Congratulations to Yamiche Alcindor
White House Correspondent for PBS NewsHour
It’s so easy to become frightened or skeptical about how journalism may change when you consider what’s happening today—aggressive acts against reporters, shrunk news staffs and newspapers that shuttered their doors.

What if we lived in a world where news and information were controlled to a much greater extent by governments and corporations? What if the deceptive messages conveyed by politicians and their followers became even more cunning and beguiling than they already are?

I explore those questions in a dystopian, cyberpunk novel I’ve written called “The Juice,” which drops in February. It imagines what it would be like to work within media companies a few decades into the future—with some suspense and romance along the way. While my dark fantasy may be way off base from what actually happens, there’s certainly reason for defenders of press freedom to be on guard today.

What gives me optimism, during these churning times, is working on issues of NewsPro. In the heart of this edition you’ll find a story from Rod Hicks about students whose moving reports about the impacts of COVID-19 were honored with awards created last summer by five journalism associations. Our Sign-Off column, written by Corey Takahashi—as well as a separate story from Debra Kaufman about 10 highly creative and engaged educators—demonstrate how the art of schooling tomorrow’s reporters is changing, and may never go back to legacy educational norms in their entirety.

There is advice on how to counteract Donald Trump’s fake news legacy from Mike Cavender, and wisdom from Dan Shelley, who advises journalists not to take their constitutional rights for granted during Joe Biden’s administration.

Most notably, our cover story by Celia Wexler highlights a courageous, thoroughly diverse frontline of TV journalists intent on breaking news that’s honest and may change people’s lives.

Entertaining novels like “The Juice” make people think about where media and advertising are headed. NewsPro issues like this one show that there are vibrant paths forward. We need to own the future, by the stories we refuse to let go of—absolutely must tell—and how we train the next generation.

— Janet Stilson, Editor
Towards the end of last year, it might have seemed like the news stories that sprang up in 2020 couldn’t possibly be topped by even more dramatic events in the coming year—a global pandemic, extremely contentious election, the killing of George Floyd, to name but a few. But it’s already clear that those monumental events are being topped by others, and journalists are tasked with reporting them to an often-distrustful public.

The following 12 people to watch in TV news are likely to be on the frontlines of that effort. They are a diverse group in every sense of the word: race, ethnicity, experience, age and background. Yet each one has a commitment to accurate information and the courage of their convictions. Those traits are more critical than ever, at a time when news has become a torrent that reporters and anchors struggle to cover. There were no lulls.

This much can be predicted about the future: the administration of Joe Biden will make headlines and its share of gaffes; injustice will persist and permeate every aspect of American life; and pre-pandemic normalcy will take time to emerge. In these difficult times, it’s good to know that TV news is in such capable hands.
YAMICHE ALCINDOR
WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT, “PBS NEWSHOUR”

When Yamiche Alcindor tried to ask serious questions about the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic, the now-former president chided her: “Don’t be threatening.”

While she wasn’t the only White House reporter to get under Donald Trump’s skin, Alcindor may have had the best rebuttal. “I’m not the first human being, woman, black person or journalist to be told that while doing a job,” Alcindor Tweeted. “My take: Be steady. Stay focused. Remember your purpose. And, always press forward.” That philosophy will make her an equally effective and watchable reporter in 2021.

As a national political reporter for The New York Times, Alcindor covered Congress and the 2016 campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Trump. She joined the “PBS NewsHour” in 2017 and is a frequent guest on NBC’s “Meet the Press.”

The daughter of Haitian immigrants, she believes in the power of good reporting expose injustice. When she took the PBS job, she made clear that she didn’t intend to just cover the president. She also wanted to talk to the “regular working-class people” who voted for him.

She wasn’t kidding. For three years, she kept in touch with Gregory Cheadle, a 2016 supporter Trump called “my African American.” In 2019, he confided that he was giving up on both Trump and the Republican party and would run for Congress as an independent. Alcindor broke the story.

Alcindor may not have to duck when she asks the Biden White House questions they don’t want to answer. But don’t expect the new folks in charge to get off lightly. As PBS anchor Judy Woodruff observed: “Yamiche has the energy. She has the curiosity. And she has the sources.”

JERICKA DUNCAN
NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT, SUNDAY WEEKEND ANCHOR, CBS NEWS

Last April, Jericka Duncan started to take a few days off after intently covering the impact of the coronavirus on people of color. But that respite ended when George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police, and the country erupted in protests.

It was that kind of year for Duncan, who is a “CBS This Morning” correspondent, and recently jumped up the career ladder when she became CBS’s weekend anchor.

Long before her stint at CBS, Duncan proved her mettle. She began her broadcasting career in 2005 in Elmira, N.Y., jumping two years later to WIVB-TV Buffalo. Three years later she moved to KYW-TV Philadelphia. She became a CBS national correspondent in 2013.

Her rapid ascent could have ground to a halt in 2018. Duncan was part of a CBS team pursuing sexual harassment allegations against “60 Minutes” executive producer Jeff Fager.

When Duncan asked Fager for comment, he responded with a threatening text: “There are people who lost their jobs trying to harm me, and if you pass on these damaging claims without your own reporting to back them up that will become a serious problem.”

Duncan was not intimidated. CBS management fired Fager, not for sexual harassment, but for his threatening message. The firing and the text became part of Duncan’s story when she identified the target of that message. “I am that reporter,” she told viewers.

Duncan’s willingness to take on difficult issues and speak truth to power will be an asset in 2021, as issues like sexual harassment and racial injustice continue to demand coverage. As she recently told The Hollywood Reporter, “[A]s a Black journalist, you definitely feel like if there was ever a time to speak up, it’s now.”

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VLADIMIR DUTHIERS  
CORRESPONDENT, CBS NEWS

Not many TV journalists come to broadcast news by way of investment banking. But that’s the background of Vladimir Duthiers. He had an epiphany at age 38, that he hadn't lived up to his dreams. His passion for news and its importance to the public has never been more needed as reporters struggle to regain the trust of millions of Americans. And he’s in a pivotal position to rebuild that bridge as part of the “CBS This Morning” news team and an anchor for the CBSN digital streaming network.

The son of Haitian immigrants, Duthiers used his savings from his job on Wall Street to prove himself as a journalist, interning without pay to get his start in the profession. He joined CNN in 2009, serving as a production assistant and then an associate producer. After he began reporting from international hot spots all over the world, he won a Peabody award in recognition of his reports about the kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram.

Duthiers joined CBS News in 2014, where he continued to report from conflict zones, both domestic and foreign. He covered everything from the aftermath of the police killing of the unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and the hunt for the alleged killer of a Pennsylvania State Police officer to stories about the U.S. military in South Korea. CBSN Original's first documentary project focused on his investigation of Muslim extremism in the aftermath of coordinated attacks in France that killed 130 people in 2015.

Journalism “is so important to democracy and civilization,” that reporters must be willing to risk their lives to cover the world, Duthiers told Reuters in 2018. “It is not a job to be taken lightly.”

ISABELLA (ISA) GUTIERREZ  
CORRESPONDENT, NBC NEWS NOW

If you want to see the future of news, watch correspondent Isa Gutierrez narrate a streaming video on weighty subjects. Streaming can mean super-short TikTok videos, but it can also mean the freedom to do lengthier, more in-depth reports, which Gutierrez is handling with aplomb.

Indeed, her very first story for NBC News Now carefully explained what it means to certify an election, and why it’s been in the news this year.

She speaks clearly and with authority, whether she’s reporting on the plight of Armenian refugees displaced by the recent war with Azerbaijan, or the way COVID-19 is spreading unchecked within U.S. prisons.

Her stories often are mini-documentaries, drawing from multiple sources—historical records, court decisions, government reports. She is a thoughtful interviewer whose subjects respond well to her probing questions.

As a storyteller for NBC LX, the streaming service for millennials and Gen Z viewers, Gutierrez explored the views of young LatinX voters before the 2020 election.

While at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, her broadcast student work earned her honors. She further honed her skills as an NBC News associate and news fellow, working at MSNBC, “Today,” “Dateline” and with the NBC affiliate WVTI-TV West Hartford, Conn.

As the nation’s demographics are changing, Gutierrez’s lived experience as the daughter of Venezuelan immigrants and a Latina Gen Z reporter will enrich her audience’s understanding of these communities.

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OMAR JIMENEZ
CORRESPONDENT, CNN

Reporters like to make headlines because of the stories they broadcast. But last summer, Omar Jimenez made the news for what happened to him, and how he responded. Viewers saw this CNN correspondent keeping his cool and speaking respectfully as two Minneapolis police officers grabbed each arm, cuffed him and placed him under arrest. His quiet confidence and grace under pressure will serve him well in 2021 as reporters, particularly reporters of color, continue to face harassment for just doing their jobs.

While the arrest became part of the nation’s reckoning and increased Jimenez’s name recognition, the 27-year-old reporter has been making waves and winning journalism awards for years. Long before he graduated from Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University he held internships with CNN and NBC. And he also worked for WGEM-TV Quincy, Ill.

He spent two years as a reporter and fill-in anchor for WBAL-TV Baltimore, then joined CNN Newsource. While there, he covered the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral; the deadliest shooting in U.S. history in Las Vegas; and hurricanes in Florida and Texas. He’s been a CNN correspondent based in Chicago since 2019.

After his release from Minneapolis police custody, Jimenez made a point of returning to the location where the arrest occurred. It was important to show that the harassment had not knocked him and his crew “off our game,” he told the Chicago Tribune. But whatever the news event, Jimenez keeps his audience in mind.

“I tried to always frame what happened to me within the larger story of George Floyd and why we were there in the first place,” Jimenez said. “What happened to me was a microcosm of the larger story we were covering.”

JOSHUA JOHNSON
ANCHOR, “THE WEEK WITH JOSHUA JOHNSON,” MSNBC

Throughout his years in public radio, Joshua Johnson has been a uniter, not a divider. That’s the approach he’ll be taking in his new career in broadcast television, offering a welcome balm to a deeply fractured country.

His career has included work at public radio stations in Miami and San Francisco. He also co-created and hosted the public radio series “Truth Be Told,” which aimed to encourage understanding and empathy through honest conversations about difficult moments in race relations.

But what brought Johnson to national attention was his stellar turn as the host of “1A,” a show that NPR termed “a national conversation” promising to present “the best debates with great guests in ways to make you think, share and engage.”

Brash and straight-talking, Johnson energized his audience, whose reach extended to 360 stations and 4 million listeners. MSNBC took notice. He was invited to fill in as the host of the network’s weekend morning show, “Up.” He welcomed the attentions, having long dreamed of a career in television. Last fall, after less than a year at MSNBC, Johnson began hosting his own program in the coveted 8-10 p.m. slot.

“The Week” is also about engaging viewers. “I don’t think there’s enough connection between people from everyday walks of life and newsmakers,” he told the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. His grandmother used to work as a housekeeper in Palm Beach, and he is acutely aware of the chasm between rich and poor. He doesn’t sugarcoat the divisions in the country.

Nevertheless, Johnson is betting that the nation is ready to listen to differing points of view, and to work together. “There are ways to make the dysfunctional function,” he said.
Arnnon Mishkin
Director, Decision Desk, Fox News

Before the pandemic, most voters went to the polls on election day, and exit polls helped TV networks reliably predict the results. That didn’t happen in 2020, and likely won’t happen again even as post-coronavirus normalcy sets in. More people voting by mail is a trend that could make elections harder to call—and make the skill of network decision desks even more important. That’s why Arnnon Mishkin’s work will be even more crucial in the years to come.

Mishkin joined Fox News’ decision desk in 1998 and became its director 10 years later. After the 2016 election, when most election prognosticators failed to predict a Donald Trump victory, Mishkin worked with his Fox News colleagues to build the first alternative to exit polls. Fox and the Associated Press partnered on the system, and first tried it out during the 2018 midterm elections.

Last year, as Fox News election-night coverage beat all other networks, Mishkin called Arizona for Joe Biden at 11:30 p.m., making Fox News the first network to do so. He appeared with Fox News co-anchor Bret Baier after midnight, speaking to Fox’s millions of viewers. When Baier asked him if he was “100% certain,” about Arizona, Mishkin didn’t miss a beat. “Yes,” he replied.

The day after the election, as the White House insisted that Trump had enough votes in Arizona to overcome Biden’s lead, Mishkin shot back, “If a frog had wings.” Fox owner Rupert Murdoch stood behind his decision desk. Mishkin’s call proved to be right.

The 2022 congressional campaigns are about to launch, and the next presidential election is less than 1,400 days away. TV news never needed Arnnon Mishkin more.

Byron Pitts
Co-anchor, “Nightline,” Chief National Correspondent, ABC News

The memoir “Step Out on Nothing: How Faith and Family Helped Me Conquer Life’s Challenges” eloquently chronicles the obstacles that Byron Pitts faced on the road to achieving his highest goals. And his lived experience enriches his work.

Pitts’ reputation for thoughtful storytelling, probing interviews and skillful on-the-ground reporting will continue to be a critical source of information for ABC News’ viewers.

Pitts’ talents were on full display last May when ABC News presented “Pandemic: A Nation Divided,” which focused on both class and race. “Nightline” was an integral part of that three-day series across platforms. Pitts focused on Mississippi, which he described as “the poorest state in the U.S., and home to the largest population of Black Americans bearing the brunt of the pandemic.”

But Pitts is far more than his racial identity. There is virtually no major event that Pitts has not reported on during his long career as a broadcast journalist, a career that has won him many Emmy awards.

After spending 15 years at CBS News, Pitts joined ABC just as the Boston Marathon bombing gripped the nation, helping with the network’s live coverage of the investigation. He covered the Arab Spring and the funeral of South African president and human rights icon Nelson Mandela.

In 2016, Pitts traveled across the nation to take the pulse of voters, for “Inside the Final 30,” a daily docu-series produced by “Nightline.” For both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Pitts played a key role covering the debates, conventions and election nights.

As ABC News president James Goldston put it: “It’s hard to find a report from Byron that doesn’t both channel innate respect and compassion for others—and challenge us to re-examine our own beliefs.”
MARTHA RADDATZ
CHIEF GLOBAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT, CO-ANCHOR, “THIS WEEK WITH GEORGE STEPHANOPOULIS,” ABC

Last September, Martha Raddatz did something unusual in this pandemic-plagued world: She traveled thousands of miles. “We were determined to drive safely across America to see close up what’s behind the polls in this ever-tightening race,” she told her viewers,

Raddatz shrugged off the dangers of traveling. “I’ve taken risks in my lifetime for things that I think matter,” she told the Associated Press.

Her courage is likely to serve her well in the future, as it has in the past. Raddatz has spent most of her career in battle zones, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Her deep understanding of the cost of war to soldiers and their loved ones is reflected in her well-received 2007 book, “The Long Road Home—A Story of War and Family.”

Even when she was ABC’s White House correspondent, covering George W. Bush, Raddatz continued to visit war zones. Her travel is important, she said at the time, because “it gives me the background to challenge the White House on issues it should be challenged on.”

That willingness to question the assertions of politicians and candidates was on display when she moderated the only vice-presidential debate in 2012 between Paul Ryan and Joe Biden—and in 2016, when she faced candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Her performance drew praise on both occasions.

Raddatz can be expected to ask the new president equally tough questions about the role of the U.S. in the world. “I can’t just write the facts,” she has said. “I have to give people a reason to care.”

JUAN RIVERA
CHIEF MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT, UNIVISION

Last year, when PRWeek published its annual list of the top 50 “Health Influencers,” Dr. Juan Rivera was included along with Dr. Anthony Fauci and billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates.

While Rivera may not be a household name to everyone, he’s been a trusted source of information for the Hispanic community during the pandemic. He answered viewer questions during Univision’s Spanish-language morning show, “Despierta America” (“Wake Up America”), helping spread fact-based information to a community that often lacks access to health care, and whose members are sometimes suspicious of doctors. He’s also the author of three best-selling books on health and diet.

Rivera hosts a weekly show on Univision and appears frequently on ABC’s “Good Morning America.” He’s also a board-certified cardiologist who crusades for the prevention and early detection of cardiovascular disease.

Having written scores of peer-reviewed articles published in medical journals, his clinical research has been honored by Johns Hopkins University Hospital, where he completed his residency.

But there’s nothing intimidating about his down-to-earth medical advice. In 2017, Rivera worked with the online site WebMD to offer a video series, “My Abuelita Told Me,” that explored the science behind home remedies popular in Hispanic homes.

Even when the pandemic finally ebbs, heart disease will still be a major killer in the U.S., and Hispanic communities will continue to be underserved. Rivera’s advice remains relevant and urgently needed.
When CBS News hired Jonathan Vigliotti in 2015, the network wasn't taking much of a risk. After all, his work for local stations had won him seven Emmys in four years. But one honor may have best foretold his abiding interest in an issue that will become more critical with each passing year. Vigliotti received a grant that allowed him to make a documentary about climate change, specifically the impact of melting ice on polar bears that were unable to reach the seals they hunt for food.

Vigliotti, based in Los Angeles, previously was a foreign correspondent reporting from London. He traveled the world for CBS News, reporting on all its platforms. His assignments took him to two dozen countries, with story topics ranging from terrorist attacks in Europe to political upheaval in the Middle East.

But it is the future of the planet that seems to drive some of his best work. In 2017, he returned to the Arctic region to explore how plastic pollution is killing wildlife and marring one of the most remote—and beautiful—parts of the world. In one in-depth feature, he swam with endangered sperm whales off the coast of Sri Lanka. And he’s also examined the threat of animal extinction in Kenya.

Over the years, Vigliotti also has reported a number of climate stories closer to home—including one about a marine heat wave in the waters off the West coast, endangering marine life and commercial fishing. As Biden promises to address climate change, Vigliotti has the reporting chops to explain to his audience why tackling this problem is so urgent.

Kristen Welker demonstrates the benefits of preparation in journalism, a talent that is sure to serve her well in 2021. Before she moderated the final presidential debate last year, Welker sought out undecided voters in swing states, as well as teachers and small business owners.

“I didn't want it to be a ‘Washington debate,’” she said during a webinar sponsored by the George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs.

That research stood her in good stead as she faced accusations related to her integrity even before she assumed her position as solo moderator, becoming only the second woman of color to take on that role. Trump supporters and the president himself claimed that she was a Democrat (she’s a registered independent) and a biased reporter out to get him at every turn.

The tactic didn’t work. Welker asked both candidates substantive questions. And she kept order, helped in part by a mute button, which debate commission staff could use if things got out of hand.

Her performance earned her rave reviews. The New York Times observed that Welker “managed to restore order to a quadrennial institution that some believed could not be tamed.”

Welker, who joined NBC News in 2010, has been on the White House beat since 2011, and was named chief White House correspondent in January. In 2013, she wasn't afraid to confront an administration spokesman when Barack Obama sent troops to Syria, after promising there would be no U.S. “boots on the ground” in that country.

These tough questions often elicit answers that make headlines. In 2021, this Harvard history graduate likely will generate more news from White House briefings, even when it irks Biden administration officials.
No Time for Complacency

While Donald Trump is no longer in office, journalists still face some critical challenges

By Dan Shelley

On Nov. 1, 2020, photojournalist Chae Kihn was covering a Make America Great Again counterprotest in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood. The New York Police Department ordered everyone to move out of the street and onto the sidewalk. Kihn was in the process of complying when officers surrounded her, threw her to the ground and then cited her for obstructing traffic.

On Oct. 12, 2020, TV reporter Caresse Jackman and her photographer were about to shoot a stand-up in a Nashville neighborhood when a man came out of his house and, unprovoked, attacked them. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Nashville police later found the man, but Jackman and her colleague declined to press charges.

On Sept. 12, 2020, Los Angeles radio reporter Josie Huang had just finished covering a news conference when deputies suddenly tackled and arrested her. She suffered from scrapes and bruises, was in jail for five hours and faced criminal charges. Those charges were later dropped.

That was all, of course, before the election and Joe Biden's presidential victory.

The day after Biden was declared the winner of the election, his campaign press secretary, T.J. Ducklo, told CNN: "President-elect Biden believes that the media is a critical piece of our democracy… [T]he media's job is to hold him accountable. He is there to do the people's work. And, you know, he welcomes that relationship. He welcomes their role, the media's role, in our democracy. And I think it will be, frankly, the polar opposite of what we have seen in the last four years.”

Ducklo's words are reassuring, indeed. It is a welcome respite, to no longer hear terms such as "fake news" and "enemy of the people" emanating from the White House.

But one should not forget that while the Donald Trump administration often made life difficult for journalists, to say the least, it never threw one in jail. (Some federal agents did arrest journalists during 2020's racial reawakening demonstrations, but there is no indication those arrests were ordered at the highest levels of the U.S. government.)

Conversely, the Obama-Biden administration did ensure that a few journalists were arrested. That ended when press freedom groups convinced then-Attorney General Eric Holder to institute rules requiring the AG’s personal approval before federal law enforcement could target journalists in investigations surrounding leaked classified information. Trump's first attorney general caused alarm when he announced he would reevaluate Holder’s rules, but he never did.

This is no time for complacency among journalists across the country who work hard every day to serve their communities by seeking and reporting the truth.

America remains deeply divided. Nearly as many people at least tacitly endorse the former president's message that responsible journalist shouldn't be trusted, as the number of those who reject it.

So, we in the Fourth Estate continue to face what used to be thought of as unprecedented challenges. (Although after the past five years or so, what really is unprecedented anymore?) Paramount among the challenges are:

• **Safety** – The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, the archive of record for attacks on journalists in our nation, says there were nearly 1,000 aggressions in 2020 aimed at journalists covering social justice and protests. There were more the 50 directly targeting journalists covering last year's elections.

• **Trust** – Research consistently shows that too many Americans simply don't trust the news they see on TV, hear on the radio or read online. One bright spot, however, is that local TV and radio journalists fare better than national news outlets. That's because many local news consumers realize, at least on some level, that the people who bring them their news live in the same communities they do. They go to the same supermarkets. Their kids go to the same schools.

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Most presidents are concerned about how they’ll be remembered when they leave the White House. One of the most significant legacies of Donald Trump is the influence he had on the federal courts. There’s no question that his hundreds of judicial appointments, including three Supreme Court justices, will have a big impact on this nation for many years to come.

But another will be the lasting effects of his success in convincing millions of Americans that much of the news in this country is “fake” and that the media is “the enemy of the people.” To be sure, the dangers from that legacy will also have long-lasting impacts.

Trump’s campaign to discredit the media started right after his election in 2016. During a “60 Minutes” interview, he told Lesley Stahl: “You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.”

After four years of relentless Tweeting on the subject, the efforts to discredit the media have paid off for him in a big way. And it’s not just among the 40% or so of his core supporters. Last October, the Pew Research Center reported 67% of news consumers now believe the media publishes facts designed to favor one side over another. In that same study, 37% say at least some of the information they see or read is simply made up (fake).

Now, with Trump out of the White House but not out of the public eye, how do we repair our reputation and earn back our credibility?

First, we should recognize that if you are in local news, there are a few more positives in your favor. Studies have shown that consumers generally have more trust in the honesty of news reported about their communities, especially when told by respected local anchors and reporters.

Regardless of where journalists work, there are some simple principles that offer some insight into how to repair the damage, according to researchers and journalists who launched The 32 Percent Project. (It was named for the percentage of Americans who said they had confidence in the news media.) They had public conversations with people across the country to learn what we might do to improve our trust factor.

First, we should pull back the curtains on our process. How do we determine what is news? Where is the line between facts and opinions? What sway do advertisers hold over the editorial process? As journalists, we may not think twice about the answers to these questions. But to the public, things are not nearly as clear. Consider expanding some of your stories to include this background information. If the airtime you are able to devote to this effort is short, consider taking it to your online portal and promote it in your newscasts.

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As was the case for journalists working within news organizations, educators faced enormous challenges over the last year. Some of us were already holding classes online before the pandemic occurred, but the process of teaching, writing and reporting in largely remote environments tested our limits.

In the following pages of this NewsPro issue, you’ll get a glimpse at what 10 educators did to meet adversity in some pretty remarkable ways. But to put their work in perspective, here’s some background on what all of us teaching in universities and colleges experienced.

In dealing with the circumstances, schools employed different tactics. In the fall of 2020, some stuck with online classes; some offered hybrid (online and lector) courses; and some had in-person learning experiences. The spring 2020 semester was all online. And it was really hard.

Some professors taught entirely with textbooks; some taught skills courses. At least one professor I know taught in an outdoor tent. We had to deal with masks and social distancing. Nobody can touch a student, or worst yet, deliver a graded paper by physically handing it to someone. When a student of mine caught COVID-19, I had to be tested. It was negative, but I worried about what the results would be for a few days. Some students were exposed to COVID-19, and had to await the test results (which made them miss a few days). The threat of COVID-19 all around was difficult. And it was hard.

Politics created challenges as well. We had to tread lightly, because many students are influenced by the very strong political views of their families. There were Donald Trump supporters, and Joe Biden enthusiasts. We had to teach politics because 2020 was an election year. Some educators were neutral, and some took sides. Regardless, it was really hard.

There were stimulus checks, then shrinking unemployment benefits. The knowledge that there were so many unemployed workers within our communities was stressful. Rising cases of COVID-19 added to the pressure. And it was really hard.

Then there was the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police. We were suddenly tasked with writing diversity statements. Some of us had not revisited diversity policies in a very long time. Some professors took training programs, and others joined diversity groups. Many of us didn’t know what to do. And it was really hard.

Teaching diversity was really tricky online. But we rose to the occasion.

Faculty diversity teams formed reading groups. There were lots of suggestions. Among the most popular books were: “How to Be an Antiracist,” by Ibram X. Kendi; “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism,” by Robin DiAngelo; “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,” by Isabel Wilkerson; “America’s Racial Karma,” by Larry Ward; and "Lead From the Outside" by Stacey Abrams.

These books formed the syllabus and helped teach our students about multiculturalism and racism. But it was really hard.

And there were riots in the streets. Again, we had to tread lightly because some families believe nothing that causes violence. We teach students about violence because it is in the news. But it was really hard.

Naturally, we all wondered when we would all get back to normal. (My husband always asks that.) But in the end, we learned that we must adjust to circumstances as they are, and not expect things to be the way things once were.

Last year made us better able to tackle difficulty. Our experiences made us more resilient. We learned some lessons. This period will go in the history books as being difficult for everyone. But for communications professors in particular, I can tell you, it was really hard.

Nancy Dupont is a professor of journalism at the School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi. She is also an interest division representative to the Broadcast Education Association. She can be reached at (504) 460-6381 or nancymdupont@gmail.com.
Among the Best in Class

Ten Educators Use Innovative Techniques to Train Students for a Brave New World

By Debra Kaufman

The combination of COVID-19 and pressing world events made 2020 a challenging year for educators tasked with teaching tomorrow’s working journalists. Based on recommendations from university colleagues and news industry sources, NewsPro has identified 10 of the notable higher-education professionals who found innovative ways to teach journalism skills within the new safety and distancing protocols.

DAVID BOARDMAN
Dean, Klein College of Media and Communication
Temple University

When David Boardman was recruited for the position of dean at Klein College, he was tasked with finding a way to distinguish the school’s offerings from programs at other big public universities. The theme now, he says, is “how communications can be brought to bear on the vexing challenges of urban life in the 21st century, with an emphasis on urban journalism, multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion.” His previous job, as editor of The Seattle Times, certainly prepared him for that. The results of his academic efforts were honored by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

When COVID-19 hit, Klein says the college invested time and money to create a hybrid approach. But one week after it began, an outbreak on campus forced a shutdown on all in-person activities. He cites his “very media-savvy, tech-savvy faculty” for a seamless switch to remote learning. One instructor uses a robot to teach her production classes.

“Our tech team is very solutions-oriented,” he says. Now Temple University TV’s engineering and production is done almost entirely remotely.

NICOLE CLARITY
Assistant Professor of Journalism, Media Studies and Public Relations
Hofstra University

Since joining Hofstra last year, Nicole Clarity has reinvigorated the journalism department’s broadcast program and supervised its election night Hofstra Votes Live project. She ensures all the technology available for students is a bigger part of the broadcast curriculum and incorporates LiveU (mobile video transmission technology) into multiple courses to teach students how to use the backpacks and incorporate their use in liveshot training in the reporting course.

Last November, Clarity and her colleagues produced a four-hour election night broadcast, simulcast with Hofstra’s radio station WRHU, while adhering to social distancing requirements. They split staff into two control rooms, two studios and a third make-shift studio, with all students (including on-air talent) wearing masks and other students working remotely.

Some classes are held outdoors, weather permitting, with lavalier mics on booms to help to maintain the six-foot distance. In the spring, this set-up will be replaced by handheld mics, which will provide better audio quality, on interview poles.

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HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY SALUTES

NICOLE CLARITY
Assistant Professor of Journalism, Media Studies, and Public Relations

AND ALL THE NOTABLE JOURNALISM EDUCATORS OF 2021

Congratulations on this well-deserved honor.

hofstra.edu/herbert  @herbertschoolhu
KIM FOX
Professor of Practice, 
Department of Journalism 
and Mass Communication 
The American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt

Kim Fox primarily teaches audio production at AUC. And as part of that, she founded and organized PodFest Cairo, Egypt’s first podcasting conference. As executive producer of the award-winning Ehky Ya Masr (Tell Your Story Egypt) podcast, she works with freelance producers, many of them former students.

Her students have won 50 international awards since 2010, and they have nominated her four times for AUC’s Excellence in Teaching Award.

Because students didn’t have access to Adobe Audition during COVID-19, she asked them to produce a short video tutorial on how they use the audio editing software of their choice. “There are many free and easy-to-use screen-capture programs available that made the execution of the student-produced tutorials seamless,” she says.

“This is a kin to an oral exam with the student demonstrating their competency and contributing to their transformative learning experience. Additionally, the video tutorials could be utilized in future courses,” she adds.

VINCE GONZALES
Professor of Professional Practice, 
Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism 
University of Southern California

Formerly an investigative reporter at CBS News and a CNN correspondent, Vince Gonzales teaches video and audio reporting for traditional outlets as well as digital storytelling and multimedia journalism. He delves into innovative journalism tools such as virtual reality and augmented reality. In the audio realm, he focuses on podcasts, social audio and online radio programs.

With the onset of COVID-19, “it quickly became clear that the virtual class environment needed to be even more centered on interaction and less on traditional lectures and homework,” he says.

Gonzales now prerecords the lecture using a deck full of animations and videos, which students watch before class. Then they complete an assignment to assess their understanding of the coursework. The virtual class meeting that follows involves discussions and exercises that “allow the student to step away from the screen to put what they’ve learned into practice,” he explains.

SARA SHIPLEY HILES
Associate Professor 
Missouri School of Journalism, 
University of Missouri

Environmental journalist Sara Shipley Hiles has been an educator for 13 years, teaching feature writing, digital editing and investigative reporting. She says her “greatest pleasure” is teaching science, health and environmental reporting. “No topic could be more important for our world right now as we face the twin threats of climate change and COVID-19,” she says.

She specializes in collaborative projects with real-world impact. For example, she and her students conducted a test for lead in drinking water. Her students have won numerous awards, including best website for VoxMagazine.com. The Mark of Excellence award was bestowed by the Society of Professional Journalists.

She says that despite the pandemic, the university journalism staff has continued to run its newspaper, magazine, NPR-affiliate radio station and NBC-affiliate TV station. Reporting and producing over Zoom has become part of the process.

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Congratulations to Sara Shipley Hiles on her selection as one of Crain’s NewsPro’s Notable Journalism Educators.

Associate Professor Sara Shipley Hiles conducts a Q&A with Nathaniel Rich about his article, “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change.”

Hiles directs the School of Journalism’s Smith/Patterson lecture series, which hosts professionals to discuss current trends in science journalism.
LEONARD HORTON  
Senior Instructor,  
Broadcast Journalism  
Missouri State University  
Twenty-year broadcast industry veteran Leonard Horton not only teaches students at Missouri State University, but mentors them on obtaining broadcast jobs or internships in top news markets like Boston, Orlando, New York City and Atlanta. His mentoring extends to former students working in news stations across the U.S. Since the pandemic, Horton’s students have been recording their TV host performances with their smartphones, which are then critiqued by the class on Zoom. In TV production, Horton limits productions to three people; COVID-19 safety protocols are observed in the studio and control room. In classes, he also incorporates pre-recorded Zoom interviews with local news directors and reporters on how they’re navigating COVID-19. “This year has taken a huge psychological toll on students,” says Horton. “I try to start every Zoom class with a ‘how was your week’ conversation—often their only face-to-face interaction with a teacher.”

BERNARDO MOTT A  
Associate Professor,  
Roger Williams University  
Formerly an international environmental lawyer as well as a consultant in environmental law and communication, Bernardo Motta is now developing a community-driven news outlet in Rhode Island serving communities that have been underrepresented, misrepresented and marginalized by mainstream media news coverage. During the COVID-19 pandemic, RWU’s student senate recognized Motta as a “hybrid hero” for how he is conducting his classes. “My goal is to find ways to transform what could be an extremely traumatic and stressful situation into opportunities to empower students to cope and even thrive in the chaos,” he says. He is teaching courses in feature writing, advanced journalism as well as media law and ethics. Some of his classes are fully online, while others are a mix of online and in-class learning, relying on a combination of technologies and techniques. “They are just tools, and we have enough of them to move around in case one fails,” he says.

LISA PALMER  
National Geographic Visiting Professor of Science Communication at the School of Media and Public Affairs George Washington University  
On the one hand, Lisa Palmer teaches science reporting for journalism majors and minors. On the other, she conducts classes on science communication for students majoring in science, technology, engineering and mathematics whose disciplines have included biology and sustainable agriculture. Palmer has been a journalist for 20 years. Prior to teaching at GWU, she was a senior fellow at the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center, where she gave seminars on storytelling; communicating with non-specialists and the public; audience analysis; and impromptu speaking. During COVID-19, she has used Zoom and Blackboard to teach and create informal spaces for her students. “Connecting with students and providing student-to-student interactions is so crucial in the university experience,” she says. “I open my classroom 15 minutes early and stay late to mimic a hallway experience.” This spring she plans to add more transparency and step-by-step instruction to provide students greater clarity on the steps needed to be successful in an online environment.”
AMY KRISTIN SANDERS
Associate Professor,
Moody School of Communications
University of Texas, Austin

Before joining the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin, Amy Kristin Sanders taught for more than four years at Northwestern University’s campus in Doha, Qatar. She has developed and taught courses on comparative media law; media ethics; media leadership; sports and the media; as well as media and society.

Sanders emphasizes the connection between what she teaches to global current events, and that certainly includes the pandemic. “In my media law course, I show students examples of real-life issues that journalists and media professionals are facing both in the United States and abroad,” she explains. In the synchronous class time, Sanders has students work through challenges they are likely to face in their careers.

When students said they missed office hours, Sanders created “Tuesday Morning Talks” where students were free to ask any question about the week’s material. “By recording it, I made sure all my students could access it—even if they couldn’t attend in person.

FERNANDA SANTOS
Southwest Borderlands Initiative Professor of Practice,
Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Communications
Arizona State University

Teaching at Arizona State University is just one of Fernanda Santos’s points of focus. The New York Times veteran also has conducted a Power of Diverse Voices seminar at the Poynter Institute, where she’s taught journalists of color to improve skills in essay and opinion writing. In addition, Santos volunteers at the News Literary Project, a national nonprofit that teaches media literacy to middle- and high-school students.

When classes at Arizona State moved to Zoom last March, Santos showed her students how she has used various digital tools over the years to stay connected with her family in Brazil. Since then, her students have used FaceTime to report on someone practicing softball and WhatsApp to accompany someone on a shift at the teen suicide prevention hotlines.

She now holds group sessions in which students discuss one element of their reporting that can be done using their smartphones. “The idea is to teach them how to be there without being there, a very useful skill any time,” she explains.

Congratulations to the 2021 Notable Educators from Crain's NewsPro
Karina Elwood always knew when her father arrived home from work; she could smell him. The scent of onions and grease wafting through their coastal Florida home was a dead giveaway. Her father, Keith, has worked in the family’s Wagon Wheel Pizza restaurant all of her 22 years, and it has been her family’s primary source of income.

When COVID-19 hit, Karina Elwood worried how it would affect household finances. The University of Florida journalism student decided to write about the angst—compounded by a slow, complicated government process for getting financial assistance to small-business owners. She submitted the story for publication in campus media.

Classmates suggested she enter the first-person narrative into a weekly contest of student-produced stories about the impact of the coronavirus. The contest, known as the CCC Awards, for College Coronavirus Coverage, was launched last spring by five journalism organizations and ran for two months. It gave student journalists an opportunity to showcase their work on one of the biggest news stories in the world using any medium or platform.

Elwood’s report was the winner for the week it was submitted and recognized as one of the top winners overall when the contest ended. “It was something really out of my comfort zone,” Elwood says of her writing approach. “It was something that I tried, and it was really nice to see that that was recognized and praised.”

The honor was well-deserved for Elwood and other contest participants who had their studies upended by the pandemic but still found a way to cover their stories, says Sue Kopen Katcef, chair of the Society of Professional Journalists’ (SPJ’s) Awards and Honors Committee, which managed the contest.

“These students, facing all kinds of challenges in the midst of the growing pandemic, came through like the pros that they are,” Kopen Katcef says.

The CCC Awards were conceived by Michael Koretzky, a member of the same committee, as a way to acknowledge exceptional student work produced during an extraordinary time. He also was responsible for bringing in the other four organizations: the Associated Collegiate Press, the Society for News Design, College Broadcasters Inc. and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

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I saw many college media outlets being so creative in their coverage of COVID-19 and its impact. And unlike their pro peers, they did it while attending virtual classes,” Koretzky says. “I thought someone should recognize their efforts.”

The contest proved popular, drawing 995 entries from 238 student media outlets. Students produced stories showing how the pandemic impacted them, their communities and their families. Entries included Facebook videos, YouTube vlogs, Twitter threads, data visualizations, artwork and more, along with traditional print and broadcast stories.

COVID-19 restrictions forced student journalists to improvise, in many cases. Laila Maiden, who’s a student at New York’s City University, pulled together a CCC Award-winning video package about the impact the virus has on refugees.

It included interviews with three experts and footage of people crammed into refugee camps. She produced the story for the New York News Service, which distributes stories by CUNY students. Maiden’s tag noted her unusual location: “Reporting from home, Laila Maiden, New York News Service.”

“I was used to having someone assist me with camera work, so having to adapt in isolation was hard,” says Siew, who documented her arrival home and quarantine. “I remember having to prop up a soft toy in my seat to get my focus right.”

The Facebook video shows Siew, 20, sitting alone in a dim hotel room staring out a window, lying in bed watching TV and video conferencing with friends and family. She had no human contact, not even with hotel staff. Her food was left outside her room on the door handle for her to retrieve.

Some of the scenes in the video that feature her jump from wide shot to medium shot to tight shot. In close-ups of her speaking, she looks past the camera as if responding to an interviewer questioning her. Viewers have to remind themselves that she’s alone in the room.

“The project really helped me a lot. I got to push myself in my reporting, which is something I don’t do often,” Siew says. “I also learned a lot about filming and editing on my own. I have newfound respect for the solo MMJs [multimedia journalists] out there.”

Back in Florida, one of the hardest parts for Elwood was reporting on the threat to her family’s livelihood as someone who would be affected by it. Elwood, who returned to her parents’ home because of the pandemic, compared what it was like being around her father as a child with being around him again as a college student.

“Things were a little different,” Elwood wrote in her story. “He still has flour blanketing the front of his shirt. He still smells like pizza. But these days, he is coming home every night with something new: the weight of keeping a small business open in the wake of a pandemic.”

The restaurant survived 2020, and Elwood is hopeful about 2021.

Rod Hicks is journalist on call for the Society of Professional Journalists. He can be reached at rhicks@spj.org.
Awards ceremonies are typically gala events with elegant attire, high-profile presenters and heartfelt acceptance speeches. After the pandemic, most journalism awards were forced online—some of them at a moment’s notice—but the award organizations employed creativity and technical know-how to reinvent a familiar format. And much of that will continue in the foreseeable future.

NewsPro asked producers of some journalism-focused awards events to paint a picture of how they did it, and what’s coming up next.

DUPONT-COLUMBIA

Honoring excellence in audio and visual reporting, the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards at Columbia Journalism School places a special focus on local investigative reporting. In typical years, 14 to 16 awards are presented at Columbia University’s Loew Memorial Library at the end of January, with an audience of up to 500 people.

Awards director Lisa Cohen reports that after everyone at the university began working from home in mid-March last year, the awards staff realized that the awards ceremony in 2021 would have to be virtual. “By then, we had done many remote events, and we learned that shorter is better,” says Cohen. The awards will take place in February but no date has yet been set, as of press time.

“The real challenge is trying to create that incredibly charged atmosphere in the room—and that’s still a work in progress,” she says. One added feature this year involves honoring 30 finalists, who are featured on the organization’s website.

We all missed being in person, but the silver lining was that we reached many more people.”

– Alexandra Lescaze, Sidney Hillman Foundation

Recognized as one of the most prestigious honors an author can receive, the RFK Book Award recognizes the book that, as Schlesinger said, “most faithfully and forcefully reflects Robert Kennedy’s purposes—his concern for the poor and the powerless, his struggle for honest and even-handed justice, his conviction that a decent society must assure all young people a fair chance, and his faith that a free democracy can act to remedy disparities of power and opportunity.”

For full details, and to submit your 2020 work, visit: RFKHumanRights.org/awards

Submission Deadline: February 1, 2021
EDWARD R. MURROW

Bestowed by the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), the Edward R. Murrow Awards are usually presented in October at a gala event in New York City’s Gotham Hall. That wasn’t possible in 2020, says RTDNA executive director/chief operating officer Dan Shelley. “We pivoted to a virtual event which was preproduced and premiered Saturday evening, Oct. 10. It attracted more than 2,000 views within the first 48 hours and is still being viewed.”

The entry period for 2021 awards is open through Feb. 5. The awards committee is currently considering options for a special recognition tied to coverage of COVID-19 and race-related demonstrations. RTDNA is planning for a return to an in-person event at Gotham Hall next October.

THE EMMYS

Look for a virtual event this coming September when the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (NATAS) presents the 2021 News & Documentary Emmy Awards.

The academy has already done one round of online events for Emmys in other content categories, which took place in mid-May through June last year. Back in 2019, NATAS, in partnership with Vimeo, had launched its streaming WatchtheEmmys.tv on a wide range of platforms. “The infrastructure was coming into place,” says NATAS president and CEO Adam Sharp “We also had an archive tool, and those became the bedrock of our COVID strategy.”

The virtual news and documentary Emmy event has a special feature, says production senior vice president Steve Ulrich. Because the ceremony is more compact than the other Emmy presentations, NATAS is adding virtual green rooms where nominees can engage in conversations, and the host and presenters can ask questions. Viewers can also log into the site an hour before the event to be part of this virtual green room conversation. Unlike the in-person event, news and documentary will be done as separate shows on subsequent nights.

FOURTH ESTATE

The American Legion’s Fourth Estate Awards recognize outstanding achievement in investigative and advocacy journalism in print, broadcast and new media. Spokesman John Raughter reports that the winners are ordinarily honored at the organization’s national convention. The 2020 gathering—originally scheduled for August in Louisville—was postponed to March 20, 2021, a date that now looks iffy for in-person gatherings.

Rauther says that the American Legion may opt for individual awards presentations, bestowed by a past or present national commander.

It has also considered an online event, but no decision had been made, as of press time. “The drawback with doing the 2020 awards in 2021 is that we’ll be recognizing work in 2019,” Raughter says. “It’s not optimal, but we don’t want to compromise anyone’s safety, and most people understand.”

HILLMAN PRIZE

The Sidney Hillman Foundation had to switch its award-ceremony “gears” last year very quickly when COVID-19 struck. Alexandra Lescaze, executive director of the foundation, reports that, “the severity of the pandemic became clear just weeks prior to our Canadian and U.S. Hillman Prize events—and we were caught having to produce virtual events with very little prep time.”

Because the next awards ceremony is several months away, no decision had been made about whether it will be conducted online, or in person.

Last year, the Hillman team recorded Zoom interviews with the winners, who were honored for their TV, radio, podcast and documentary investigative reporting. Then the organization created a prerecorded Facebook Live show emceed by board member Danny Glover.

“We all missed being in person, but the silver lining was that we reached many more people,” Lescaze says.

The foundation also made grants to several publications to help them to pay freelancers to do “the essential labor of reporting during the pandemic.”

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CALL FOR ENTRIES  Deadline Jan 30, 2021

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Open to television, radio, podcast, and documentary investigative reporting and deep storytelling in service of the common good

$5,000 prize
No entry fee

More information at HillmanFoundation.org
No Time for Complacency  
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Let’s focus on safety. Amid the police reforms that followed the late-May death of George Floyd, some states and cities enacted laws and policies that affirm the right of citizens, including journalists, to record the activities of police. The Los Angeles Police Department issued an order specifically prohibiting officers from arresting journalists covering civil unrest.

But those laws and policies aren’t worth the paper—or email, or Tweet—they’re written on.

In the days before and after election week, business owners boarded up their windows in Times Square and New York City’s shopping districts; downtown Washington, D.C.; areas of Chicago; Los Angeles; and in cities and towns virtually everywhere in between. It was as if a giant hurricane the size of the continental United States was about to move on shore.

People were worried about mob violence, regardless of who was declared the winner of the presidential election. And regardless of who was protesting or rioting, journalists were there to chronicle it for the communities they serve.

Because that’s what journalists do. And it is what journalists will continue to do in the new Biden administration.

For decades, network news organizations have provided armed security to protect their crews in dangerous places overseas. Beginning in 2015, they provided such protection for journalists covering political rallies throughout the U.S.

For at least 10 years, local newsrooms in a handful of large American cities have provided armed security for their journalists working in the field. In 2020, in media markets large and small across the country, security guards became just as much a part of field crews as the reporters, producers and photojournalists. Independent and freelance journalists often have no protection at all.

Not counting the aggressions that emanate from law enforcement, the threats to journalists come from people across the ideological spectrum. Some who attack journalists wear red hats; some are dressed in black. Some carry tiki torches; some say they’re anarchists.

One might say there are bad people on both sides.

So why should people care? Because journalists exist to serve them and their communities. They put themselves in harm’s way to seek and report the truth. And their work often serves as catalysts for positive change. They shine light on problems so those problems can be rectified.

And as Louis Brandeis famously wrote three years before becoming an associate justice of the Supreme Court, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

Dan Shelley is executive director of the Radio Television Digital News Association. He can be reached at dans@rdna.org.

The Fake News Legacy  
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Secondly, the researchers learned the importance to viewers of a shared mission between news organizations and their communities. Early in our careers, we learned to be independent watchdogs over government and powerful institutions. While news consumers understand that need, they point out a parallel need for journalists to demonstrate that they want to make their communities better places to live.

To some of those interviewed, this “shared mission” was defined as journalists delivering the news in ways that show concern for the community, rather than being an outside observer.

The need for diversity in newsrooms was another key element in establishing trust with the audience. We’ve long known of the importance of reflecting the makeup of our markets through our staffs. If we don’t, we’re sending a subtle message the news we produce is not for everyone. But this challenge is about more than racial diversity.

It’s also about ensuring your staff comes from a variety of economic, social and geographic backgrounds. One participant in the study from rural Illinois put it this way: “It’s one of the reasons why rural and small-town people are trusting the media less and less.”

He added, “When they see the coverage of their own setting, either the interpretation is off or they’re missing some important piece of the story.”

Perhaps the most frequently cited barrier to getting people to trust journalists is an all-too-common perception that “all the news is negative.” Spot news may be easy to cover, and it fills time, but a lot of it doesn’t do much to earn the audience’s trust.

A number of those surveyed pointed to the need for stories that show the positive aspects of a community. They’d like a focus on solutions to problems—not just the problems themselves.

The 32 Percent Project researchers offered the takeaway that good journalism should mirror the same characteristics as a trusted interpersonal connection. As one of the study’s participants said, “Journalism is a relationship. It’s not a product.”

Well said!

Mike Cavender is executive director emeritus of the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA). His opinions are his own. He can be reached at mikec@rdna.org.
If you told me a year ago I’d be teaching in an outdoor tent and an indoor auditorium, I’d wonder who had signed me up for the circus. Then came a 2020-21 academic year that was like no other.

As I start the new semester, hope and opportunity are again mixed with uncertainty. But this much is in the books: my students and I thrived in the highwire fall 2020 term, and until a COVID-19 surge during the last few weeks of the fall semester, we met in person at Syracuse University, masked-up and socially distanced.

As a journalist, I’ve covered and lived through the aftermaths of 9/11 in New York City, as well as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The current crisis—which involves the intensity of teaching nearly an entire year without knowing when my classes might need to adjust to an unforeseen phase of COVID-19—is an experience my students and I will always remember.

The question that continues to drive my work and planning is not: “How quickly can we get back to normal?” It is: “What new possibilities have we been forced to see?” Like the rest of the country, schools are living an experiment that only history can judge with clear eyes. The most important lesson I’ve learned is that I don’t want to return to the Old Normal.

Back in August 2020, at the outset of the new school year, I told all my students, particularly the freshmen, that we were embarking upon a journey that would bring new insights—including the possibility of a different worldview than their friends, many of whom were stuck back in their hometowns. I didn’t realize how true this would be for me, as well.

I’ve been designing online classes for mid-career grad students since 2015, so higher ed’s emergency shift to “fully online” last March wasn’t that much of a change. For me, the real paradigm shift came in August, when most of my students wanted a physical classroom experience, though others could still opt for online.

While there are growing pains with the merging of traditional, empathetic in-person pedagogy and new tech, this odd combination pushed my freshmen to tackle stories and subjects that were far beyond what I’ve typically seen among first-year students.

Knowing that interviews for their documentary project would need to be conducted socially distanced or via Zoom during the fall 2020 semester, I upped the ante and added a requirement to include an international source in their stories. This, I reasoned, would help students see the U.S. from the outside during the pandemic and election season, and show them how easy it was to burst beyond their university bubble.

Moreover, this was a rare opportunity for them to compete with the industry on the strength of story ideas alone, now that many professionals were also working from home and laptops, and the advantages of expensive studios or big-budget production had been rendered obsolete in the nation’s intermittent lockdowns.

Thanks to smartphones, my experiment with the first-year students was a success: one group explored how pandemic-era border restrictions in Kuwait, Canada and the U.S. were impacting families hoping to reunite for the holidays. Another took a comparative look at the concept of “happiness” in a pandemic, featuring footage and interviews from California, New York and Denmark, including The Happiness Museum in Copenhagen. Yet another investigated COVID-19 campus life across Europe and America, along with the regional differences experienced by twin sisters from California who were living their first year of college life at extreme poles—one at school in Texas, the other in New York.

At the end of my fall semester, I pulled up a soulful YouTube video from the R&B singer Aloe Blacc, and let his music provide the class coda. In a song called “My Way,” the artist sings: “I’ve got pride that gives me clarity / I still wake up in the morning with a vision of a better life / See the option of defeat’s just not written in my story.”

We are writing a new story for a new time. As I prepare to complete a full year of pandemic-era teaching, the central question for me and my students is not how quickly we can get back to the way we were doing things before, but, in the face of unprecedented change, how wisely did we observe and adapt?

Corey Takahashi is an associate professor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, where he focuses on multimedia storytelling, digital media and cultural journalism. He can be reached at ctakahas@syr.edu.
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