

# Tips for Managing Coronavirus Reporting Risks

By **Howard Goldberg for INN** | March 27, 2020

Newsrooms around the world are confronted with new ethical and safety considerations in covering the coronavirus and its effects. Photographing an interview subject through a window from their front yard - with their consent, of course - has gone from unthinkable to routine. Nursing homes have been described in apocalyptic terms like “ground zero.” Deciding whether to send a reporter out on assignment now seems unbelievably complicated.

With help from [Reuters](#)

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.reuters.com/>) and many INN member news leaders, we have assembled advice and tips to help nonprofit news managers think through some of the risks of reporting this story.

## **Weighing reporting risks and safety in your decisions**

Concerns about the virus are unprecedented not only in scale but in the two-way risks involved: Anyone coming into a newsroom could infect the rest of the staff, and anyone from the news staff going out to cover the story could infect others.

“People are no longer walking into danger zones. Danger zones are coming to them,” said Reg Chua, Reuters global managing editor operations, who shared with INN members advice about how to manage three kinds of reporting risks: preparation, deliberation and protection.

### **Preparation:**

In most dangerous situations, news organizations only send out journalists who have had extensive safety training. With the scope of COVID-19, hundreds of journalists are serving the public by covering a risky story for which equipment and training are limited or non-existent, as the situation is changing rapidly.

Have a plan in advance even for something as simple as reporting for work.

When the [Center for Investigative Reporting](#)

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.revealnews.org/>) instructed

its staff to work from home, it made an exception for essential production and operations staff who opted in and agreed to follow a safety protocol including social distancing and disinfecting surfaces they touch.

News media are generally considered essential service providers and are exempt from shelter-in-place orders. Know what your local officials are saying and always carry credentials even in ordinary neighborhoods where they might not normally be needed.

### **Deliberation:**

Structure all decision-making around risks so there is a dispassionate second voice questioning the risks involved.

“Almost every journalist I know including ours would rather do something more risky than not (to get a story),” Chua said. “They all want to get the story, and more power to them. They will always find a reason as to why it’s safe. That’s why you need someone else who has less of a stake in the story, just as you need an editor who, in effect, doesn’t believe you, to poke holes in your story. You need someone to poke holes in your security assessment.”

Since not all news organizations have expert consultants to help assess risks involving health, security, and legal considerations, use common sense but also consult as much as possible with colleagues who may have more complete or up-to-date knowledge.

Don’t make any decisions about coverage without a deep effort to understand the dangers involved. What’s the worst that could happen and how would you deal with it? What is a reporter’s exit plan if a situation unexpectedly becomes more dangerous than anticipated?

Smaller INN members can create their own buddy systems or use the association’s listserv or confidential office hours to get that “second voice.”

“All of you guys are smart people,” Chua said. “You wouldn’t have been running news organizations if you weren’t. You have dealt with all kinds of issues.”

### **Protection:**

Disease epicenters and hospitals are obvious “red zones” that cannot be entered without extraordinary preparation and protection like what doctors would wear in an emergency room. Newsrooms should not send any journalists into these situations without full protection.

But staffers or freelancers could be exposed to coronavirus almost anywhere.

Don’t assume protective measures (N95 respirator masks, hand sanitizer) will be effective unless users understand how to safely deploy them in the situations they will encounter. For COVID-19, specific advice from public health authorities is readily available in these [official advisories](http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.google.com/covid19)

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.google.com/covid19>) and [safety videos](http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.google.com/covid19/#safety-tips)

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.google.com/covid19/#safety-tips>). All journalists should watch and practice.

## Field reporting tips and work-arounds

Even newsrooms well stocked with emergency supplies don't have anywhere near the amount of protective gear to send journalists out regularly into high-risk situations. But there are individual options that can reduce risks.

- Reporters and photographers are staying 6 feet away from others during interviews, using boom microphones.
- Crews are outfitting booms or regular microphones with covers that can be washed afterward with soap or detergent and warm water and allowed to dry in the sun.
- Journalists are wearing raincoats and pants while in the field, disinfecting them with a bleach solution afterward and leaving them outside to dry. Even wearing Wellingtons can be better than wearing “indoor shoes” out on assignment.
- Rain covers, or even disposable ponchos, are being used on cameras and recording equipment indoors because it is easier to wash and dry some plastic than to disinfect the equipment. Journalists are working to remember not to set down gear, or if they must, put a disposable, protective layer under it. Crews carry garbage bags or other disposable plastic to put under their equipment, so gear bags are not picking up the virus from droplets that might have landed on a floor or table.
- Journalists are wearing disposable latex gloves to pick up and throw away that plastic. The CDC provides guidance on the safe way to take off and dispose of gloves (<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/poster-how-to-remove-gloves.pdf>).

## Enlisting sources in places you can't go

Risks may be too high for journalists to enter medical facilities or shelters housing ill people. So some journalists are working ahead of the worst of the crisis to set up medical and staff contacts that are confirmed and trusted and encourage them to report out the situations they see.

Even very local news organizations are setting up confidential call lines or protected tip lines to protect sources. Some use Signal (<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://signal.org/>), a secure voice and messaging app, or a method called SecureDrop that is explained to potential sources on a web page like this one (<http://web.archive.org/web/20201029015053/https://www.icij.org/leak/>) from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

## HR policies and supporting your staff

Every employer should be reinforcing and following local health authority guidance including insisting that anyone with flu-like symptoms calls in sick and does not leave home to work. There also is a moral obligation to consider

that staff may be living with people at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Their concerns about protecting their loved ones have become considerations in making work assignments.

Strict policies regarding personal time off may not be flexible enough to accommodate employee needs as they look to juggle work and family responsibilities at home. Some ideas from INN members:

- Extend sick leave time and allow it to cover anyone who needs to take time off to care for someone who is ill, or for a child.
- Improvise flexible work schedules. One newsroom suspended a policy against combining remote work and dependent care and told employees to work out a flexible plan with managers.
- Ask team members what they need to deal with their work-life issues, ask often, and be creative about finding solutions.

Chua notes that newsrooms that work with freelancers might consider policies for handling cases when a freelancer becomes ill through exposure on an assignment, or reasonably believes that is the case. News organizations are weighing how to determine if exposure likely came on assignment or elsewhere, and when and under what circumstances they would take responsibility for paying the freelancer for their quarantine period.

In all of these areas and all circumstances, news leaders advise their colleagues to be continually vigilant and ready to change.

Michael Christie, Reuters general manager, global logistics & security, said precautions must be continually reviewed in the face of a new virus.

“You are making some assumptions about what you are protecting yourself against that hopefully you will be right about,” he said. “But you also have to be prepared to update your protocols and your ideas about what you are protecting yourself against as new science comes out.”

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