



# **JOURNALISM & THE PANDEMIC:**

## **A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT OF IMPACTS**

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# INTRODUCTION: HOW IS JOURNALISM ENDURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

This report presents the initial findings from the first large-scale global survey of journalists<sup>1</sup> since the COVID-19 crisis began. The survey was conducted by the **Journalism and the Pandemic Project** - a collaborative research initiative from the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. We launched the project in April 2020 to study the impacts of the coronavirus crisis on journalism worldwide. We also wanted to assess our field's most critical needs, and to make evidence-based recommendations to inform the post-pandemic recovery, recognizing that professional journalism is an essential pillar of vibrant democracies.

The first 30 findings from our English-language survey are both startling and disturbing. Based on an analysis of 1,406 vetted survey completions during the pandemic's first wave<sup>2</sup>, we can conclude that many journalists covering this devastating human story, at great personal risk, were clearly struggling to cope. Seventy percent of our respondents rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work. A similar number (67%) identified concerns about financial hardship as a significant difficulty, while the intense workload was ranked the third biggest challenge, ahead of social isolation and the risk of actually contracting the virus.

The stress conveyed by these respondents was no doubt compounded by the fact that employers were evidently failing to adequately support them, and not only in the area of mental health. At the most basic level - providing appropriate

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<sup>1</sup>Our respondents ranged from news reporters to editors and CEOs. We use the term 'journalists' throughout this report in a generic sense, to represent the broader spectrum of respondents.

<sup>2</sup>The English language survey ran from May 13-June 30, 2020. The respondents represented 125 countries.

safety equipment to prevent frontline reporters<sup>3</sup> from contracting or spreading coronavirus - employers appear to have failed in their duty of care. Thirty percent of our respondents said that their news organizations had not supplied field reporters with a single piece of recommended protective equipment.

Significantly, the respondents identified politicians, elected officials, government representatives and State-orchestrated networks as top sources of COVID-19 disinformation. They also pointed to Facebook as the most prolific enabler of false and misleading information within the social media ecosystem. And, they expressed substantial dissatisfaction with the platforms' responses to the content that they had flagged for investigation. The barrage of disinformation and misinformation that our respondents said they were confronting in their daily work testifies to the scale of the 'disinfodemic' accompanying the disease itself.

Our respondents also told us about pandemic-induced unemployment, salary cuts, and outlet closures as news organizations took a huge revenue hit during the first phase of the crisis. On top of all this, they were enduring increasing attacks - on and offline - as governments and other antagonists tried to discredit journalists and roll back press freedom under the cloak of the pandemic.

Still, there were some bright spots. Forty-three percent of the respondents said they felt there was increased audience trust in their journalism during COVID-19's first wave. And 61% said they felt more committed to journalism than they were before the pandemic. There was also evidence of stronger community investment in journalism and increased audience engagement in reporting during the period. These comparatively optimistic findings may be key to reimagining post-pandemic journalism as a more mission-driven and audience-centered public service.

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<sup>3</sup>We use the term 'frontline reporters' as it is used in conflict zones, to denote those journalists reporting in the field during COVID-19 - including from inside hospitals, quarantine zones, and protests. We acknowledge, however, that medical and other support workers generally face even higher risks.

FIGURE 1

## THE DEMOGRAPHICS

A diverse international sample of English language respondents

# 1,406

respondents: journalists, editors, CEOs & other newsworkers

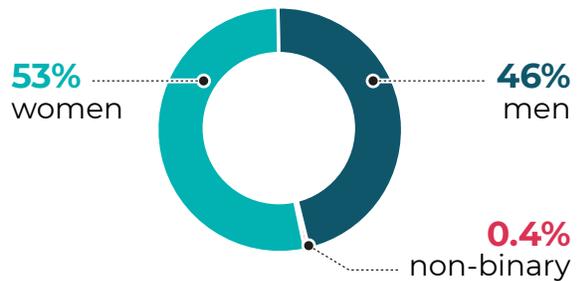
### Where do they come from?

Top 5 countries by rate of survey completions

- 1  U.S.
- 2  India
- 3  Nigeria
- 4  U.K.
- 5  Brazil

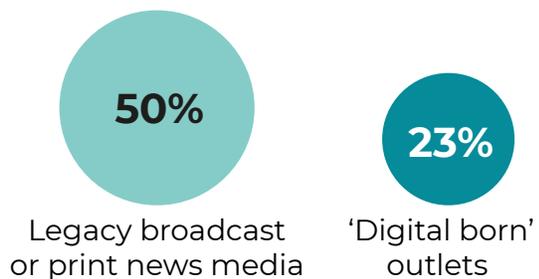
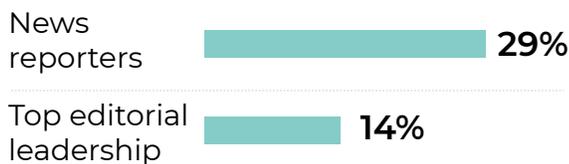
**125 countries**  
were represented  
by respondents

### Gender identification

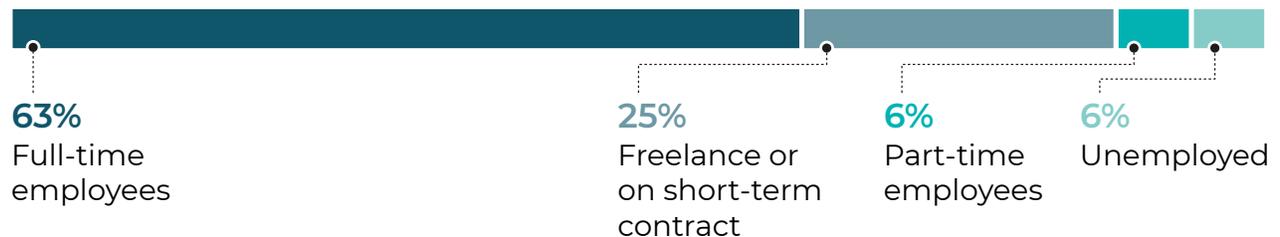


Age **65%** were aged 25-49

### Professional grouping



### Employment status





# TOP FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

## JOURNALISM SAFETY THREATS

- 70% of our respondents rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work, and 82% reported at least one negative emotional or psychological reaction as a result of the pandemic.
- 30% said their news organizations had not supplied a single piece of protective equipment for field reporting.
- 20% said their experience of online abuse, harassment, threats or attacks was “much worse than usual.”

## DIS/MISINFORMATION PANDEMIC

- Politicians and elected officials were identified by our respondents (46%) as a top source of disinformation, along with government agencies and their representatives (25%), and State-linked troll networks (23%), highlighting a serious lack of trust in political and governmental actors as the pandemic took hold.
- Facebook was most frequently identified as a prolific disinformation vector (66%). Over one-third (35%) also nominated the Facebook-owned closed-messaging app WhatsApp as a top spreader, while Instagram (also Facebook-owned) was identified as a top enabler by 11% of respondents, and Facebook Messenger was cited by 9%.
- Twitter was identified as a prolific disinformation spreader by 42% of respondents.
- 46% of our respondents said that they were either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the social media companies’ responses to dis/misinformation. Just 8% were satisfied. The most common response they reported from the companies when they flagged disinformation was no response at all.

## PRESS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS

- 48% of respondents said their sources had expressed fear of retaliation for

speaking to journalists in connection with COVID-19.

- 10% of respondents said they had been publicly abused by a politician or elected official during the period. They also identified major restrictions on their journalism, including State-linked censorship and legal harassment.
- Our respondents said they had experienced a range of pandemic-related digital security threats: government surveillance (7%); targeted digital security attacks e.g., phishing, DDOS, malware (4%); forced data handover (3%).

## **FINANCIAL (UN)VIABILITY**

- 17% of respondents with knowledge of their news organizations' financial losses reported that revenue was down over 75% since the pandemic began, with 43% indicating that that revenues were down by over half.
- 89% reported that their news organization had enacted at least one COVID-19 related austerity measure (including job losses, salary cuts and outlet closures).
- 7% reported that their outlets had ceased print editions and 11% reported reduced print runs due to the impacts of COVID-19-induced budget constraints.

## **MOST URGENT NEEDS TO ADDRESS**

- The most significant need identified by respondents (76%) was funding to cover operating costs (including salaries). But the results also highlight an urgent need for mental health support and interventions to help alleviate burnout. And there is strong demand, too, for training on new technologies to support remote reporting and publishing (67%), advanced verification and fact checking (67%), and science and medical/health reporting (66%).

## **SOME GOOD NEWS**

- 43% of respondents said they felt audience trust in their journalism, or that of their news organization, had increased during the first wave of the pandemic.
- 61% expressed an increased commitment to journalism as a result of the pandemic.
- 38% said they had experienced increased audience engagement (which was also largely positive) during the period.

## PARADOXES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The paradoxical nature of some of our findings is noteworthy. Take, for example, the significant concern expressed by respondents about the threat that abusive and disinformation-prone politicians and elected officials pose to independent journalism on the one hand, and the fact that 32% of respondents indicated that they were relying more heavily on government sources and official statements during the pandemic on the other hand.

Another example of this dualism relates to the finding that social media companies - most notably Facebook (66%) - are identified as such prolific disinformation spreaders and poor responders to the information pollution they harbor and propel. Our respondents indicated frustration with the platforms over their failure to adequately deal with the disinformation crisis, and 20% said online abuse was “much worse” than their pre-COVID experiences, but at the same time 38% said they were relying more heavily on social media for audience engagement and distribution during the period.

Finally, despite evidence of a serious mental health crisis among our respondents, the top three emotional and psychological reactions to the pandemic that they identified were positive. They were: an increased sense of commitment to the importance of journalism (61%); valuing their friends and family more than before COVID-19 (46%); and experiencing a deeper appreciation for life (42%).

These paradoxes highlight some of the challenges for journalism that are likely to emerge post-pandemic. But they also represent potential guideposts for those invested in journalism’s recovery, and they reinforce the need to reimagine journalism’s future. For example, how can audience engagement and trust be strengthened in a ‘socially distanced’ digital environment outside of the disinformation-riddled and abuse-prone social media platforms? How can

journalists hold governments and international organizations accountable for their management of the pandemic while restrictions on independent journalism, including the chilling of sources, leave them increasingly reliant on official statements? And how can the positive emotional and psychological responses to the pandemic expressed by the journalists we surveyed, along with their increased sense of vocational mission, aid responses to the deepening mental health crisis within the profession?

As the world careens into COVID-19's second wave, journalism is still reeling from the devastating impacts of the first stage of the pandemic. But it is essential that the field - and those committed to its survival - take stock, while bracing for the full force of compound effects. This report is designed to aid that stock-taking process - one which we hope triggers **creative and informed** responses to the ongoing challenges confronting public interest journalism amid the COVID-19 crisis.

What follows is a presentation of key findings and insights based on our analysis of the quantitative data gathered through our English-language survey, which ran from May 13-June 30 2020.

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## 30 KEY FINDINGS AND 22 GRAPHS

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### **PART 1: THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF COVERING COVID REPRESENTS AN ESCALATING RISK, AND EVERYONE IS STRUGGLING**

**Overview:** Our survey paints an unsettling picture of burnt-out journalists in the grip of a mental health crisis, who are increasingly living in fear of unemployment. These are journalists who are exposed to great risk by neglectful employers who have failed to provide essential safety equipment, while coming under attack from politicians and others seeking to chill critical reporting. Our data also points to significant gaps in support on offer to those covering the pandemic and seeking to hold governments to account for their responses to the crisis. These range from mental health support and protection from physical burnout, to urgent training and development needs, and help for employees trying to balance intense (often home-based) work with child care and home-schooling responsibilities. While there are some reasons for optimism as outlined below, unless these gaps in support are addressed, the impacts on journalists - mentally, physically, professionally and socially - are likely to worsen as the pandemic wears on.

**KEY FINDING #1:** Many journalists were struggling to cope with the mental, physical, personal and professional impacts of the crisis during the first wave of COVID-19. The mental health impacts of covering the pandemic were the most commonly cited difficulty (70%). The next most frequently nominated concerns were about unemployment or other financial impacts (67%), and then the intense workload (64%). Interestingly, fear of actually contracting COVID-19 was only the fifth most frequently nominated difficulty (54%), and it came after the challenges of social isolation (59%). The top six issues affected at least half of respondents. (See figure 2.)

FIGURE 2

**WHAT DID RESPONDENTS DESCRIBE AS DIFFICULT OR VERY DIFFICULT ASPECTS OF COVERING COVID-19?**



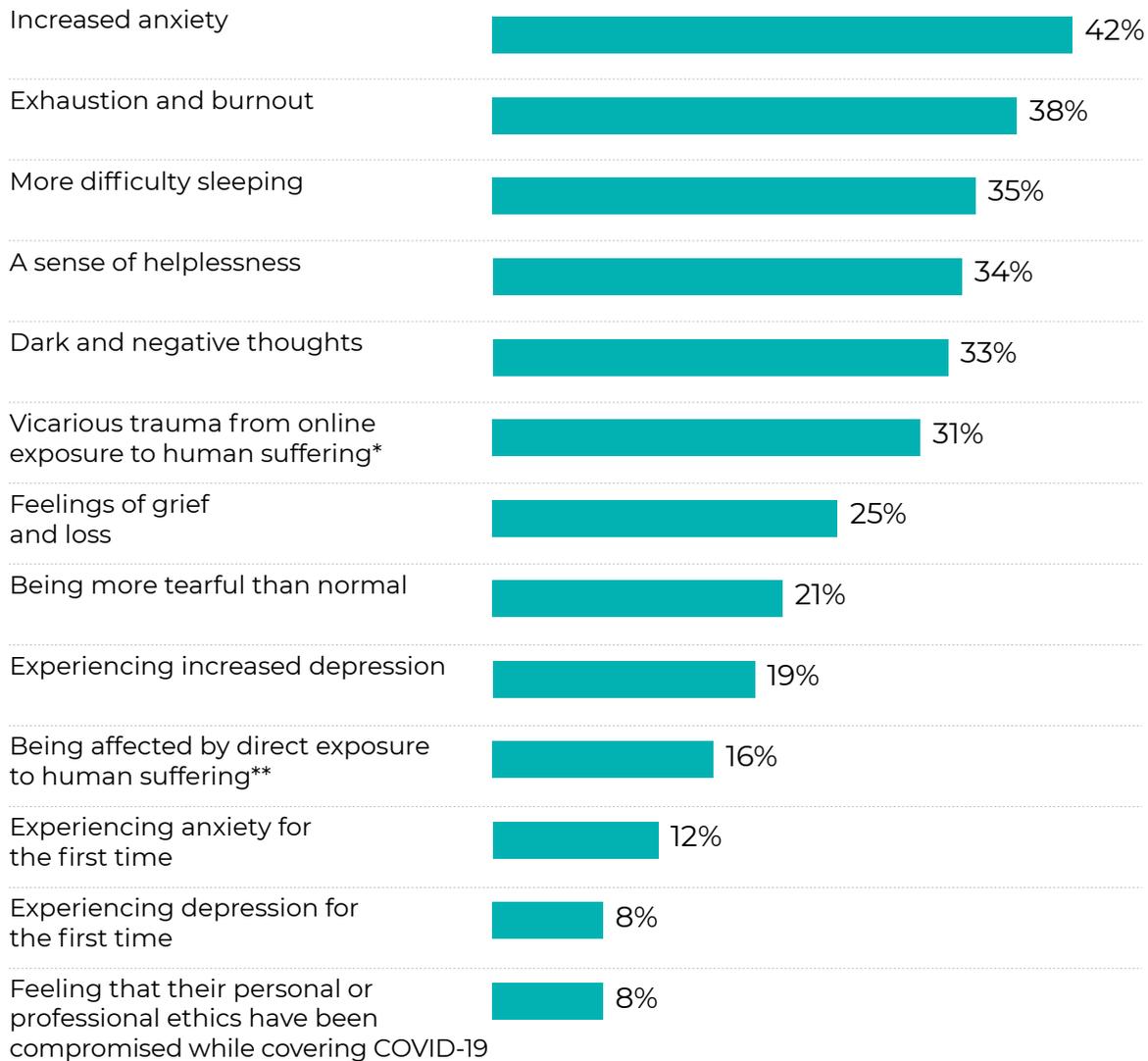
**KEY FINDING #2:** Eighty-two percent of respondents reported at least one negative emotional or psychological reaction as a result of the pandemic. Two-thirds reported multiple negative mental health impacts (66%). The top five reactions affected at least one-third of respondents.

**KEY FINDING #3:** Fifteen percent of respondents – over one in every seven – reported having sought psychological support to help them through the period.

**KEY FINDING #4:** Twenty-five percent of our respondents were still reporting from the field at least once a week. Overall, 38% were reporting from the field at least once a month.

FIGURE 3

### WHAT WERE THE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO THE PANDEMIC?

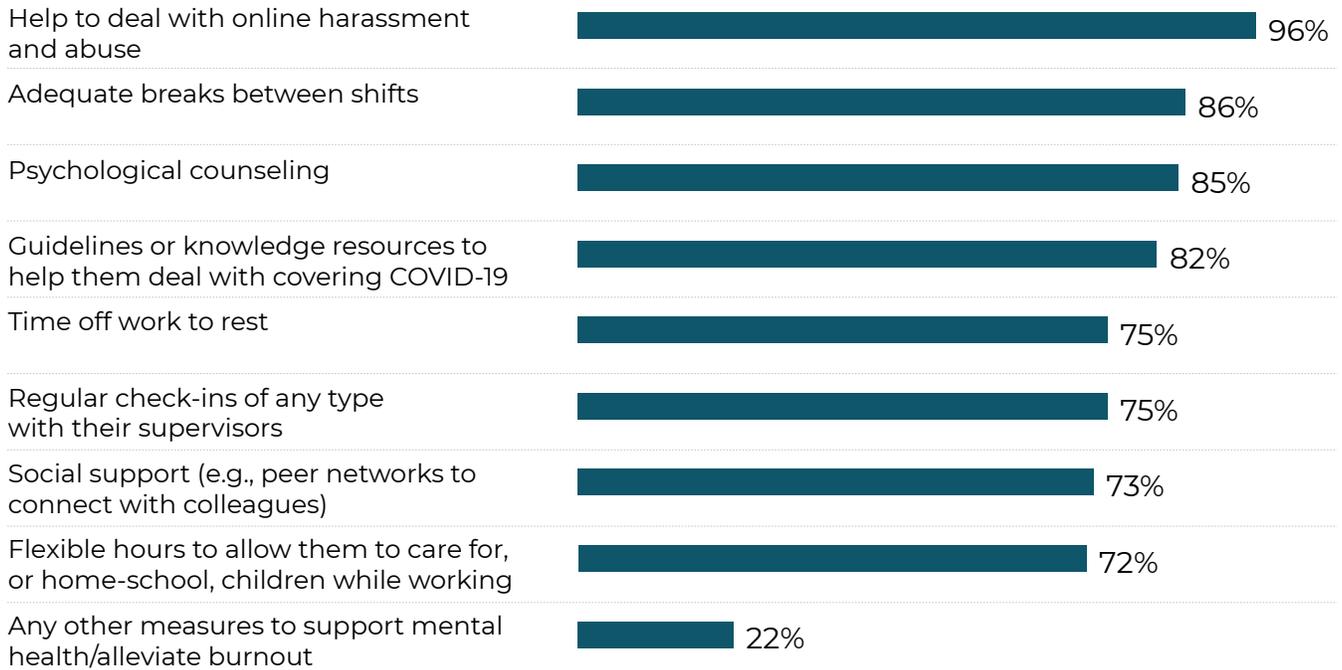


\*While working \*\*Through reporting

**KEY FINDING #5:** Our respondents identified a serious failure in support systems. They indicated that employers were providing very little support in general to journalists. There is evidence of neglect - from a vacuum of psychological counseling (85%) and burnout alleviation measures, to training and development failures, and the absence of social support.

FIGURE 4

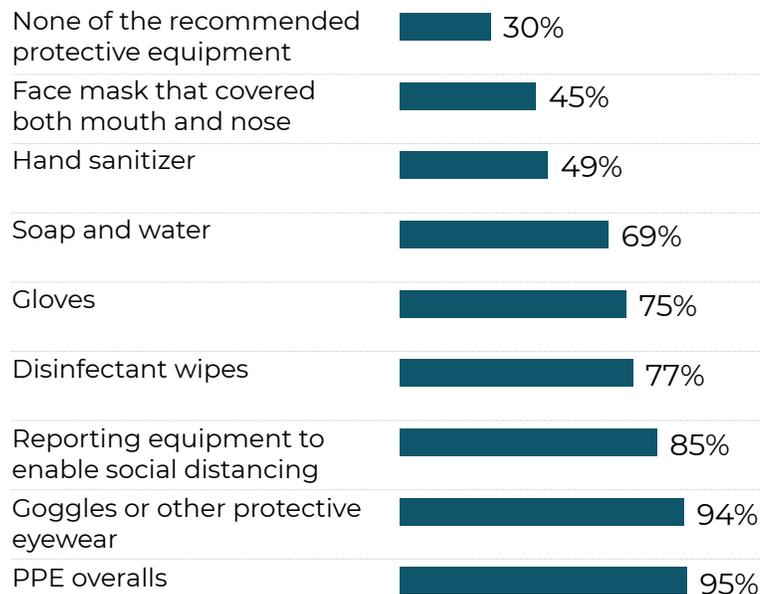
**WHAT SUPPORT IS NOT BEING OFFERED BY EMPLOYERS?**



**KEY FINDING #6:** Respondents indicated the widespread failure of employers to supply basic recommended safety equipment for field reporting during COVID-19 – ranging from protective clothing and hygiene products through to equipment to allow social distancing while covering the crisis. Most notably, 30% of our respondents said that field reporters had not been supplied with a single piece of safety equipment.

FIGURE 5

**WHAT EQUIPMENT DID NEWS ORGANIZATIONS NOT SUPPLY FOR FIELD REPORTING?**



## PART 2: JOURNALISTS ARE BEING CONFRONTED BY A TSUNAMI OF COVID-19 DIS/MISINFORMATION

**Overview:** Our survey results demonstrate the scale of the ‘disinfodemic’ confronting journalists, along with the key sources and propellants of false and misleading content associated with the pandemic. Over 80% of our respondents reported encountering COVID-19 related dis/misinformation at least once a week. They identified political leaders and elected officials (46%), government agencies and their representatives (25%), and State-linked troll networks (23%) as top sources of disinformation. Also notable is the fact that 34% of our respondents identified ‘propagandistic or heavily partisan news media, or State media as a major disinformation driver. Despite the dominance of ‘foreign influence’ narratives in reporting on disinformation, our respondents were least likely (8%) to identify ‘foreign influence agents’ as a top source of disinformation. Facebook was most commonly cited as a prolific carrier/spreader of false and misleading information by our respondents (66%) who expressed frustration with the failure of social media companies to deal appropriately with the dis/misinformation that they reported to them.

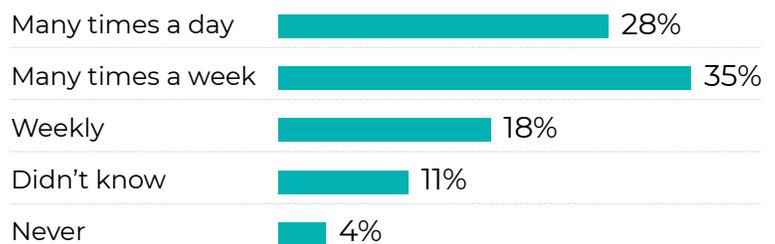
### KEY FINDING #7:

Four out of five respondents reported encountering disinformation connected to COVID-19 at least once a week (81%). For most, though, it was far more common. Over one-third reported seeing disinformation

connected to COVID-19 many times a week (35%), while 28% said they encountered it many times a day.

FIGURE 6

### HOW FREQUENTLY DID RESPONDENTS ENCOUNTER DISINFORMATION?

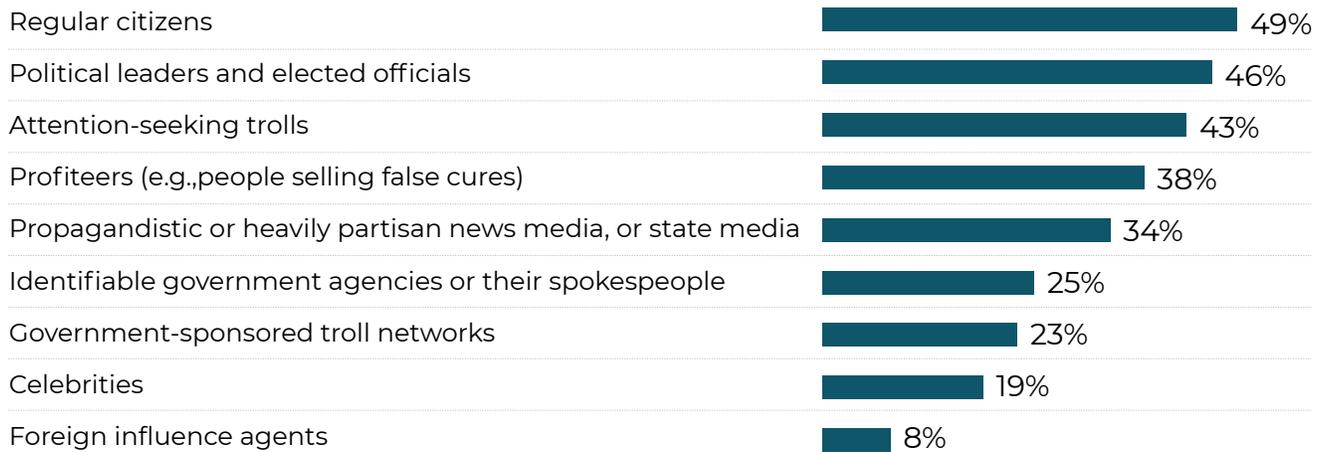


**KEY FINDING #8:** Political leaders and elected officials (46%), government agencies and their representatives (25%) and State-linked troll networks (23%), represented

top sources of disinformation identified by respondents. But the most commonly cited source (49%) was “regular citizens”.

FIGURE 7

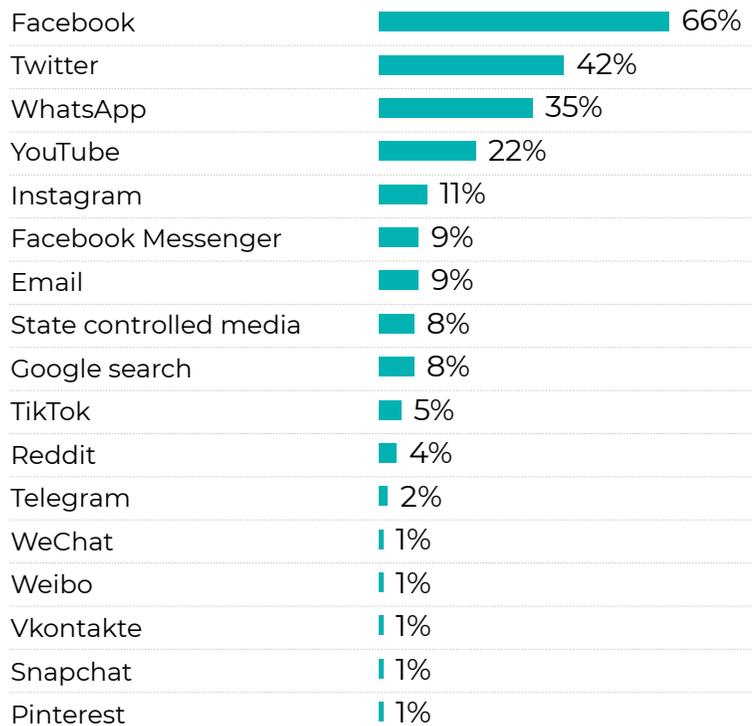
**WHO DO RESPONDENTS CITE AS TOP SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION?**



**KEY FINDING #9:** Facebook is the platform that respondents most frequently identified as the place where disinformation was spreading prolifically. Two-thirds of them said they had encountered disinformation connected to COVID-19 on Facebook (66%). Over one-third nominated the Facebook-owned closed-messaging app WhatsApp (35%) as a “prolific” spreader, while Facebook-owned Instagram was also identified by 11% of respondents, and Facebook Messenger was cited by 9%.

FIGURE 8

**ON WHICH PLATFORMS/APPS IS COVID-19 DISINFORMATION SPREADING PROLIFICALLY ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS?**



**KEY FINDING #10:** The top non-Facebook owned disinformation spreaders among the social platforms identified by our respondents were Twitter (42%) and Google’s YouTube (22%). Eight percent also nominated Google search.

**KEY FINDING #11:** When it came to reporting dis/misinformation to the platforms, 82% of respondents said they had reported such content to at least one of the identified companies during the first wave of the pandemic. A quarter (25%) of respondents said that they had reported dis/misinformation to Facebook – by far the highest for any single platform.

**KEY FINDING #12:** Almost half (46%) of our respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with social media companies’ responses when they referred instances of dis/misinformation for investigation. Just 8% were satisfied or very satisfied with the responses received. The most common response identified was no response at all.

### **PART 3: ATTACKED, ABUSED, DETAINED, CENSORED AND RESTRICTED**

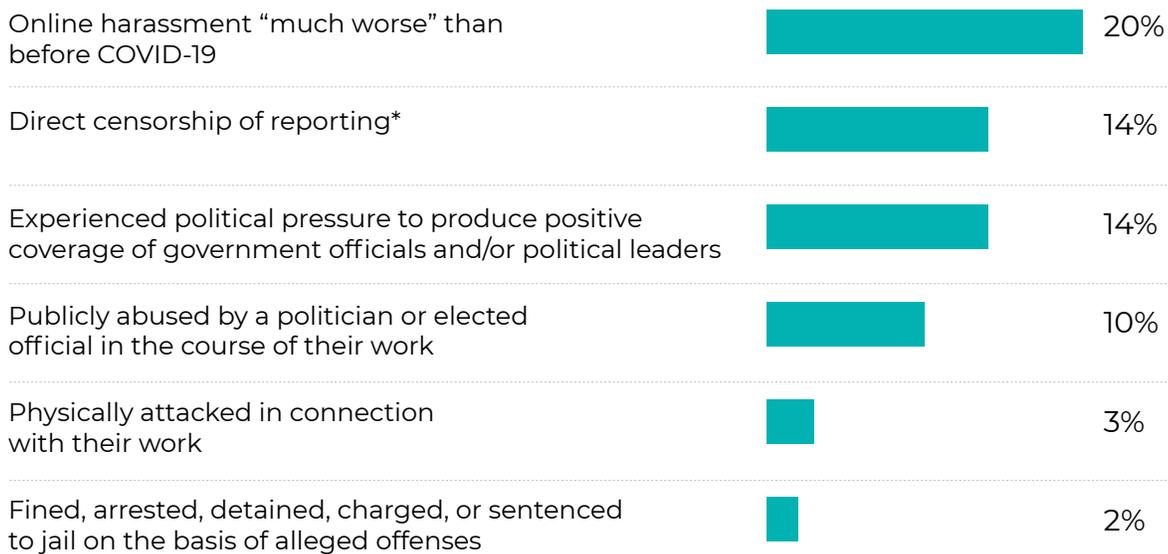
**Overview:** Covering COVID-19 exposed journalists to significant threats and chilling restrictions, as attacks on press freedom escalated during the pandemic. One in every 10 respondents said they’d been publicly abused by a politician or elected official in the course of their work during the period. A similar number (14%) reported being subjected to direct censorship, while 20% said their experience of online harassment and abuse was “much worse than usual.” Three percent said they’d been physically attacked in the course of their work and a similar number had been detained, arrested or charged. Thirty-four percent of our respondents indicated that they had experienced attempts to restrict journalists’ access to information and chill critical reporting - ranging from being excluded from government press

conferences to having their permits to report revoked, and being expelled from foreign countries.

**KEY FINDING #13:** Our respondents reported being abused, harassed and detained by law enforcement and political actors. They also testified to being attacked and assaulted during the period, and highlighted interference in their reporting through censorship and other restrictions under the cloak of the pandemic.

FIGURE 9

**ATTACKED, ABUSED, DETAINED AND CENSORED DURING COVID-19**

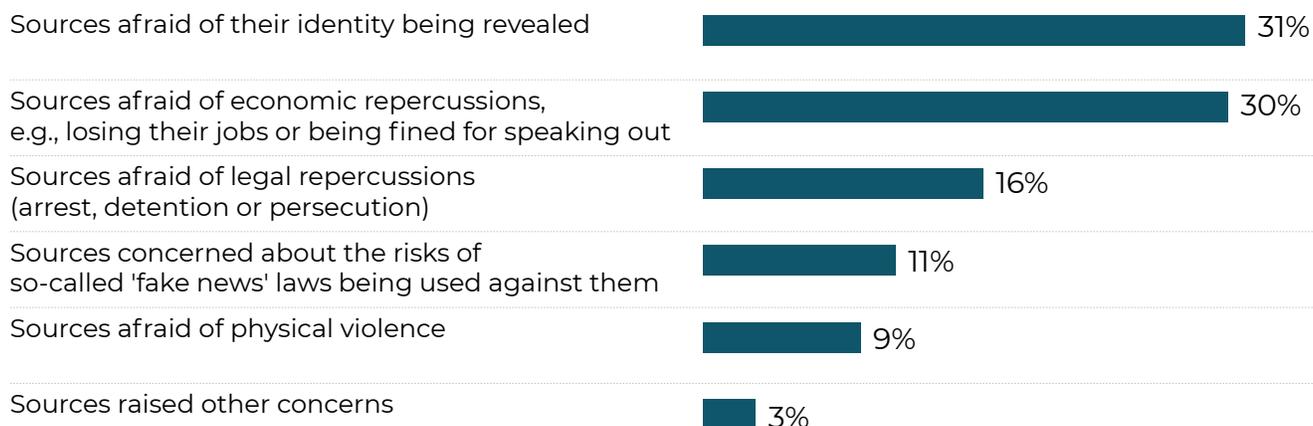


\*Ranging from preemptive non-publication orders and defamation suits to takedown demands and forced shutdowns of news outlets

**KEY FINDING #14:** Nearly half of our respondents (48%) said that their sources had expressed concern about reprisals for speaking to them (on or off record) during the first stage of the pandemic. Most were concerned about losing their jobs, but fear of being fined, jailed, or physically attacked all featured prominently.

FIGURE 10

**RESPONDENTS SAID FEAR OF REPRISAL WAS CHILLING COVID-19 SOURCES**

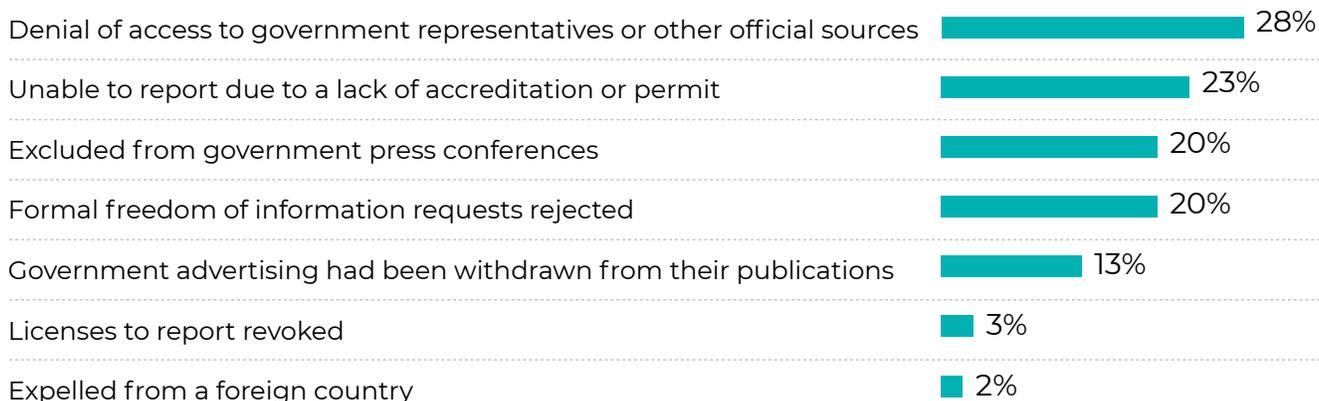


**KEY FINDING #15: Digital security threats** were also a feature of the press freedom challenges associated with covering COVID-19. Our respondents said they had experienced government surveillance (7%); targeted digital security attacks, e.g., phishing, DDOS, malware (4%); and forced data handover (3%).

In addition to the press freedom violations identified above, about 50% of respondents reported other restrictions on their journalism which directly affected their access to information. The percentages in the chart below represent the portion of those 50% who signaled these other restrictions.

FIGURE 11

**OTHER OBFUSCATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS**



## PART 4: CUTS, LOSSES AND CLOSURES

**Overview:** Seventeen percent of respondents with knowledge of revenue losses at their news outlets during the first three months of the pandemic said that revenue had plummeted more than 75% in the period. Revenue fell by more than 50% at outlets represented by 43% of our respondents who had access to their outlets' financial data. While some research at the beginning of the pandemic suggested that increasing demand for accurate, reliable information might translate into paying audiences as advertisers disappeared, the economic impacts of COVID-19 have clearly been devastating for some news organizations. Respondents identified the closure of news outlets (in some cases permanently); salary cuts; layoffs; increases in unpaid overtime; a reduction in working hours, shifts or assignments; print cessation and print-run contraction among biting austerity measures. This has also been borne out in research tracking U.S. newsroom cutbacks, and the large-scale disappearance of local news outlets internationally.

**KEY FINDING #16:** COVID-19 has significantly affected the economic viability of news organizations and the sustainability of journalism. Seventeen percent of respondents with knowledge of their outlets' financial situation reported revenue declines of more than 75%.

FIGURE 12

### LEVEL OF REVENUE DECLINE IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS WITH KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR OUTLETS' FINANCIAL SITUATION

Reported revenue decline

More than 75%		17%
50-75%		27%
25-50%		38%
Less than 25%		19%

**KEY FINDING #17:** There is strong demand for grants and other funding support to help weather the COVID-19 storm. Eighteen percent (18%) of our respondents reported that their news organizations had already applied for emergency funding.

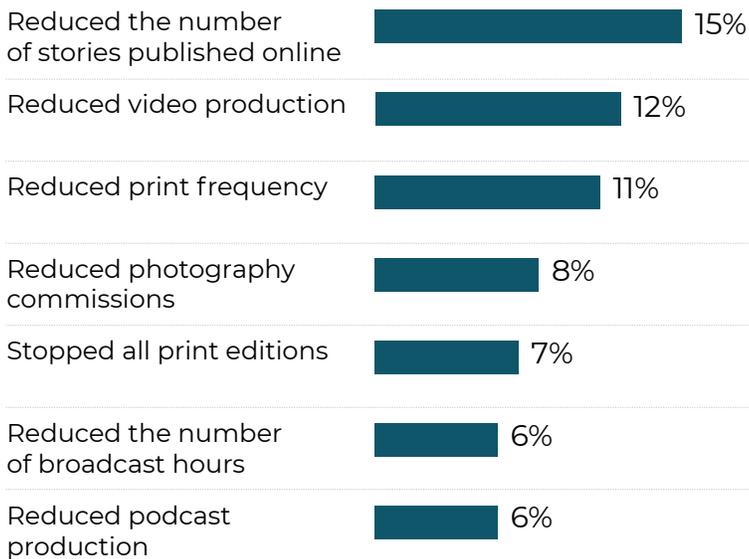
FIGURE 13

### AUSTERITY BITES



FIGURE 14

### CHANGES TO CONTENT PRODUCTION DUE TO COVID-19-RELATED CUTBACKS\*



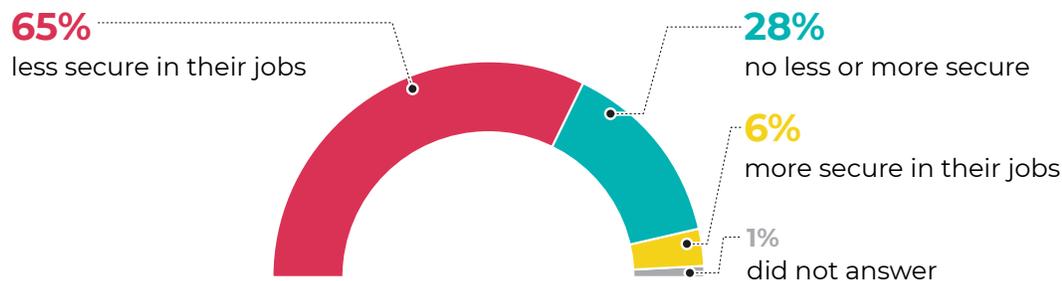
\*Based on respondents' reports of changes at their organizations.

**KEY FINDING #18:** 89% of respondents said that they had been affected by at least one austerity measure during the pandemic's first wave.

**KEY FINDING #19:** Two-thirds of respondents reported feeling less secure in their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

FIGURE 15

### JOB (IN)SECURITY



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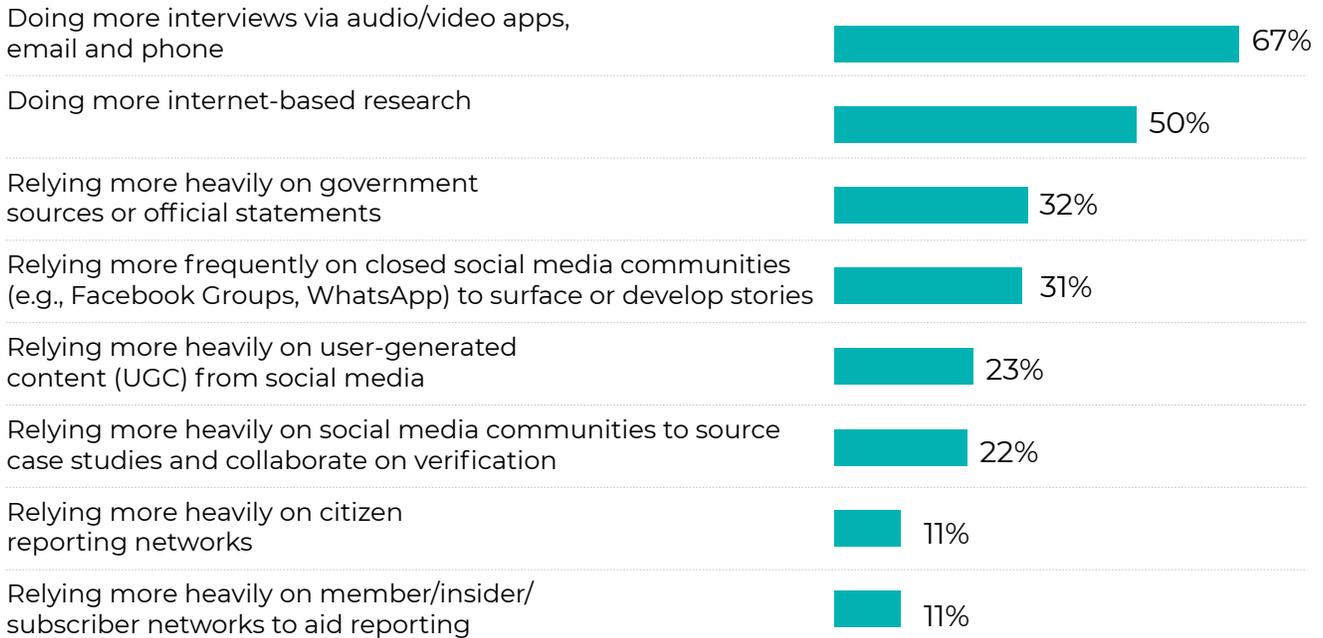
## **PART 5: COVERING COVID-19 - THIS IS WHAT REMOTE NEWSGATHERING AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IN 2020**

**Overview:** Our respondents said they were making more use of digital tools and online communities to report (67%) and engage audiences (38%). For example, 21% said they were experimenting with a new program of online events, and 31% were relying more on closed social media groups to connect with their audiences (a narrower, deeper, and safer way to engage). There is also evidence of stronger engagement and collaborative reporting with audiences in the midst of the pandemic. This includes increased reliance (23%) on user-generated content (UGC), more frequent collaboration on verification within online communities (22%), and tapping more heavily into the expertise of audiences, subscribers and members (11%). Importantly, there were also positive signs that audiences had been more proactively engaged in these processes too. These gains **come with risks**, however. More time inside social media communities means more exposure to online toxicity - in the form of ‘platform capture’, which involves social media channels **weaponized by disinformation purveyors**, and increasing **online violence** targeting journalists. On the newsgathering side, the increased reliance on government sources and official statements reported by our respondents (32%) is also problematic given the aforementioned evidence of State-linked attacks, censorship and other restrictions on independent journalism. However, in a more positive development, there was evidence of proactive dis/misinformation countermeasures being adopted by our respondents. (See figure 18.)

**KEY FINDING #20:** Audience engagement retreated to online interaction during the pandemic’s first wave and newsgathering is now more socially distant. But it is also more audience-centered, with some evidence of deepening of relationships between journalists and their communities among our respondents.

FIGURE 16

**HOW HAVE NEWSGATHERING PRACTICES CHANGED FOR THOSE WORKING REMOTELY?**

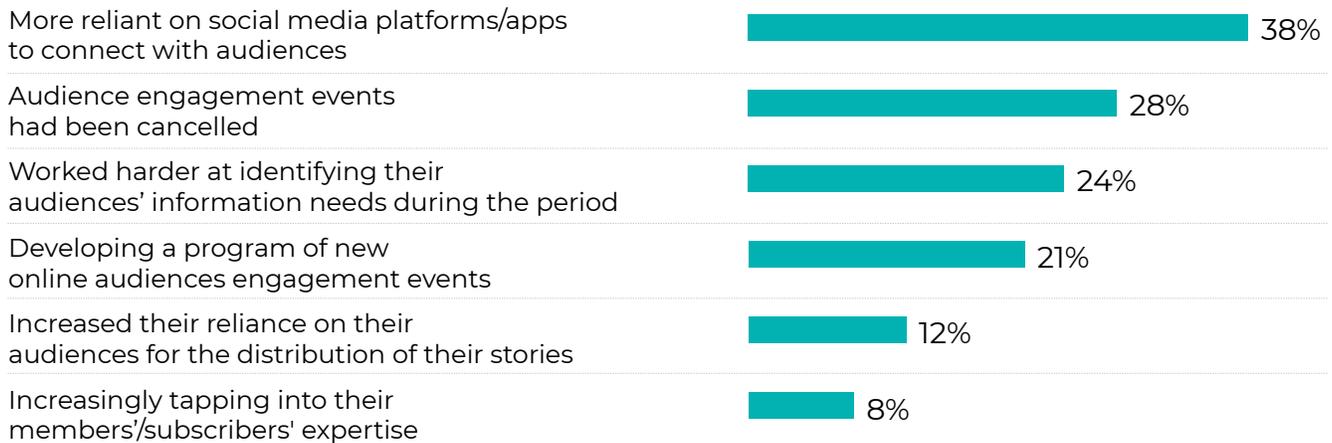


**KEY FINDING #21:** 31% of respondents said that they were relying more heavily on closed social media sites and apps (e.g. Facebook Groups and WhatsApp) to help surface and/or develop stories. While such groups may be safer spaces than the open web to practice social journalism, they are still significant targets of disinformation purveyors.

**KEY FINDING #22:** Our respondents were increasingly dependent on social media for audience engagement and distribution as a result of COVID-19 – induced social distancing. Given our parallel findings about increasing online harassment and prolific disinformation on the platforms, including how dissatisfied our respondents were with the tech companies’ management of the crisis, this is also a potentially problematic trend, which increases exposure to ‘platform capture’.

FIGURE 17

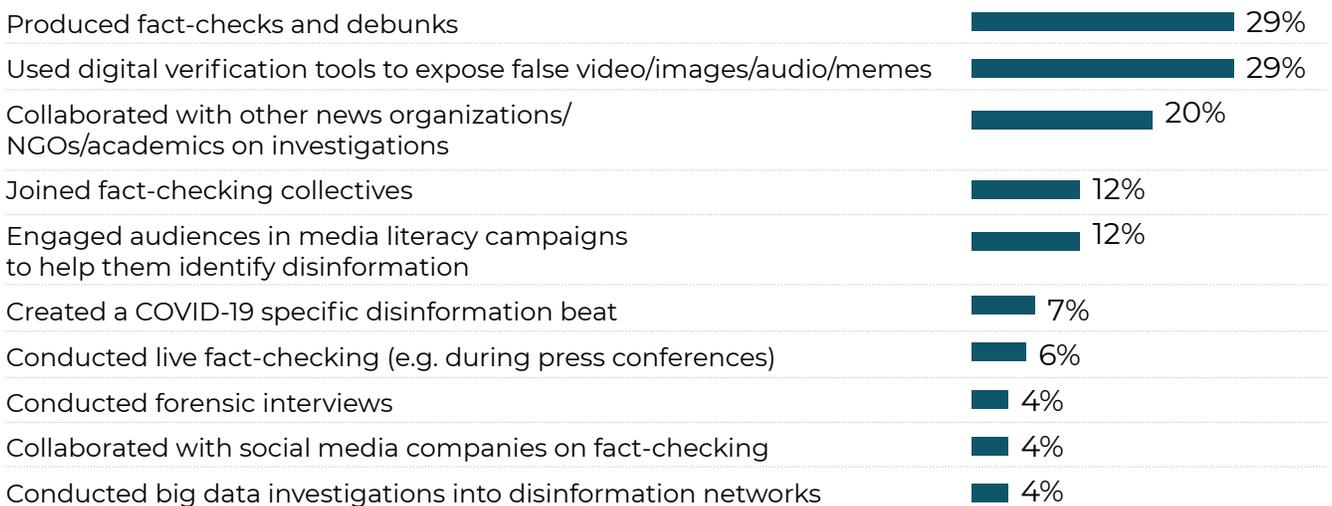
**HOW HAVE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES CHANGED AT THE RESPONDENTS' NEWS ORGANIZATIONS?**



**KEY FINDING #23:** Many journalists are responding proactively to counter the 'disinfodemic.' Seven percent of our respondents said that their news outlets had created a specific COVID-19 disinformation beat; 29% indicated that they were producing fact-checks and debunks; 29% said they were using digital verification tools to expose false video, images and memes connected to COVID-19; 20% said that they had collaborated with other news organizations, NGOs or academics to investigate COVID-19 disinformation; and 12% said that they had engaged their audiences in fact-checking or media literacy projects to combat the spread of false content.

FIGURE 18

**PRACTICES ADOPTED BY RESPONDENTS TO COMBAT COVID-19 DISINFORMATION**



**KEY FINDING #24:** The increased reliance on government sources and official statements (32%) is a worrying trend in light of the restrictions, censorship, attacks, abuse and legal harassment of journalists by the same group of political and State actors. It also has implications for accountability journalism designed to ensure scrutiny of government and intergovernmental responses to the pandemic. (See figure 16.)

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## **PART 6: RANKING JOURNALISM'S NEEDS DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE PANDEMIC**

**Overview:** Our respondents' first priority was surviving. Their second priority was adapting to the 'new normal.' When we asked them to indicate the importance of key needs, all of the available training, development and operational options were rated important or very important by at least half of the respondents. The need most commonly identified was funding to cover operating costs (including salaries) due to economic impacts, which 76% of respondents rated as important or very important. Other issues that at least two-thirds of respondents viewed as important or very important were: training on new technologies to support remote reporting and publishing (67%); advanced verification and fact-checking training (67%); and training on science and medical/health reporting (66%). These responses should help inform donors and other organizations seeking to support critical, independent journalism through the COVID-19 crisis.

**KEY FINDING #25:** If journalists and news organizations are to endure the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as the second wave surges, there must be an attempt to address the very significant needs our respondents identified by news media employers, donors, democratic States invested in a healthy information ecosystem, and civil society organizations supporting press freedom and media development. Financial support is the top-identified need (76%) but even the lowest-ranked need - access to peer support networks - was still rated as

‘important’ or ‘very important’ by 51% of respondents.

FIGURE 19

**THESE NEEDS WERE RATED VERY IMPORTANT OR IMPORTANT BY MORE THAN 50% OF PARTICIPANTS**



**KEY FINDING #26:** Despite our respondents indicating that dealing with the mental health impacts of covering the pandemic were the most difficult (70%), only 25% said they were being offered psychological counseling. Meanwhile, 62% rated assistance with managing mental health and well-being as an important or very important need.

**KEY FINDING #27:** While 20% of respondents said that the online harassment they were experiencing was “much worse” than before the pandemic, only 4% were being offered help to deal with the problem, indicating another area of need to be addressed.

## PART 7: AND NOW, SOME GOOD NEWS...

**Overview:** The bulk of our first findings from this survey are far from sanguine. However, there are some significant bright spots on which to focus. These relatively positive findings are connected to the mission of journalism as an audience-centered public service and the professional characteristics of resilience and determination. Our respondents' perception of increasing audience trust in their work (43%) was one such bright spot, which correlates well with the findings of an increase in positive audience feedback noted (25%), increasing audience engagement (38%), and better quality engagement. Also, while journalists are frequently judged as negative, in part because of their role in exposing injustice, incompetence and corruption, our respondents revealed some surprisingly optimistic reactions to the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, the top three psychological or emotional reactions to the pandemic could be characterized as positive. They were: an increased sense of commitment to journalism (61%); an increased appreciation for family and friends (46%); and a deeper appreciation of life (42%).

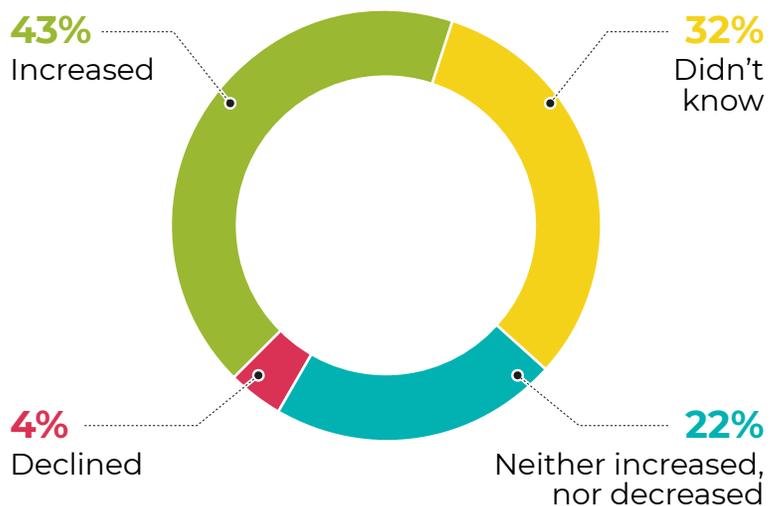
**KEY FINDING #28:** Our respondents' perceptions of audience trust - an issue critical to journalism's future - is surprisingly strong. Over two-fifths (43%) felt that audience trust in their journalism, or that of their news organization, had increased during the pandemic. Only 4% felt that trust had declined.

**KEY FINDING #29:** Audience engagement can reap dividends

FIGURE 20

### ON THE (VERY BIG) QUESTION OF AUDIENCE TRUST

How respondents perceived levels of audience trust after COVID-19 hit



in a time of shared crisis. Twenty-four percent of respondents said that they had worked harder to identify the needs of their audiences. A quarter had experienced more positive feedback than usual, and the same proportion said they have found audience members more eager to provide information they thought might be helpful.

**KEY FINDING #30:** While there was strong evidence of a worrying increase in stress, anxiety, depression and burnout among journalists during the first wave of the pandemic, there was also a positive flip side. The top three emotional or psychological reactions to the pandemic recorded by our participants were positive.

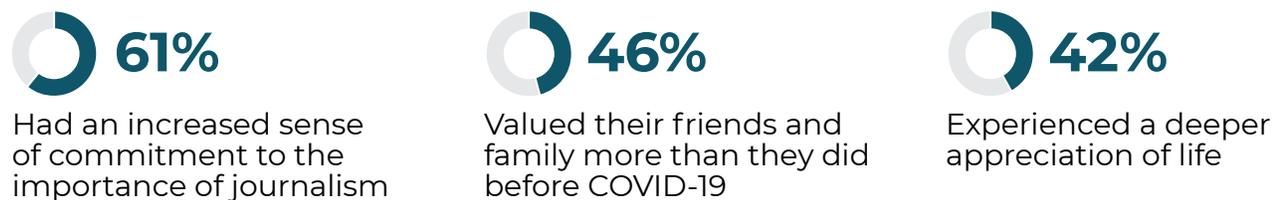
FIGURE 21

**WHAT CHANGES IN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WERE EXPERIENCED BY RESPONDENTS DURING COVID-19'S FIRST WAVE?**



FIGURE 22

**RESPONDENTS' TOP THREE EMOTIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO THE PANDEMIC WERE POSITIVE**



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## CONCLUSION

Our report demonstrates that journalists are working in a severely pressured financial, physical and psychological environment during the pandemic. This will be the most enduringly difficult professional period many have experienced during their careers. There is the added complication of an information ecosystem that is too tolerant of dis/misinformation and unreliable sources, including officials and politicians who politicize the crisis at the expense of truthfulness and accountability. Despite the challenges, a significant opportunity exists for journalism as a field to build on the renewed levels of mission, audience engagement and clearly demonstrated need for accountability reporting the pandemic has highlighted.

As we note elsewhere in this report, there are real opportunities here for journalists to become more inventive and inclusive in how they reach audiences and become more relevant to their daily lives. Finding ways to both report with, and engage, communities while remaining physically remote is a particularly difficult challenge, especially considering the prolific levels of disinformation and toxicity on social media platforms.

In terms of their most urgent needs, journalists indicate a high degree of interest in training in new reporting skills and advanced verification techniques. These could enable them to accomplish better quality journalism that also more effectively **responds to the threat of disinformation**. Addressing these needs - along with those related to mental health and physical safety - is vital to avoid compounding the damaging impacts of COVID-19 on journalism as the pandemic wears on.

However, even if these issues are addressed, such interventions will not have adequate impact unless both the conditions of the publishing environment are altered in favor of high-quality reporting, and unless governments and civil society

organizations reaffirm a belief in the value of critical independent journalism.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

In the coming months, we will bring you a synthesized analysis of the international language surveys we conducted in parallel with the English-language survey results analyzed in this report. We will also present a series of deep-dive thematic reports drawing on the surveys and other research underway. Themes include: the impacts of COVID-19 on press freedom and journalism safety; reporting and storytelling; audience engagement and distribution; journalists' encounters with disinformation during the pandemic; and the reimagination of journalism in a post-COVID world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## A NOTE ON OUR APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH

During COVID-19's first wave - March to June 2020 - there were reports of unprecedented audiences for independent journalism as people scrambled to make sense of the pandemic. But along with that came collapsing advertising revenues, mounting dis/misinformation, press freedom attacks, the technical challenges of 'socially distanced' reporting, and the need for even faster digital transformation. It seemed clear that journalism was indeed in the midst of a transformative moment. Some worried it would become an "extinction event."

As the severity and longevity of the pandemic became clear, the **Journalism and the Pandemic Project** launched an international survey to understand the toll that the COVID-19 crisis was taking on journalism around the world and to inform the recovery. The survey was conducted online in seven languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish). It ran from May 13th-June 30th, 2020.

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a process that involves targeting selected groups within a particular type of respondents. We targeted journalists via the networks of ICFJ (including the ICFJ Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum), the International Journalists' Network (IJNet), the Tow Center, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and affiliated organizations.

This survey is not – and does not purport to be – generalizable or representative of journalists as a 'population.' Instead, it provides a meaningful and actionable snapshot of the critical issues facing journalists across the world in the first months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

The data and findings presented in this report are based on an analysis of the quantitative English-language survey results. After a methodical process of identifying and excluding invalid responses, 1,406 English-language survey completions were accepted for analysis. In this report– the first of a series planned from our ongoing Journalism and the Pandemic Project research– we present 30 key findings and 22 data visualizations from the English survey. The survey results from the other six language groups covered are still undergoing analysis.



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