

Student journalists end school year embracing opportunity but also balancing reality of coronavirus pandemic

In September of 2019, there was a small mumps outbreak at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. I had just started my term as editor-in-chief of [The Gateway newspaper](#), and I thought it would be fortuitous to buy a large bottle of hand sanitizer for the newsroom. I wrote a little note with scripted handwriting: “don’t get the mumps!”

In the first week of March 2020, I crossed out “mumps” and wrote “Coronavirus.” Soon, there wasn’t anyone left on campus to use the hand sanitizer anyway.

The university announced its pivot to “remote learning” on March 12, and as soon I knew it, my incoming editor-in-chief and I were cooped up in my apartment a mile away from campus, likely the last time we’d see each other before social distancing measures were put in place, watching a live stream of a student government meeting and working our tails off to report the FAQs of the Covid-19-induced campus closure.



Kamrin Baker, editor-in-chief of The Gateway newspaper at the University of Nebraska –Omaha, sits at her desk before the pandemic. (Photo by Andre Sessions)

From my second hand loveseat, with a box of macaroni and cheese cooking on the stove, we were quickly bombarded with the realization that *this* was the new future of journalism.

Student journalists are at a unique crossroads, balancing their studies with (often underpaid) jobs at the student newspaper, and existing as human beings during a time of communal trauma.

These students are also grieving the loss of many traditional college journalism experiences. Many of the editors are

outgoing seniors, deprived of graduation ceremonies and farewell customs; production meetings have moved to Zoom; even the satisfying stain of fresh ink from a new copy of the paper is a little wonder many of us have had to (temporarily) kiss goodbye.

“Student journalists are proving right now that the work they do is essential,” said Kenna Griffin, president of the [College Media Association](#), which represents 600 collegiate media advisors and their student staffs.

CMA has provided digital resources for students during this time, including an [open letter to administrators](#) about the value of collegiate press.

“They are the ones who care about the campus community and what is happening there,” Griffin said of student journalists. “Without them, the students and other community members would be left with even more questions and uncertainty. Administrators and others in the campus community need to remember this critical service when the pandemic ends and always support student journalists.”

Marissa Payne, the editor-in-chief of [The Daily Iowan](#) at the University of Iowa, has moved to produce a daily newspaper to a weekly one, extending production over a three to four-day time period to “allow ample time” to confront challenges.

Payne has led the charge of her staff’s emphasis on digital journalism while still managing a paper trail of these unprecedented times.

“My staff has remained incredibly committed to continuing to share Hawkeyes’ stories that can serve as a thread that keeps the community connected while we’re all physically apart,” Payne said. “Decades down the line, when people are interested in looking back to this time period, they can turn to the physical copies of *The Daily Iowan* as a historical record of this pandemic.”

Although Payne understands the gravity of writing the next pages of history, she's still a college senior missing out on an enormous milestone— especially as a first-generation college student.

“I'm spending the last quarter of my year as editor unable to work from the newsroom I've called home for four years and away from the staff I consider family,” Payne said. “People keep telling me how impressive it'll be that I've covered something so historic, and I'm certainly proud of the work we've produced, but truthfully, all I wanted was to experience the end of my senior year and have closure on a college career that I've absolutely loved.”

The grief will come later, though. Right now, Payne has a job to do.

“Continuing to do this isn't something I ever really questioned,” Payne said. “I knew we had to keep giving people news and information they could trust while it seems like we know so little or the things we think we know change by the next day. This experience has affirmed my love for journalism.”

Lydia Gerike, editor-in-chief of the [Indiana Daily Student](#) at Indiana University, is keeping up with production, only delivering the paper digitally.

“We're still designing a paper and publishing it [on issuu](#) so that there's still a record of life in the time of the Coronavirus but not putting students, readers or delivery drivers at risk by touching the stands and the papers,” Gerike said. “We always have a graduation edition, and we will be printing that and mailing it out to seniors. Our 'circulation' is definitely smaller but we are still creating great work.”

Gerike has found comfort in the work-from-home routine, placing her IDS responsibilities front and center.

“It’s been nice to still have the routine of overseeing the IDS. Even when I’m putting off my schoolwork, I’ll jump on Slack to handle a problem or schedule a Zoom meeting,” Gerike said. “I think having a motivated staff and solid analytics numbers during quarantine shows me people still care, and that helps me keep going.”

On a macro scale, she knows the value of good journalism in a time of great uncertainty.

“I was writing the end of my own senior year, and it really hit me how much had changed with one email,” Gerike said. “It’s a surreal experience, but I feel like I can graduate knowing I spent my last semester doing something meaningful despite everything that’s going on.”

Other student journalists are only getting started.

Dylan Miettinen is the incoming editor-in-chief at [the Minnesota Daily](#) at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities, and although he is excited about the opportunity and ready to take on the role, it comes with a lot of pressure— especially now.

“It’s a strange feeling to come into this position at such an uncertain time,” Miettinen said. “During the 2008 recession, we had to cut our staff by roughly 35%. Because our funding is uncertain, we are projecting losses and fielding different scenarios depending on the severity of our situation.”

Miettinen said physical copies of the paper are now on hold and will be all summer, as no students will be on campus to pick up a copy. *The Minnesota Daily* usually runs a physical issue twice a week, but with funding from student fees partially being refunded to students this semester, the future of the print edition is unclear. However, as with most publications, Miettinen said their digital presence has increased.

“As scary and uncertain as this all is, I think it’s a great opportunity, too,” Miettinen said. “My goal is to set up the long-term success of the *Daily*. As a nonprofit, we need to continue to find alternative revenue streams, such as grants and donations. With our physical printing schedule in question, this is a perfect time to focus on redeveloping our website to create a platform that is more intuitive and user-friendly.”

This time of year is naturally a time of transition for most college papers, as the spring semester and summer months are typically used for onboarding of new staffers and editors. Maria Leontaras is the editor-in-chief of [The Observer](#), which covers Notre Dame, Saint Mary’s and Holy Cross College in Indiana.



Students journalists at the Observer , which covers Notre

Dame, Saint Mary's and Holy Cross College in Indiana, hold a conference on Zoom. (Photo courtesy of Maria Leontaras)

Although the paper is not printing right now, Leontaras said her team is working to put out digital content on a similar schedule to the regular distribution of the print edition. She's also had to get crafty with cultivating a cohesive environment for a new crop of editors, who started their new posts in this remote work world.

"We actually had a prom-themed all staff Zoom meeting, and it was great to have the new editorial board introduce themselves and to see everyone who has been keeping the paper afloat," she said. "We encouraged people to wear their prom attire, whether it be an old dress or just a blazer or something. The department editors had a 'pre-game' where they met with the staffers from their sections, and then we all came together in a big Zoom call."

Leontaras said the team spirit makes all the heartache and stress worth it.

"I have complete faith in all of the editors and staffers, and it's been a lifesaver to be able to comfortably delegate responsibilities," she said. "None of this would be possible if it weren't for the people who are still so dedicated to the paper even though we aren't together."

Smaller school papers are still putting in the work, too. Sophie Hills, the editor-in-chief of [The Pilot](#) at Principia College in Illinois, said she's been working hard all year to revitalize the paper after it had "kind of gone dormant." The switch to remote turned out to be a blessing, as it has provided opportunity for more and better coverage.

"Before this, we were focusing on print on campus, and the website was pretty dormant. Now we're running one to three articles a day on the website, which is a leap for us," Hills said. "I think the crisis also gives less experienced staff

more story ideas.”

College journalists are clearly embracing the opportunity of this unique scenario as they work through it, but what will come after the Coronavirus dust has settled?

Jason Brummond, the publisher of The Daily Iowan said the publication has already seen steep advertising losses since mid-March, but now is the time to think more strategically.

“We are expanding our special graduation edition with congratulatory ads from colleges on campus, parents and friends,” he said. “We will continue to prioritize fundraising, which is growing quickly and becoming a larger part of our total budget, and we’ll make a stronger push with grants this year.”

The news industry is not the only one that will need to rethink its revenue models and long-term practices.

Josefina Loza, the publications manager at my paper, *the Gateway*, said we have only just begun the development of digital news consumption.

“Digital media is in its infancy and still evolving. We as print journalists, be that local, national, or collegiate, haven’t pushed the barriers of technology as far as we could. We’re still exploring and playing in the sandbox,” Loza said. “We need forward-thinking, critical, thinking creatives to help us build a new method for reporting, interviewing, editing, and sharing the wealth of what newsmen and newswomen have to offer. We need student reporters, photographers, videographers, graphic designers, and so on and so forth to lead us into this new era of journalism.”

At the end of the day, though this time may be challenging, daunting and intimidating, many college journalists are seeing it as an opportunity to give the industry the boost it so desperately needs.

Miettinen said: "Half of the journalism field has been laid off in the past decade, but expectations of us have all but soared. It's like if half of all car manufacturers were laid off, yet we expected the same rate of car production with increased fuel efficiency. This pandemic has shown the absolute resilience of local journalism and how valuable it can be. I think this is a prime chance for college journalists to interact with their community on a very real, human basis, establish their presence in the community and see how best to serve community needs while setting the foundation for a media-hungry environment."

Go off into our communities we will.

A few weeks after the initial cultural shift of the pandemic, my university announced that all buildings would be closed and only bare bones staff would be allowed on campus. I scrambled to my office to clean out all of my decorations, a nostalgic changing of the guard that I had to embrace two months earlier than I anticipated.

I felt a tightness in my chest as I took down my momentos: a sign a friend snagged from the local Barnes & Noble magazine rack that said "award-winning journalism." A photo of one of the first women editors of our college paper. A director's chair I had repurposed from my mom's basement. It was all so historic for me when I first inherited the office, and it was all so historic as I walked away.

At *the Gateway*, we have a longstanding tradition that outgoing editors write a note to incoming editors on an old desk drawer from the very first newsroom on campus. I re-read the one that was written for me: "you got this," it said.

And I wrote to my successor: "You are capable of amazing things."

Kamrin Baker is a correspondent for Gateway Journalism Review and based in Omaha, Nebraska. She just graduated with a degree

in journalism and media communications from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, where she served as Editor-in-Chief of the campus newspaper (coincidentally named) the Gateway. She's now on the hunt for the perfect copywriting job and freelancing in her spare time. Reach her at @thekamrinbaker on Twitter.