

# Freelancing during the pandemic: Journalists chase assignments, security as more of them exit the industry

After covering the Jussie Smollett case for nearly two years for The New York Times, I had to turn down reporting from the actor's trial in Chicago recently on charges that he faked a racist, homophobic attack in 2019.

I had another assignment that week so couldn't commit to being in court every day of the trial, which The New York Times wanted when they asked me to cover it. I didn't think it would be hard for them to find someone else. The high-profile trial was taking place in a major media market flush with journalists.



A Coast Guard ship comes into Navy Pier on a mission to deliver Christmas trees, a tradition in its 22nd year. A story by the author, who was on the boat, ran on the front page of Chicago-Sun Times this week. (Photo by Bob Chiarito)

But I later discovered that wasn't the case. While the New York Times eventually found someone for the assignment, three other outlets contacted me, each offering me money to drop my other assignment to cover the trial, which ended last week with a [guilty conviction](#) for the former "Empire" actor. All of them were having trouble finding experienced freelancers.

The experience backed up recent [reports](#) that the more and more journalists are exiting the industry, their departure heightened by the pandemic. Just this week the Tow Center for Digital Journalism [released findings](#) that more than 6,100 news industry jobs were lost during the pandemic even as readership surged. At least 100 news organizations closed during the pandemic, and another 42 were consumed by mergers and acquisitions, with a net loss of 128, according to the Tow

Center report.

For me, a general assignment freelancer who reports out of Chicago for The New York Times, Agence France-Presse and The Chicago Sun-Times, among others, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the busiest of my career. I'm well aware that this has not been the case for every journalist. Those who cover the arts, entertainment and restaurant industries were hit especially hard. Shonda Talerico Dudlicek [reported for GJR](#) in April 2020 about the challenges she faced when venues were closed during the height of the pandemic.

And even among general assignment reporters, the experience of working through the pandemic has been vastly different.

For Mark Guarino, a Chicago-based freelancer who regularly reports for the Washington Post, his workload did not change much.

"I think Covid was a factor in all the social unrest last year and I was involved in covering that, so I think the type of stories we covered was affected that way. It definitely put me and other people at risk because we had to cover large crowds," Guarino said.

Risk from Covid is one reason Washington, D.C.-based freelance photographer Alyssa Shukar, a Nebraska native who also worked in Chicago, has been transitioning more to nonprofit work. Schukar, a freelancer for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and several others, said when the pandemic began, many events she normally would cover were cancelled. Then, once things started up again, she had to think about what was worth covering.

"Any assignment I would take, if there were risks involved, I'd also be risking assignments moving forward," Shukar said. "So, there was a lot of analysis of what was the most appropriate decision given the risk."

Schukar also noted that photographers, unlike some reporters, did not have the option of working remotely.

“As photographers we have to be out in the field.”

However, one thing that helped is that some media companies paid freelancers a higher “hazard rate” while covering events during the pandemic.

“We weren’t able to necessarily make as much money as we did before the pandemic, but freelancers were able to have fewer assignments and still get by,” Schukar said.

While Schukar stayed safe from Covid, she missed three months of work after having to undergo three surgeries after getting hit in the hand by a rubber bullet while covering the unrest after the Jacob Blake shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Along with medical expenses, that experience cost her some jobs even when she was recovered.

“The New York Times helped me financially but I definitely lost money. As a freelancer, if you get out of the swing of things it’s a lot more difficult. Editors are less likely to call you if you keep saying that you’re unavailable,” Schukar said.

Another freelance photographer, Kamil Krzaczynski, who covers sports as well as news out of Chicago for USA Today, AFP, Getty and others, said his workload remained about the same but things were different.

“When sports restarted, we were far away from the action, shooting from the stands. But I looked at it this way – it was just from a different angle. It wasn’t like I couldn’t take pictures, they were just different than if I was sitting on the floor during a basketball game or being on the field for a football game,” Krzaczynski said.

It’s a bit ironic that the thing that caused some reporters to

lose work, made others extremely busy. When there were less than 100 Covid in the U.S., I was recruited by The New York Times to be on a team that tracked Covid cases and Covid deaths that not only kept me busy for 8 hours a day for months, but ultimately was part of a broader entry of Times virus coverage that received a Pulitzer Prize in the Public Service category in June 2021. And while I worked on the team, I continued working on stories. Over the last 18 months, I've covered many Covid-related stories; unrest in Chicago and Kenosha; dozens of court appearances related to Jussie Smollett and singer R. Kelly; a mass shooting in Indianapolis; Chicago gun violence; the recent tragedy in Waukesha, Wisconsin and the recent tornadoes in the Midwest. I even spent a couple days on a Coast Guard ship for a story.

Others racked up just as many clips, and covered other big events such as the 2020 presidential election. Simply put, as I told WGN Radio interviewer Rick Kogan several months ago, those who worked in journalism over the last two years experienced more than the previous generation covered in two decades. However, being busy is great but is also not guaranteed, especially as a freelancer.

As Schukar put it, the pandemic exposed a lot of the vulnerabilities of freelancers and has forced her to transition a lot of her work away from the news industry.

"A lot of us are trying to shore up some stability, especially given that we don't have health insurance with our work," Schukar said. "And it's not just me, a lot of my freelancer friends are looking for ways to shore up some sense of security in our work, and that's often looking away from journalism, unfortunately."

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