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, Fresh 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 difficult decisions they faced. "There were a lot of (photojournalists) and certainly us, worried when scheduled jobs started drying up in March due to the pandemic. "Just paying rent is really difficult for many photographers surveyed (6%) 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. "I 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 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 being pushed out of commercial assignments. "We're the assigns of having a variety of specializations and that uncertainty in newsrooms and the about the persuaded of the newsroom's need. "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 balance 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 write about."

"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 saying they lost $2,500 to $7,500 during the time of the survey – an overwhelming sense of financial precarity among photographers, suggesting a potential impact on the visual narratives of COVID-19."

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

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 kmoloney@bnu.edu or msmithrod@bnu.edu.
METHODODOLOGY
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 participants’ professional specialties and identity such as: focus and general specialties in visual communication, types of work produced, and approximate income levels.

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 restrictions and terms. Finally, they were invited to submit their thoughts on useful emergency resources, their engagement and support within the professional community, and hot spots and sources for hope in the present situation. These survey questions resulted in a wide array of insights around the experiences of mostly independent photographers before and during this unprecedented crisis.

RECKONING WITH RACIAL REALITIES
What becomes apparent in our research is that the racism and xenophobia community is affected by COVID in the same way as the general public: safety and health concerns for themselves and their families; financial vulnerability exacerbated by the pandemic’s economic uncertainty. The inherent racism reflects the racial disparities that are made all the more apparent by coronavirus.

CONCLUSION
Our survey analysis of the health and wellness experiences of visual journalists revealed myriad ways in which COVID affected photojournalists and therefore coverage of the pandemic itself, continuing research and industry reflection during and beyond the COVID crisis is necessary to understand how it has affected our community. This historical moment demands a critical analysis of photojournalist practices in the field and the newsroom. To understand the crisis in our industry, we begin by exploring how the visual journalists we spoke to earned less than $25,000 a year when working. When asked if they felt pressured to take more risks while working, 20% saying they definitely did not feel able to photograph the crisis safely. While COVID-19 has created a new space for photography made collaboratively in contrast to the ongoing problem of financial vulnerability exacerbated by the pandemic, twenty-six percent of Black/African American photographers expressed feeling little to no financial stability before the pandemic. Both Black/African American as well as Hispanic/Latino photographers indicated significantly greater financial potential ability to pay for housing when compared with white photographers.

Survey results: COVID-19
Continued from the previous page
due to her restricted mobility on hospital wards. “I don’t have health insurance and I also frequently worried about how her work on COVID-19 would affect her ability to earn a living.” 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 rent or keep their small businesses operating, the results underscored a tension between a willingness to work and feeling unsafe while working. Forty-five percent of photographers supported to safely work on assignment, a vast majority (75%) of photographers expressed they don’t have health insurance and their spaces were prohibited,” Katz said.

Some positive news in the data was that most (95%) expressed their photography made under COVID and forged new connections across the world. Conceived of and coordinated by photographers Charlotte Schmitz and Jennifer Venet, The Journal was an opportunity to support women photographers in using the time during COVID to make new work, gain support and depict a global perspective on the pandemic.

The results from our survey highlight a clear problem of economic inequality across racial lines in photojournalism. All of 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 expressing feeling little to no financial stability before the pandemic. Both Black/African American as well as Hispanic/Latino photographers indicated significantly greater financial potential ability to pay for housing when compared with white photographers. Survey data showed photographers were significantly more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year when compared with counterparts identifying as a person of color were far more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year. The news photographers in our survey were significantly more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year when compared with counterparts identifying as a person of color were far more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year.

Statistics such as these underscore the need for newsroom resources to ensure that news photography is equitable and reflective of the diversity of our communities. 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 participants’ professional specialties and identity such as: focus and general specialties in visual communication, types of work produced, and approximate income levels.

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What’s interesting about the pandemic is that it affects everyone — journalists and the newsroom and the photographic field. The results from our survey highlight a clear problem of economic inequality across racial lines in photojournalism. All of 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 expressing feeling little to no financial stability before the pandemic. Both Black/African American as well as Hispanic/Latino photographers indicated significantly greater financial potential ability to pay for housing when compared with white photographers. Survey data showed photographers were significantly more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year when compared with counterparts identifying as a person of color were far more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year. The news photographers in our survey were significantly more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year when compared with counterparts identifying as a person of color were far more likely to earn less than $25,000 a year.

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