

The Media Industry Is Another Casualty of COVID-19

The events of Sept. 11, 2001, catapulted the media industry into a 24/7 competitive news cycle, forever changing the industry. However, the recent global pandemic is transforming the media industry in even more and newer ways that will have repercussions for years to come.

COVID-19 has cast a dark shadow over all aspects of our lives. The media industry has not been spared, and perhaps it is among the sectors hardest hit. Due to the precarious economic conditions, advertisers have pulled their ads, causing a domino effect that has led to layoffs and, in some instances, closures. If an outlet does survive, the pandemic will alter newsroom operations. As media relations professionals, we must understand what is happening, why and how we can better support journalists during this transformative time.

The Vanishing Newsroom

In the U.S., COVID-19 changed our lives almost overnight. Within a matter of hours, schools were closed, professional sport seasons were canceled, office buildings shuttered, parks roped off and everyone sent home in a state of shock, bracing for what was soon coined “the new normal.” Newsrooms scrambled to cover the influx of coronavirus-related news. As the initial frenzy started to stabilize, one thing became clear: COVID-19 would transform the media landscape. The *New York Times* rearranged its staff to cover the publication’s daily briefings, while editors and reporters volunteered to help bear the increased workload. One *New York Times* reporter said that it was “like drinking from a firehose.”

Newsrooms are places of extreme energy – phones ringing, excited conversations, people coming and going, open desk space. Now they sit empty, as reporters and editors work from their home offices, kitchen tables or makeshift desks in their bedrooms. Reporters can no longer brainstorm and challenge each other to think deeper and ask more questions. There are no more debates and no in-person sharing of resources. No hopping on a plane, train or in a car to follow the story. While these are things that can happen over the phone or email, the reality is that those versions are not as natural.

Photojournalists are faced with a potentially life-threatening dilemma: Get the shot and risk getting sick or stay home. Their work cannot be done remotely or at a safe social distance. This quote from a *New York Times* article sums up the challenges photojournalists face – and bravery they display: “Despite the hazards, many photojournalists are driven by a need to record what the world looks like at a dramatic time.”



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In addition to the disruption of their newsrooms, journalists are grappling with the same personal issues as everyone else in the workforce – balancing home and work lives at the same time, in the same place. It's no small feat to conduct interviews and meet deadlines with children, barking dogs or extended family members in the background.

Yet, ironically, while the demand for news is at its highest, the business model that supports the newspaper industry is rapidly crashing.

Media's Financial Fallout

As the [Guardian](#) reported, the newspaper industry was already on borrowed time, but now it is truly on life support. Since the coronavirus, advertisers have pulled out, forcing layoffs and closures of major publications across the country. This fact is particularly heartbreaking at a time when readers rely on local papers as trusted news sources during a crisis and the impact of the virus is felt differently in different regions. The [Times-Picayune](#) in New Orleans has furloughed 10% of its staff and switched the rest to a four-day work week. The [Plain Dealer](#) in Cleveland has laid off 22 newsroom staffers. [The Guardian](#) also reports that the [Tampa Bay Times](#), Florida's largest newspaper, has switched to printing only twice a week after it lost \$1 million in advertising revenue due to the coronavirus.

National newspapers are also casualties. [USA Today](#) reported that its parent company, Gannett, has furloughed workers. McClatchy, one of the country's largest news publishers, is in bankruptcy. Other chains, such as Lee Enterprises and Tribune, are deeply in debt. The trend is not expected to change, and experts question whether switching from print to online-only platforms will be enough to save the industry.

In a piece for the [Atlantic](#), "[The Coronavirus Is Killing Local News](#)," Steven Waldman, co-founder of Report for America, and Charles Sennott, CEO of the GroundTruth Project, called for news organizations to be considered in future stimulus packages, such as funding public health ads in local media outlets.

Other analysts predict that, in the coming months, newspapers may shrink the size of daily editions, reduce the number of print editions or stop printing altogether. There is also discussion about asking foundations to subsidize coverage of the coronavirus crisis or offering employees extended unpaid time off.

Facebook is stepping up by giving \$25 million in grants to local news outlets and spending \$75 million on a marketing initiative for the news industry with the launch of the [Facebook Journalism Project](#). It may not be long before we see the media industry supported and structured as nonprofit or non-governmental organizations instead of for-profit business endeavors.

What Can We Do to Support Journalism?

As the bottom free-falls out from under the journalism industry, we as media relations professionals need to help. These measures might just be a drop in the proverbial bucket, but they are worth a try:

1. **Pay for your subscriptions.** At this time of crisis, do not use more than your fair share of trial subscriptions. Do not cheat the system – remember that the future of journalism depends on revenue generated from subscriptions.
2. **Support journalists.** Remember that it is our job to make their jobs easier. We need to go the extra mile to understand their beats before we pitch them, read their articles and offer sources that can add an interesting perspective. A few years ago, I wrote a blog post with tips about [how to craft successful pitches](#). It might be time to look at it again.
3. **Keep local stories local.** Take some time to know what local reporters are covering that is relevant to your firm's practice areas. If you can, find a time for a background conversation between the journalist and a member of your firm so they can get to know each other. Journalists frequently welcome the opportunity to get to know their sources before they need them on deadline.
4. **Remember that reporters are human, and connect with them on a human level.** My colleague, Randy Labuzinski, offers tips on [how to think logically, creatively and strategically about how we work with and pitch](#) our lawyers and law firms to editors and reporters for media opportunities.

We are all in this together. As public relations professionals, we are part of the greater media community. We must recognize the serious challenges ahead and work to ensure that we preserve the important role that journalism plays in our society and our profession.

If you wish to discuss your firm's PR plans and ways to better engage with the media during this tumultuous time, you can reach me, Stephanie Holtzman, at sholtzman@jaffepr.com.