, the two that topped the list as the most correlated to higher earnings in the survey were News/Editorial and Commercial photographic work. Both of these spaces for photographic income were devastated by COVID, leaving many photographers at a financial loss.

Photographers drawing income from News/Editorial only, or Commercial work only - as well as those with income from both – all reported nearly the same levels of economic stability on the average, before the health crisis. However, reports of losses during COVID varied significantly depending on which of these groups they were in. Photographers who worked in only News/Editorial reported the lowest impact due to losses in the three groups, with 41% of them saving they lost \$0-\$2,500 during the time of the survey – an overrepresentation according to statistical tests. Those who took income from both News/Editorial and Commercial were higher reporting (60%) in losses of more than \$10,000 during the health crisis, compared to 16% of those who did only News/Editorial work, reporting in that high-loss category.

This pattern is consistent with reports of commercial work falling off while many News/Editorial clients remained in need of talent during a very active time in news - and may underscore the importance of having a variety of specializations and photographic clientele.

Those who were able to take coronavirus-specific news assignments were met with other limitations, such as a lack of access to the medical and funeral spaces where the pandemic's effects are most apparent. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws protect the privacy and rights of medical patients, but they also frequently dictate what journalists can and can't see, photograph or write about.

"Transparency and access is a delicate negotiation with hospitals during non-pandemic times, let alone when an entire network of hospitals is under tremendous stress," Amaria said. "You can see the delicate dance the few photographers who have gotten access are doing in order to shield the patients' privacy while still being able to communicate the urgency of the moment."

Caitlin O'Hara, a freelance visual journalist based in Phoenix, AZ, faced issues with limited access when sent on COVID-related assignments. "A few of the assignments I've had relied on me to find access, stay on public property and do the best I could with photographing the outside of hospitals," O'Hara said. She described being approached by hospital security and being unable to get close enough

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Survey results: COVID-19 Continued from the previous page

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, healthcare 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 overrepresented 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 Zalcman, an independent photojournalist and co-founder/executive director of Women Photograph. Zalcman 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
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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," Zalcman 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.