

Lessons learned from teaching journalism during the pandemic

During the height of the pandemic, New York University journalism professor Yvonne Latty had to teach some of her students on Zoom and others in the classroom at the same time. Her glasses fogged up while wearing a mask. So she got contacts. She had to also consider how much she spoke as her mouth became dry from talking with a mask on for three hours.

“It became a piece of their mental health that I showed up in person,” Latty said.

She added that the isolation also was difficult for many of her students living alone in small dorm rooms.



Journalism students are socially distanced during a class at Columbia College Chicago. (Photo by Elio Leturia)

“The isolation was hard for my students. My heart went out to them,” said Latty, who also is director of the graduate concentration, Reporting New York and Reporting the Nation in Multimedia, at New York University’s Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute.

Despite these physical and emotional challenges, Latty’s students published 171 stories from articles to multimedia stories in six weeks on their multimedia news site, pavementpieces.com.

“We turned our whole classroom into a pandemic newsroom,” Latty said. “It was some of the best work I ever saw in the grad program.”

More than a year into the pandemic, journalism professors across the country are still facing challenges as their students reported on the pandemic nationwide. They want to cover the most impacted communities and also keep their students safe, especially as the Delta variant packs hospital ICUs again.

They worked through the initial technology challenges of Zoom interviews and remote video recording and editing as well as the emotional challenges of supporting students’ mental health and students who also were essential workers while going to school.

The pandemic taught the students and their professors the importance of journalism in times of crisis. It is a lesson that continues.

In March 2020, Professor Jesús Ayala Rico of California State University, Fullerton received word that the campus was closing due to the pandemic. He teaches the broadcast journalism course that produces a weekly 30-minute Spanish-language Emmy-winning newscast, Al Día.

His students went back home to locations across California, to

San Diego, Sacramento, Half Moon Bay, Riverside and Orange County. He realized that his students could report from their own communities, so they formed a statewide team of correspondents. He assigned each student to do a COVID story.

“They were scattered through the entire state and we did a show on how COVID is affecting everything in the state. They filed from their different locations,” he said.

The professor and the department did not require the students to do in-person reporting but students who wanted to do field reporting were allowed to do as long as they followed safety protocols, such as wearing masks and keeping their distance from others. Students also were allowed to do zoom interviews.

“The (students) wouldn’t let up. They wanted to cover the story,” Ayala said. “The students said, professor, let’s do something.”

Early in the pandemic there was a lack of in-depth coverage by the Spanish-language networks Univision and Telemundo, Ayala said. So they expanded their coverage and produced a 45-minute TV news magazine style show called “Coronavirus Pandemia Mundial.”

It won the CMA best newscast for the year and ACP best COVID-19 coverage for the year.

Ayala realized the pandemic was one of the biggest stories since 9/11, and he spoke to news directors about what they expected of young journalists in this time of crisis.

“We’re going to judge your students on how they covered COVID,” Ayala said they told him. He worked at ABC News for 17 years before he started teaching journalism in 2017.

During the pandemic Vincio Sinta worked as the broadcast practicum coordinator at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

He shared that many of his students work and go to school

full-time. They worked on their broadcast stories at the same time they worked in grocery stores or hotels.

“It was a big factor there because many of them are paying their way through the program,” explained Sinta. “There was the added risk of many of them being essential workers.”

Many of his students also live with their parents and then faced challenges when one person in the household became sick with COVID-19.

“Many live at home. They had people at home test positive for the virus and they had to skip class. It was intensely stressful,” Sinta said.

He said there are some elements such as zoom interviews that will become a mainstay of broadcast journalism.

“It’s easier for a source to agree to meet online for a few minutes without traveling there and setting up the lights. We can’t lose that if it allows us to get sources and voices,” said Sinta, who will be an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Arlington in fall 2021.

Journalism professors said the pandemic made students and journalism professors more resourceful. Also many grew closer to their students than before.

“I did get close to students and we did create a bond in the worst teaching situation,” Latty said. “My lesson learned is journalism is an incredibly important tool and you should never stop.”

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