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## Challenges, Adaptability, and Resilience of Campus Journalists Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates campus journalists' challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and explores the adaptability and resiliency they demonstrated in the face of these obstacles. This study employs questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD) to investigate the lived experiences of campus journalists at Mindoro State University. During the pandemic, campus journalists encountered various difficulties, as revealed by this study. The closure of campuses has disrupted journalists' traditional reporting practices, limiting their access to sources and on-site reporting. In addition, the cancellation of campus events has deprived them of significant news content, presenting them with the challenge of effectively engaging their audience. The pandemic has further highlighted the impact of campus journalists' mental health struggles. Due to juggling academic obligations, remote journalism, and personal well-being, the individual experienced stress and exhaustion. In addition, the constant flow of pandemic-related news overshadowed their ability to discern and communicate vital information effectively. Disparities have hampered student journalists' transition to virtual journalism in technology access and digital literacy. Ethical quandaries complicated the situation. During the pandemic, campus journalists struggled to combat misinformation, maintain journalistic integrity, and protect source confidentiality. Despite the obstacles, the study demonstrates that campus journalists are resilient and adaptable. They embraced digital innovation by utilizing online platforms to broaden their audience reach and experimenting with innovative storytelling techniques. Collaborative journalism has flourished because of partnerships between campuses and increased community involvement, leading to a stronger sense of unity and shared goals among student journalists.

### INTRODUCTION

The field of journalism, being a crucial component of democratic societies, is continually undergoing changes and adaptations to keep up with the dynamic sociopolitical and technical environment. Gibbard (2022) reiterated this viewpoint, highlighting the extensive changes journalism has seen in response to the digital revolution and the complexities associated with the post-truth age. The scholarly discourse has predominantly centered around mainstream media, but it is essential to include university journalism as a significant platform for emerging journalists. University journalism offers a valuable viewpoint on how the upcoming generation of journalists is adapting to the evolving landscape of the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as an unprecedented worldwide disruption, causing significant shifts in existing paradigms. It had a pervasive impact on all aspects of existence, fundamentally reshaping the fundamental structures of established systems. The media was not immune to its extensive influence. According to Garagiola *et al.* (2022), journalists have shown exceptional adaptation and resilience during the global epidemic, navigating several logistical and ethical challenges. The transition to remote work has brought about significant changes in journalism, presenting various opportunities and problems pushing the limits of conventional

journalistic methods.

The environment presented additional layers of complexity for campus journalists. The impact of the pandemic on higher education was substantial, as outlined by Crawford and Cifuented-Faura (2022), who conducted a comprehensive analysis of the rapid increase in blended learning approaches and the resulting pedagogical difficulties. Campus journalists were challenged to operate within two distinct environments: the rapidly changing field of journalism within the epidemic and the altered landscape of academic endeavors in virtual or hybrid formats. The utilization of two navigation systems presented a distinct array of challenges.

Although researchers like Hafeez (2022) have extensively examined the broad challenges faced by mainstream journalism during the pandemic, including combating misinformation and the need for remote collaboration, there needs to be a more significant gap in contemporary scholarly discourse regarding a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of campus journalism. The absence of campus journalists is especially conspicuous, considering their crucial role in disseminating campus-related information and their more considerable societal impact as aspiring professionals in the mainstream media industry.

Furthermore, the spatial limitations of enclosed educational institutions and the digitization of scholarly

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activities presented distinct obstacles. In light of the vacant campuses, conventional news sources became increasingly limited. The vibrant cadence and pulsation of university life, characterized by its array of activities, intellectual exchanges, and dialogues, which before contributed to a diverse narrative, gave way to an unsettling tranquility. The traditional practice of conducting on-site investigations, a fundamental aspect of journalism, has been replaced by digital platforms. However, in the face of these problems, narratives of resilience began to surface. Campus journalists demonstrated adaptability that warrants a thorough investigation, as they employed novel storytelling strategies and utilized digital platforms to attract a wider audience.

The lack of adequate portrayal of these experiences in current scholarly literature indicates a notable void in inquiry. The lack of attention given to campus journalists not only diminishes the significance of their perspectives and encounters but also hinders the ability of academics and the broader journalistic community to get vital insights that could inform educational methods and industry readiness for forthcoming changes.

Given the circumstances, this research intends to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the realm of university journalism within the COVID-19 pandemic. This research examines various obstacles comprehensively, analyzes adaptable strategies and explores the interconnectedness of academic and journalistic obligations to provide a comprehensive grasp of the subject matter. The objective of this endeavor is to not only address the existing disparity in scholarly discussions but also to offer concrete perspectives that might enlighten and motivate both the academic community and the worldwide journalism industry in light of forthcoming obstacles.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study utilized a qualitative phenomenology methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of campus journalists affiliated with Mindoro State University during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A purposive sample was employed to choose a group of 15 campus journalists actively engaged in their journalistic activities. The data collection process involved the utilization of questionnaires, one-on-one interviews with the participants, and organizing focus group discussions, each consisting of five individuals. At the beginning of the data gathering, the participants were provided with a comprehensive overview of the study and were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential. The online sessions were done due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, and audio recordings were obtained with the consent of the participants. The data was subjected to thematic analysis, beginning with open coding and afterward with axial coding to find overarching themes. The research adhered strictly to ethical standards, prioritizing the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The study's validity

was strengthened by triangulation, which involved diverse data-gathering methods. Additionally, reliability was assured by implementing consistent interview techniques.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Challenges Encountered by Campus Journalists

The experiences of campus journalists during the pandemic can be viewed as a microcosm of the broader journalistic community's challenges and adaptabilities in an era of unprecedented change. The results highlight three primary areas, each offering more profound insights into the evolving nature of journalism and the inherent resilience of those dedicated to the profession.

### Disruption of on-site Reporting

The pandemic caused significant Disruption to traditional campus journalism, primarily based on on-the-ground reporting. The core characteristic of this reporting style is its inherent authenticity, which captures genuine emotions and spontaneous reactions, enhancing the depth of the stories.

According to R1:

"The onset of the pandemic felt like hitting a brick wall. With campuses closed, our primary sources of news were cut off."

The student journalists claimed that sudden campus closures resulted in a lack of access to traditional news sources, which caused them to feel disconnected. As R13 exclaimed:

"Sitting behind a screen felt limiting."

In further analysis of the participants' view on this Disruption of on-site reporting, it was revealed that the absence had two consequences: a decrease in content quality and a decline in journalistic passion among reporters. Stories began to lose their authenticity, often needing more genuine emotions and immediate descriptions of the surrounding atmosphere.

The Disruption of on-site reporting reflects the broader challenge journalism faces in the digital age, as traditional reporting methods grapple with the advantages and constraints of technology. Journalism's essence is found in its capacity to convey authenticity, a quality traditionally based on firsthand experiences and being present at the scene (Lamprou *et al.*, 2021). The student journalists' responses highlight the pandemic's impact on the relationship between traditional journalistic practices and emerging digital norms. One must consider how journalism, as an institution, can adapt and grow while maintaining its core principles.

### Mental Health Struggles

Journalists' mental health also emerged as a prominent concern during the pandemic. According to R5:

"Being isolated took a toll on my mental health. There were days when I felt uninspired, unable to write or contribute."

Additionally, R15 claimed:

"The blurred lines between work, school, and personal

life often led to burnout.”

The shift to remote work prioritized physical health, inadvertently leading to emotional and psychological challenges. Journalists faced considerable stress due to the transition and the overwhelming volume of pandemic-related news. The participants encountered challenges such as heightened anxiety, burnout, and more pronounced depressive symptoms. This emphasizes the intersection of personal and professional realms during these periods.

The issue of mental health struggles has garnered considerable attention in recent times. The pandemic worsened existing challenges, emphasizing the blurred lines between personal and professional lives for journalists. According to Perreault *et al.* (2021), journalists frequently operate in demanding circumstances, particularly during times of crisis. The observations made by R5 indicate that remote work, while providing safety advantages, also introduced additional emotional and psychological challenges. These challenges stemmed from the constant influx of pandemic-related news and the blurred boundaries between work and personal life.

### Technological Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the unequal access to technology among journalists, as emphasized by R4:

“Not everyone on our team had equal access to technology. While some had high-speed internet and laptops, others worked off their phones with patchy connections.”

Resource access became a determining factor in efficiency, as certain journalists possessed advanced tools while others faced challenges with basic amenities. The digital divide significantly impacted their ability to gather and share news. The abrupt shift towards a digital-first strategy necessitated the adoption of unfamiliar tools and platforms, often needing more guidance, resulting in possible frustrations and a sense of inadequacy.

The technological challenges campus journalists encounter highlight a more significant societal concern: the digital divide. The division in journalism can impact news distribution’s quality and fairness. According to Machete and Turpin (2020), technological access and proficiency influence how news is sourced, presented, and consumed. R4’s experiences demonstrate the difficulties of implementing a digital-first strategy in environments with varying levels of technological development.

### Ethical Challenges

The initial stage of the pandemic was characterized by a deluge of information, some of which needed to be more reliable. Journalists faced ethical challenges in navigating the influx of data during the storm, leading them to filter out misinformation, as highlighted by R2 carefully.

“The flood of misinformation during the pandemic’s early days was overwhelming. Differentiating between genuine news and rumors became a daily challenge. Moreover, the absence of physical interaction made verification even

harder.”

The growing reliance on digital platforms has raised concerns regarding preserving source confidentiality. Furthermore, journalists have faced an increased need to carefully consider their personal beliefs to maintain impartiality in their reporting during the ongoing pandemic.

The pandemic has brought new dimensions to the ethical challenges that have always been central to journalism, particularly with the influx of misinformation. In his publication, Radcliffe (2021) delves into the heightened accountability that journalists face amidst periods of misinformation crises. R2’s experiences highlight the complex task of managing vast information and safeguarding sources in the digital age.

### Adaptability

Given the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the campus journalists found it necessary to adapt and continue the flow of journalism. In this context, student journalists displayed impressive flexibility, embracing innovative approaches to maintain productivity.

### Embracing Online Platforms

Many participants emphasized the significant contribution of online platforms to their journalistic pursuits. The transition to virtual environments became imperative, allowing student journalists to uphold their connection with their audience and carry on with their work. As explained by R1:

“We had to rethink our approach. We pivoted to using online platforms like Zoom or Google Meet for interviews. Facebook Live became a valuable tool for hosting panel discussions.”

Recognizing the limitations of online engagement compared to in-person interactions, these tools proved invaluable for maintaining connections and ensuring continued operations. This adaptation showcases the adaptability and ingenuity of student journalists in embracing technology as a tool for Communication and storytelling.

Student journalists increasingly transitioned to online platforms, which reflects the overall shift in the media industry towards digital transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the transition to online journalism, compelling news organizations and journalists to discover novel methods of engaging with their audiences. A study conducted by Ferreira and Borges (2020) explores the impact of the pandemic on online news consumption. It emphasizes the significance of digital platforms in sustaining the relevance of journalism during times of crisis.

### Collaborative Strategies

During the pandemic, student journalists found that collaboration was a crucial strategy. Participant 2 highlighted the importance of collaborating with other campus publications to verify information and use fact-

checking websites. In addition, they forged connections with the university administration in order to obtain official statements.

The collaborative approach employed by the student journalists not only improved the accuracy and credibility of their reporting but also cultivated a sense of unity among them. Through collaboration and leveraging their collective resources and knowledge, they could address intricate narratives and offer a more all-encompassing perspective on the effects of the pandemic within their campus community.

The collaboration among student journalists highlights the importance of working together and finding solutions as a group. In times of crisis, such as the current pandemic, collaborating can significantly improve the quality and depth of reporting. A more comprehensive and insightful approach can be achieved by pooling together resources, skills, and perspectives. In his publication, Dorthheimer (2022) explored collaborative journalism models that incorporate numerous contributors and highlight the significance of collective intelligence in reporting. Additionally, Caled and Silva (2021) emphasize the significance of collaboration in citizen journalism and the crucial role of fact-checking and verification processes in upholding journalistic integrity.

### **Innovative Content Generation**

Content generation innovation has become a distinguishing characteristic of adaptability among student journalists. Participant 3 discussed the transition towards thematic topics, explicitly highlighting the impact of quarantine on student experiences:

“The constraints forced me to be more innovative, more empathetic, and most importantly, more resilient.”

This approach appealed to their audience, showcasing a deep comprehension of their readers’ changing requirements and preferences. Participant 5’s inclusion of personal essays, op-eds, and reflections demonstrates the broad range of written content. These pieces, although divergent from their typical reporting style, resonated with readers by capturing the collective emotions and experiences of the pandemic. Participants 11, 13, and 14 utilized multimedia elements, including podcasts and video interviews, to enhance the interactivity and engagement of their content.

The strategies employed by student journalists demonstrated their ability to engage readers and adapt to the evolving media landscape through innovative storytelling techniques and formats. Efficient content creation is crucial for attracting and maintaining audience engagement. The adaptability of student journalists in exploring new formats and storytelling techniques is in line with the imperative for media organizations to experiment and evolve their content strategies. Kramp and Loosen (2017) explore the significance of innovation in journalism and the potential digital technologies hold for creating and distributing content. Relevantly, Arafat and Porlezza (2023) explore the dynamic connection

between journalism and its audience. They highlight the importance of adopting innovative strategies to engage readers effectively.

### **Mental Health Initiatives**

During the pandemic, the mental well-being of student journalists became a notable issue. Participants 4, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 15 discussed their different approaches to prioritizing their well-being.

“Even virtually, knowing you are not alone makes a huge difference.” (R8)

I learned that caring for one’s mental health is not a luxury but a necessity, especially in journalism.” (R9)

Establishing clear boundaries and dedicating specific hours for work and personal time proved effective in maintaining a balanced work-life dynamic, as reported by participants 3 and 15. Virtual newsroom hours (Participant 8) created a simulated shared workspace, which helped alleviate feelings of isolation and fostered a sense of community. Implementing designated periods of reduced news coverage and rotating days off helped team members recharge and mitigate burnout.

In addition, the participants emphasized the importance of engaging in self-care practices, participating in mental health workshops, practicing mindfulness exercises, and acknowledging and celebrating small accomplishments (Participants 10, 12). The strategies showcased a strong understanding of the significance of mental health and resilience amidst a difficult time.

Ensuring the welfare of journalists, including those in academia, has emerged as a pressing issue, particularly in times of crisis such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to prioritize mental health initiatives to uphold journalism professionals’ resilience and productivity. Frey (2023) delved into the stressors experienced by journalists and the coping strategies they utilize. The study emphasizes the significance of providing mental health support to this profession. The author further examined the effects of media work on journalists’ well-being, such as the potential for burnout, and emphasized the importance of implementing self-care strategies.

This study’s findings emphasize student journalists’ ability to adapt to challenging circumstances. They successfully adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic by utilizing online platforms, fostering effective collaboration, engaging in innovative content generation, and placing a strong emphasis on mental health. The adaptations enabled student journalists to maintain their journalistic work while also improving their skills, creativity, and well-being. These incidents provide essential insights for journalism programs and student publications in preparing and responding to future disruptions. They highlight the importance of being technologically adaptable and having a robust support system for journalists. Moreover, the approaches utilized by these student journalists can serve as a valuable guide for media professionals grappling with comparable

obstacles in the constantly changing field of journalism.

### Demonstrating Resilience

Another significant aspect that the study explored is the demonstration of resilience among the student journalists. The findings revealed that resilience was demonstrated through team dynamics, reaffirming commitment, and exploring Personal Development and Self-Reflection.

### Team Dynamics

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of their teams as valuable sources of strength and resilience. For example, Participant 1 discussed establishing a support group within the team, where members provided emotional check-ins for one another. At the same time, Participant 4 emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment where all team members' voices are acknowledged and valued.

The research findings highlight the crucial importance of teamwork in journalism, particularly in times of crisis. Duchek, Raetze, and Scheuch (2019) and other scholars have emphasized the importance of collaboration in journalism and how cohesive teams enhance the resilience of news organizations. Effective Communication, shared goals, and emotional support are essential for navigating challenges, as Perreault, M. and Perreault, G. (2021) highlighted.

In addition, the emotional support offered within teams is consistent with the findings of research on the emotional labor of journalists (Ivask *et al.*, 2023). Journalists frequently encounter emotionally challenging circumstances, and having a support network within their team can assist them in managing the strain and preserving their resilience. This finding is consistent with studies highlighting newsroom culture's significance in addressing journalists' mental well-being (Englund *et al.*, 2023).

### Reaffirming Commitment

During the pandemic, student journalists demonstrated unwavering dedication to upholding journalistic principles and preserving the trust of their readers, emphasizing the theme of reaffirming commitment. Participant 2 highlighted the regular editorial meetings conducted to uphold the precision and reliability of their reports.

"Our dedication to journalistic integrity became our anchor. We held multiple editorial meetings to discuss the implications of our reports...."

Student journalists exemplify an intense dedication that aligns with journalism's ethical aspect. Research by Liu *et al.* (2020) emphasized the importance of journalistic ethics during crises, as maintaining credibility and trust is crucial. During periods of uncertainty and misinformation, it is crucial to adhere to journalistic principles, including accuracy and fairness (Storm, 2023). Moreover, the dedication to ethical reporting can be examined from the perspective of professional identity development. Ecker *et al.* (2022) and other scholars have explored the self-perception of journalists as professionals

who bear the crucial duty of providing accurate and ethical information to the public. The unwavering dedication to upholding journalistic standards is a cornerstone of resilience, strengthening the journalist's sense of purpose and mission.

### Exploring Personal Development and Self-Reflection

The exploration of personal growth and reflection emphasizes the impact of the pandemic on student journalists as they acquire fresh abilities and a heightened comprehension of their responsibilities. Participant 3 discussed enhancing journalistic skills through innovation, empathy, and resilience.

"Despite everything, this period made me a better journalist. The constraints forced me to be more innovative, more empathetic, and most importantly, more resilient."

The research findings suggest that journalists can experience personal growth and professional development as a result of facing adversity. A study conducted by Frey (2023) highlights that journalists frequently experience growth due to facing challenges, which leads to the development of resilience and adaptability. Due to the pandemic, student journalists were compelled to adapt and acquire fresh abilities, mirroring the broader shift in the media sector towards digitalization (Pedroso & Pacit, 2022).

In addition, the focus on empathy is in line with the changing responsibilities of journalists in connecting with their readers. Researchers such as Fernandez-Quentanilla (2020) have emphasized the significance of adopting a reader-focused approach in journalism, which involves empathizing with readers and comprehending their requirements. Adopting an empathetic stance can significantly improve a journalist's capacity to establish a connection with their audience and deliver reporting that is both relevant and meaningful.

The themes identified in this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the remarkable resilience displayed by student journalists amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their reliance on their teams, dedication to journalistic principles, and personal growth and reflection highlight their adaptability and commitment to their profession.

The resilience demonstrated here not only showcases the fortitude of student journalists but also mirrors larger patterns within the field of journalism. Amidst the fast-paced evolution of technology and the overwhelming amount of information available, journalists are constantly adjusting to emerging obstacles (Mrah, 2022). The pandemic provided a distinct opportunity for their professional growth and ability to adapt.

Through an examination of the experiences of student journalists during this challenging period, we can gain valuable insights into the ever-changing landscape of journalism. The significance of teamwork, ethics, and personal growth in upholding the vitality and integrity of journalism remains evident, even during times of global

crisis.

The resilience demonstrated by campus journalists is a testament to the unwavering spirit of the profession. The observations made by R1 and R4 regarding strengthened Team Dynamics emphasize the importance of solidarity and a collaborative ethos that can arise from facing adversity. The commitment to journalistic integrity, as highlighted by R2 and R6, is a symbol of hope, indicating that the dedication to honest and influential journalism remains unwavering despite significant obstacles. This resilience is not only concerned with navigating external challenges, as indicated by R12 and R15. The importance of personal growth and introspection cannot be understated, highlighting the human element of journalism and the intertwining of personal journeys with professional challenges.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought about significant transformations in campus journalism, presenting a range of obstacles and opportunities for development. Journalists encountered a dynamic terrain characterized by several challenges, including interruptions in traditional reporting, mental health issues, technology limitations, and ethical dilemmas. However, the individuals showed remarkable adaptation and resilience, as seen by their ability to embrace digital platforms, prioritize collaborative efforts, and uphold the principles of journalistic integrity. The ramifications for the domain of university journalism are significant. The current period has highlighted the utmost significance of adaptability, the possibilities brought forward by digital advancements, and the lasting relevance of ethical considerations and psychological welfare. The advancement of university journalism will be enriched by these experiences, fostering a more robust, flexible, and comprehensive approach to news coverage equipped to handle forthcoming challenges.

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