

Your safety as a journalist reporting COVID-19

“First do no harm” is a basic principle in medicine, and of course in journalism too. For a journalist covering COVID-19, it should read: **First do no harm – to yourself. Also, do no harm to others.**

In war, conflict, and disaster coverage, journalists – the eyes and ears of the world – often come in harm’s way. The journalists, their editors, and networks or outlets have to make tough decisions. The additional dimension with COVID-19 is that the contact journalists feel they need to make to report is dangerous, but the danger can be unseen.

In reporting COVID-19, we are busy redefining many of the rules of safe journalism, “first-do-no-harm” journalism.



Internews

Internews, an international nonprofit organization, empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account.

In war reporting, certain rules apply. When reporting on a hurricane, most of the danger and impacts are clear and visible. Reporting on other viral infections, like HIV, poses no personal safety risk to a journalist and their follow-on contacts. COVID-19 is different, and information about viral spread is evolving, so we need to pause to consider the following:

1. Essential services: In some countries, media and communications networks have been designated as “essential services.” This means – with permission or accreditation – journalists may move around, even if a country is in lockdown. This places the onus on media houses and individuals to make essential decisions about safety. Some newsrooms operate on skeleton staff. Many journalists are able to follow the best safety advice and operate from home, but there are grey areas about studio production staff and broadcasting.

2. Demand for Personal Protective Equipment: Journalists should follow the evolving best-practice advice from credible sources (such as the WHO) about the use of protective masks. However in some places, masks are in short supply and there have been government-led decisions not to supply these to journalists, saying these are essential items for first-line respondents and health staff.

3. A revolutionary way to gather news and information: From the science, we know that “social distancing” is the safest strategy for everyone to follow while a viral outbreak like COVID-19 is spreading actively through a town, city, or country. Just as companies and individuals have been innovative in adapting to this reality, journalists have too. Here are some ideas to take these innovations further:

- **Harness the best of social media and make connections to make meaning for your audience.** Social media is and can be a source for good. Explore credible, relevant sources and influencers on social media, and weave their comments into your stories – acknowledging the source. Newsgathering by distance can include Skype and Zoom-recorded interviews, WhatsApp voice or video calls, and Facebook Watch Party, instead of traditional broadcasts.
- **Invest in data and stable internet** and ask your editor to support you in this.
- **Make thought connections.** Working by distance and without physical contact presents a vital moment for journalists to exercise their creativity and bring to the fore their role as “meaning makers,” connecting thoughts, insights and analysis, making sense of

incidents, making relevant comparisons and placing experiences and utterances into context for new insights. For this “connecting the dots” journalism, one does not need to be at an event or in the street. Your story need also not be dry or overly analytical. Interweave thought connections with remotely gathered interviews or photographs, for example.

- **Use only credible and known sources**, when remote sourcing, as described above.

- **Don’t deepen the digital divide:** while [research suggests](#) nearly 60% of the world’s population is already online, think of ways to not exclude those who need the information you produce. Partner with remote local radio stations or a communication network, for example, to get information to those who do not have smartphones and aren’t online.

- **Partner with citizen journalists and relevant CSOs** and trusted advocates to exchange content, but also encourage them to practice safe news-gathering.

- **Special consideration for TV:** Content is king. Don’t worry so much about pixels and picture quality. TV stations are collecting, vetting and broadcasting crowd-sourced cell phone videos to tell stories about

isolation, new business practices, and empty streets.

- **Special considerations for radio:** Use and maximise phone-in formats and voice recordings of interviewees

4. Stay digitally safe: Digital Security is another global concern which is under intensified threat, as opportunists (those after your data and passwords) are exploiting the heightened news interest and fears around COVID-19. [This guidance from The Committee to Protect Journalists](#) highlights areas like how to secure your (new) remote office, how to communicate more securely and how to guard against the many phishing attempts.

5. Stay safe from crime: General insecurity is heightened through a number of uncertainties: global markets are under severe pressure and local markets might close. Small businesses are collapsing and very many people have become and will become unemployed. In many cases, security has been diverted from where it is usually needed so crime could increase. Frustration and sheer poverty may drive up crime and violence. These are all reasons to be vigilant and take extra care with your physical safety. No story is worth your life, as they say.

6. Stay level-headed: Only consult and share health news from credible, reliable and official sources. Remember #NoSourceNoForward. Tricksters get cleverer by the day (as it has always been), and they now, for

example, preface some of their messages as “Johns Hopkins University (JHU) just sent this summary”, etc. We need to remind partners to stop and think: why would JHU need to compose a summary, when they have excellent, easy-to-follow resources already available on their site. Refer frequently to sources including [Johns Hopkins](#), the [CDC](#), and the [WHO](#).

7. Mental health: a duty to self, family, friends and partners. COVID-19 can be overwhelming and fills us with uncertainty and fears about the future and about our own health and the health of loved ones. There is also the stress of a huge amount of change, of isolation and of seemingly never-ending tragedy in the news. Our families may suffer losses, and our well-being may be compromised through the delay in getting treatment for other health concerns. The list goes on. It is human and normal to feel depressed and anxious under such circumstances. Consult best global guidance on mental health issues, brought on by calamities such as COVID-19, e.g. [WHO](#), [MNH](#): and [The Carter Center](#).

- Before there is a crisis, enquire about the availability of local support (e.g. counselling groups) and make partners aware of these
- Take breaks from COVID-19!
- Connect with loved ones

Risk versus reward: Is the task worth the risk we're taking? If it isn't, we don't take it.

Here's a handy risk assessment you can use to check how safe/unsafe our actions will be:

When we leave the sterile confines of our own home, that could mean we're going into an area where the virus is present, but not visible.

Self-assessment of ourselves and our team:

1. What is our age, are we in the vulnerable age bracket?
2. Do we have any underlying ailments that make us more vulnerable?
3. Where is our headspace at the present moment? If we had been dealing with a particularly traumatic story, do we have the headspace to tackle this assignment?
4. Have we done enough research on the issue we're about to cover and do we know what we're getting ourselves into?

Assessing the environment for the story:

1. Is the environment we're going into large enough and safe enough to maintain the protocols of social distancing to get the job done?
2. What is the number of people at the venue?
3. Does the venue have hand sanitisers, wash-basins with soap?
4. Evaluate the transport: how are we going to get there? Are we going to self-drive, are we going to take a taxi or car service? Are we going to take public transport? If so, we need to adhere to the self-protection protocols.

What to do when you get home?

1. How do you dispose of contaminated items? Do you have a systematic approach of decontaminating yourself?
2. Be sure to develop a logical and systematic sequence for this, otherwise there will be a loop of recontamination.

Example: when you enter your home, wash your hands or sanitise them. Then wipe down your equipment and clean all devices you've used in the field. Then remove your work clothes and wash them. Avoid touching anything else and head for the shower.

Think again about the system. It has to be logical.

Think again about how you could rather be covering the story by using the Tips in #3 above.