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RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Journalism in the Era of Doomscrolling

by Bijoyeta Sahoriya Das

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Vildana Khamidullina imagines how the inside of a newsroom would be like. She wonders, is it all shiny? Fast?

"And I don't know when I will get to see one even though I have been studying journalism and even worked as an intern," she says. Khamidullina, 25, knew she was in a "unique situation" when she started her associates degree, with a major in journalism, at LaGuardia Community College in the Fall of 2020. By then the pandemic was in full swing. She was my student, and she shared her thoughts with me in an interview for the purpose of this article.

On one hand, she is very happy she saved a lot of time not having to commute to college and was able to work part-time and focus on her studies. But on the other hand, she says she misses new connections and the comradery of fellow journalism enthusiasts.

"I was an extrovert with a drop of introvert. However, in the last couple of years, this drop has become bigger," she adds. But when she reflects on her experience of becoming a journalist during a "once in a lifetime historical event," she says she is proud that she learned to appreciate solitude, became better at time management, and produced meaningful stories. Her story: "Here's how much it costs to live as a single person in NYC compared to other cities," which she produced while working as an intern for Schneps Media, has been clicked over 70,000 times.

The finish line of the pandemic remains blurry, triggering anxiety in Khamidullina about the future. She is not alone. The question—how to study or practice journalism when there is no newsroom to go to—confounds students and educators. We are all living the story of the pandemic, so how can we tell stories of such deep, personal resonance with objectivity? I drew comfort in the fact that this quandary was not unique to me, it wasn't even general, it was universal. Every single journalist was reckoning with it, every professor was winging it, all students were adapting, we were all figuring it out at the same time, while experiencing the *new* new which was constantly pulling us this way and that way.

"If someone says it's raining, and another person says it's dry, it's not your job to quote them both. Your job is to look out the fucking window and find out which is true." This quote has murky origins, but it has been cited so often that it has become an inescapable and provocative conversation starter about journalism 101 (Wood).

However, in a world dominated by fake news, journalists cannot afford to just look out of the window; they often go out in the rain and only when sufficiently wet do they master the courage to say it is raining. Journalists are entrusted with the responsibility to dig the truth out. But, as part of the verification process, it also becomes their moral duty to trust their own senses.

During the pandemic, journalists were not just reporting "on the crisis" but, like everyone else, were "in crisis" (Fowler-Watt, K., et al 1). We were all witnessing and enduring, shaking our heads in disbelief, yet hungry for the next update. But the safety protocols that were demanded of us in Spring 2020 caught us off guard and clearly mandated quarantine—forget about stepping out on the streets. The days of chasing the subject or taking pride in writing an eyewitness account were suddenly no more. Hunker down, isolate, separate, and distance—was the call of the hour. Therefore, as the Covid 19 cases soared, I, a journalism professor, was morally obligated to discourage my students from any field reporting.

As normalcy vanished, the enormity of this duty challenged me, and I had to transition to a new pedagogy and adopt practical methodologies to nurture prospective journalists. I had to contemplate the ways the pandemic upended the practice and teaching of journalism. I had to reorient myself as I had to improvise my training methods in real time.

But the first step was to listen to and understand my students' experiences.

I had the privilege of interviewing my students about their experiences of pursuing academic degrees and practicing journalism during the pandemic. My students were generous with their time; they reflected on my questions and shared insights into their experiences.

This essay is a combination of my reflections and their stories.

When News Consumes Us

My syllabus for the course Journalism: The Craft of Gathering and Reporting the News states, "I expect you to be updated on news happening around you. Pay attention to both local and community news as well as international news. All journalists should be driven by curiosity."

A journalist is, in essence, committed to being a student of the news. This contributes to their knowledge base, equipping them to provide a nuanced perspective to their audience. In a lighter vein, journalists are seen as quintessential mascots of the phrase, "a mile wide and an inch deep." This remark was made by the American journalist and humorist Edgar Nye in 1889 while describing the Platte River in the United States (Hatmaker).

I have tried to inculcate in my students the good habit of reading, with a special focus on being updated about the news.

But what happens when the pandemic unleashes doomscrolling, pushing us into compulsive, obsessive, half-hearted consumption of news? Doomscrolling happened even before, but it became so ubiquitous with the pandemic experience that the Oxford English Dictionary named it "the word of the year" in 2020. It refers to the tendency to constantly browse through bad news. It perfectly latches onto our anxiety around uncertainty. But it spirals and we get hooked, even though the news gets darker and darker.

Before we know it, the news consumes us.

The BBC asked, "Why does endlessly looking for bad news feel so strangely gratifying—and can we break the habit?" Of course, this "soothing compulsion" comes with consequences (Klein). Studies have linked consumption of

Covid 19-related news with increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression (Bendau, Antonia, et al).

I am as susceptible to doomscrolling as my students, or everyone else. This posed a dilemma. How do I train students to study and produce news while protecting their, and my own, well-being from news itself?

Countless news and journal articles, podcasts, op-eds espoused expert advice on ways to snap out of this infatuation. But how does one practice this self-care around news when news is bread and butter, and the world is on fire? Brian X. Chen, a technology reporter for *The New York Times,* shared his strategy to escape the panic-reading of news. He got out of the habit of doomscrolling by altering his digital habits, which included taking his corgi, Max, for walks and skipping the lunchtime Twitter scrolls and embracing hugs (Ovide).

Is it then possible to withstand the word of the year and come out saner?

It is continuously becoming clear that this addiction, wreaking havoc with our sensibilities, will require more than self-discipline and self-resistance. This also puts a spotlight on the role and responsibilities of media as we try "limiting limitless news" (Charney).

I seized upon this opportunity to have a conversation with my students about a future where they will have a say and where we can imagine media as constructive and affirmative too.

Balance in Life and News

Federico Bardier completed his associates degree, with a major in journalism, from LaGuardia Community College in Spring 2022. For more than a decade he has been working as an independent broadcast journalist, producing news for ABC news and Radio Carve among others.

Bardier says news always occupied a focal point in his life. His love for journalism started when he was in high school. At any given time, he is either chasing news stories or he is reading the news voraciously, or he is studying how to become a better journalist.

"I can definitely assure you, there came a day when I was just fatigued," he says.

The pandemic ushered "that day" for Bardier.

The nonstop news cycle of the pandemic drove him away from news itself. "Day in day out, it was the same thing," and that same thing, he says, was—all doom and gloom.

Bardier recollects the early days of the pandemic. He remembers feeling numb and fatigued. That is when he knew he had to make a change. "Since high school, journalism has been a part of my life. It is a muscle that I exercise every day, but the pandemic turned me off from journalism," he adds.

He made his journalism education a "reflective exercise."

"Being in school and studying in a formal environment made me pause and think—why do I do what I do?" he reflects. Bardier engaged in contemplation about the driving forces of journalism. For example, he began questioning the excessive importance of objectivity. He said he realized that he tends to lean towards fairness more than objectivity. "The real world is not objective. I want to show my readers how my environment affects me, how it frames my perspectives," he explains.

Classroom discussions about ethics of journalism helped him understand his own motivations for choosing a career in news. He said this reflection gave him deep insights into the positive and negative impact of the 24-hour news cycles.

He said he knew that he could not just "turn off" the news. He had to turn on something else within him to counter the negative impact of negative news. So Bardier went about designing a healthier lifestyle for himself, where news was a significant, but balanced, part of his life.

During the pandemic, he was unable to indulge in his love for group sports. He therefore began experimenting with new hobbies and interests. This is how he discovered a love for surfing, which he is pursuing with diligence.

"I am a curious person by nature, but the pandemic gave me a reason and urgency to broaden my interests, experiment with new things, try out activities," he adds.

Bardier says the burnout from too much news triggered a slew of changes. Choosing a healthier and more balanced life filled him with a sense of well-being. This in turn healed his relationship with news.

"At the end of this reflective process, I was able to renew my love and passion for journalism," Bardier adds.

Federico Bardier's experience revealed an astute strategy. He did not focus his energy on resisting bad news or being hard on himself for consuming too much news. Instead, he slowly filled his weekly routine with more joyful experiences. He experimented with new things. These new interests and hobbies gained more weight and the engagement with news shrunk. The transformations took time but had the desired effect.

Finding Hope in the Age of Doomscrolling

In a post, "Goodbye, Doomscroll," for Nieman Lab, Kawandeep Virdee, a writer-advocate, summed up this sentiment well: "There's a hunger for media formats that feel more considerate, more consentful, and are designed with care. It is absolutely crucial for our safety and our wellbeing." Virdee pointed out some qualities and formats of media that "care for you," and that are bearable and healthier. He surmised that media requires clear intention and not just seeking attention; a thoughtful narrative that responds to the reader; establishing clear boundaries and giving readers an option to choose how to interact.

Doomscrolling is as pervasive as it is universal. The Icelandic Tourism Board launched a site called Joyscroll, to persuade travelers to swap the 22.7 meters of bad news we consume everyday with 22.7 meters of "joy-inspiring" and

gorgeous Icelandic nature sights and sounds. This joyscrolling was not limited to vistas only. Pandora Sykes wrote in *The Guardian* that she adopted joyscrolling by sniffing out good news like a bloodhound and succeeded in breaking her doomscrolling habit.

Doomscrolling vs. joyscrolling brought into focus the debate about the propensity of journalists to report mostly bad news.

Miguel Madrid is pursuing a journalism major at LaGuardia Community College as a part-time student. Recently, he worked as an intern for the college newspaper, *The Bridge*, as part of a news internship class, ENG288, that I taught.

Madrid shared his experiences as an adult learner and the role the pandemic played in shaping his life journey. In Fall of 2019, he joined LaGuardia as a part-time student. He was excited to resume his academic journey after a two-decade gap. He was also working full-time in the hospitality industry.

"The pandemic was one of the most overwhelming situations I have ever been in. Every aspect in my life was affected by it, particularly my academic life," Madrid says. As the pandemic raged in 2020, he lost his job as a server.

"I was emotionally drained and financially unstable," he says. He did not want to take another break from his education. In addition to his dwindling finances, he injured his back. He said he had no option but to take a semester off. These months were a low point of his life. But Madrid used this time to delve into a spiritual quest.

"I had the time to strengthen my faith and somehow revisit my relationship with God. I had very dark days; on such days when there was not enough clarity, I asked why me? Instead of asking, why not me?" he says.

The pandemic made him "stronger, resourceful, and faithful," he adds. He got a new job and once again enrolled in LaGuardia to pursue journalism with a renewed sense of purpose and passion.

Madrid did not want to chase news cycles, especially the kind of news that follows the adage: "when it bleeds, it leads." His real interest lay in understanding human character and the emotional journey of his subjects.

The pandemic news cycle made him question the value of news stories. "When the news showed the victims of Covid 19 being stored in refrigerators outside the Elmhurst Hospital, I stopped watching the news," he says. He found the continuous barrage of news pointless.

"Instead of giving me hope they were doing the opposite. I felt hopeless and desperate to live," he adds.

He knew he wanted to pursue a form of journalism that inspired and invigorated him. But first he had to wrestle with the challenges of online learning. "Online classes, on Zoom or Blackboard, were a new thing for me, but also for many professors. I noticed many struggled with technology but also being isolated in quarantine made it worse and annoying, particularly for me, as I am a social person," Madrid explains. He slowed down and kept plodding. He took his time to understand the various online modalities and when in-person classes resumed, he was relieved.

He said the classroom discussions about why stories of murder get so much attention made him very conscious about the role of drama and storytelling. Madrid was determined to avoid sensational tragedies. "I understand that many people enjoy the drama about the simplest things." He said he was annoyed with the "repetitive nature" of bad news.

For his class assignments, where he had to produce news features, he focused on lighthearted stories. He wrote a feature, "New Normality, New Looks," in which he investigated how some students have embraced masks and use them to make fashion statements.

He is also writing a long-form feature, where he explores how the pandemic made immigrants reconnect with their roots and loved ones in their home countries.

Miguel Madrid says he is excited to carve a niche for himself as a storyteller who examines the human conditions and looks for stories of redemption and hope.

News Stories That Evoke

Disasters and crimes are read out first in most news broadcasts. Of late, the inherent pessimistic nature of news has been repeatedly called out. The pandemic coverage exposed the overindulgence and exaggeration of negative news. This became even more important for me to consider when a study revealed how the US media stood out for its bad news coverage compared to scientific journals and international media. The US news media is an outlier when it comes to pandemic coverage. Even when Covid positive cases were falling, the media focused on places where it was rising and downplayed the importance of the vaccine (Sacerdote, et al).

Yes, in the past decade, there has been an enthusiastic focus on producing news that draws our collective attention to positive events, solutions, what's going right, uplifting, and heartwarming stories, acts of kindness and generosity, and evidence of constructive change. Reasons to Be Cheerful is a non-profit editorial project founded by artist and musician David Byrne. It calls itself a "tonic for tumultuous times" and publishes stories of "hope rooted in evidence," such as "The City That Uses Its Lake as an Air Conditioner" and "This Rap Song May Have Prevented Hundreds of Suicides." There is *Positive News*, which is a magazine for "good journalism about good things."

Even legacy and established media have created dedicated streams of good news. For example, *Mother Jones* magazine has a newsletter, *Recharge*, that focuses on positive news, such as "As COVID Rages on, the First Malaria Vaccine in History Gets Approval." *The Washington Post* publishes "The Optimist," which describes itself as "A selection of inspiring stories to help you disconnect, hit refresh and start the week off right."

Solutions Journalism Network promotes and trains journalists to focus on the solutions to problems and thereby rebalance the news. And it stresses that the pandemic is a

"particularly good time for solutions journalism." It continues to share practical tips based on the "Solutions Approach," which includes advice such as: zone in on the magnitude of the problem and investigate who is responding effectively; examine a small slice of the problem; look for positive deviants in data; hold power to account by showing who's doing it better; proactively engage with the audience (Shaw).

But this begs the question, does hunting for good news constitute going against the tide and are we trying too hard?

The Columbia Journalism Review weighed in on this dilemma in the article, "The Good-news Trend: Uplifting? Delusional? Both?" The writer, Mathew Ingram, revealed that when he shared a video clip of a steam ship flowing by his house, he was thanked profusely. Ingram makes a thoughtful observation, "But a focus on only good news could easily turn into escapism, if it involves deliberately avoiding the truth in favor of something that feels better, because it implies that the world is just fine the way it is, and therefore nothing needs to change. That's a little too close to the 'bread and circuses' the ancient Romans provided as a way to keep the populace in line."

This infuses an urgency to the question—where does good news fall in the relentless coverage of the pandemic?

Rick Edmonds and Kelly McBride from the Poynter Institute deliberated on the ethics of good news in the coverage of Covid 19. McBride suggested, "The ethical imperative is not to provide a mix of good and bad news. Instead, journalists have a duty to really listen to their audience. Do that well, and then let what you hear influence your choice of stories." She explained listening closely will uncover stories that could be mostly negative but there would also be moments of "levity and clear ingenuity." This is how the newsrooms can select the most meaningful stories. Just seeking the feel-good news stories would lead to an overproduction of the cliché stories such as Zoom celebrations and novel workout solutions, she pointed out.

I tapped into this discussion. It played a crucial role in shaping my pedagogy. When I teach my students the craft of newsgathering, I spend a considerable amount of time elaborating on the process of finding news ideas and tips. I simulate a newsroom environment. I play the role of an editor. Students are asked to pitch story ideas, just as any reporter would do. They must go through the rigor of pitching and rejection. It is at this stage of the exercise that I introduce my students to the nuances of the good vs. bad news debate. It is important, given the pandemic context, to shield the students, and myself, from the risk of overindulgence in the gloom of news production and the doom of news consumption. It is here I reiterate the advice of Kelly McBride from Poynter Institute on the value of listening closely to the audience and community.

This exploration helped me to refocus my teaching strategy. The goal was not to tell students to avoid distressing news and seek out joyful news or find a balance. Far from it. I only wanted to bring to consciousness the proclivity for bad news and the prevalent despondent mood, while highlighting the possibility for reporting meaningful stories that comes from the sincere effort of genuinely listening.

I asked my students to seek out stories that excite them. I did not burden them with the pressure of actively avoiding negative stories or only seeking positive stories.

The assignment was titled: "Find a Story that Evokes You." They had to report and write a news story of 600 words.

The following are some of the examples of the stories that were written by the students:

- Profile of a librarian in New York: Finding joy in books during the pandemic
- Stories about entrepreneurs who opened restaurants during the pandemic
- Bands practicing music on Zoom
- Adults and senior citizens embracing enrolling in college
- Ethnic media newspapers providing comfort to local immigrant communities.

Students reflected on the above assignment in a short survey. Here are some of the responses:

- "Okay, so I can write a story that makes me smile!"
- "It was fun. It made me love news a little bit more."
- "Can too much positive news become toxic? Can we balance problems with solutions, gloom with inspiration?"
- "I don't care if my story is published. I felt so motivated to interview people who were not complaining and pursuing their passions."

Challenges of Online Learning and Self-Care

Latchmie Dookie came to the United States in 2019 from Guyana with a pocketful of dreams. She wanted to pursue a degree in psychology. She is the first member of her family to go to college. But she found herself in the doldrums because the pandemic robbed her of the opportunity to indulge in a true American experience, leaving her "emotionally disturbed."

"I would say the color of this experience is very dark, gloomy. I was away from home and family and craved for interactions; instead, I was staring at black boxes on Zoom," she says. She felt lonely and exhausted. "I just wanted to have some fun, have silly conversations," she says.

She devoted herself to her academics; she changed her major to English and joined co-curricular groups and clubs. She was acutely aware of the need for self-care. "I used to journal a lot and it used to help me process my emotions. But even that stopped helping, and I got some help in a wellness center," she explains.

The cloud only lifted when she was able to join in-person classes. She graduated from LaGuardia and is transferring to Queens College. "Coming out of the pandemic I just wanted to stand in the street and smell people," she adds.

Many students shared "feeling overwhelmed" with online learning.

"My experience as a journalism student was a roller coaster ride," says Kayla Greene. Online learning left her feeling anxious. "I was constantly thinking about if I am late or if the professor is late. I learned that in journalism, you can't be late," Greene said.

She knew she had to put extra effort to connect with sources and build networks.

"There were situations where I just spoke my ideas and answers when the whole class was silent because I wanted the professors to know that there's at least someone listening to the professor," she added.

As the semesters rolled on, she adjusted to the demands of virtual learning. The experience sharpened her time management skills. "I was able to interact with my classmates and build friendships thanks to making WhatsApp chat groups," she says. But practicing journalism continued to be a "nerve-wrecking experience," she says. "I am a shy person."

Greene knew that networking is essential in journalism. But finding contacts to interview was always challenging because of the isolation and lack of the support of physical communities. She never gave up. She diligently attended virtual events, asked for contacts, and remained focused on making the best of the challenging times.

"I believe what the pandemic taught me during the online environment is to make an effort to reach out and build connections," she adds.

But for many students online learning during the pandemic was a game changer.

Marilou Rivera always wanted to be writer. She was a prolific writer, recording her life experiences and stories. She wanted to self-publish her work. "I had saved all my writing from 1995 to 2011 in floppy discs and one day I lost all the discs," Rivera shared. She sunk into depression and paused her writing.

She has been working full-time at a children's center while also being a primary caregiver for her family. But her heart was always in writing and telling stories. In 2019, she joined college to pursue an associates degree. Scheduling her work was a challenge. She could not take the classes she wanted, and commuting exhausted her.

However, the pandemic changed it all.

"Pandemic was the catalyst that got me motivated," she explains. Online learning unleashed many opportunities. She returned home from work and took a nap and was able to attend classes. She was able to take multiple classes.

"Yes, the pandemic caused a lot of grief and sadness, but it also gave me a chance to be retrospective, do a lot of thinking about my life purpose and a chance to continue my education," she adds. Rivera did not mind the social isolation. "I was not going to college to make friends. I am always surrounded by people. I just want to focus on getting a degree, acquire new skills and change my job," she explained.

Rivera hopes to teach journalism and art to children one day.

Resonance

The pandemic also presented us with the golden era of open data. The International Journalists Network noted, "Many health-related organizations published daily and real-time updates about the spread of the virus around the world, circulating an unprecedented amount of numbers and figures. The challenge for journalists has been to analyze this information accurately and communicate their findings to the public effectively." The conspiracies around the origins of the virus and the vaccine efficacy required that we had to go an extra mile to verify sources and be sensitive to people's beliefs and propaganda. Journalism students were trained to develop "healthy skepticism" towards information on social media and any data, investigating who collected the information, who was circulating it, who funded the research etc.

However, there came a moment of reckoning for me. I realized this feverish attitude to reorient myself and offer my students pandemic-era skills and strategies is needed but is ultimately a knee-jerk reaction. The collision of Covid 19 with our normal lives is earth-shattering in its gross reality. But the subtle reality is that it is a contemporary problem.

All said and done, the pandemic-era restrictions are temporal in nature. I am training journalists of the future. Of course, in the Spring of 2020, coronavirus caught us off guard, and we had to frantically transition to distant learning and reporting. It became clear to me that the time-worn journalistic skills from before the pandemic, such as in-person interviews, eye-witness accounts, will be needed again. In fact, even as stay-at-home orders became commonplace, journalists continued to report about the havoc created by the pandemic. It was business as usual for reporters and photographers. We came to understand that journalists are performing as essential and front-line workers.

Hence, I was obligated to teach my students the very essence of journalism as a practice, while preparing them for eventualities. To return to the case of in-person interviews, even though I discouraged them from going on field, I taught them the necessary principles of field reporting. They might be simulations, and that is the best I can do. But they were rendered with utmost sincerity.

My pedagogical beliefs drive my practices but, more importantly, they influence student's success and growth. In the past two years, I saw my students produce in-depth reportage despite the pandemic-triggered restrictions. Students produced stories about immigrant families and remittances, new business openings, struggles of daycare workers and librarians, challenges faced by ethnic media, among others. In addition to nurturing the skills of a good

journalist, I am also keenly interested in their personal growth and the development of their values.

Efran Ahmed has been working as an independent journalist for more than a decade focusing on the ethnic media in Queens, New York. He was my student when he was pursuing his associates degree at LaGuardia Community College. Currently, he is pursuing an undergraduate degree at Columbia University, while continuing to work as a freelancer.

Ahmed shared his journey in an interview with me for this essay. "Covid was really a time to get into a conversation with the everyday person who often felt that their voices were neglected or not heard," he says. People shared their traumatic experiences as well as accomplishments such as learning how to cook or paint during the pandemic.

Ahmed struggled with the shrinking freelance market. He endured many challenges, but he still looks back at these two years with gratitude. For Ahmed, though, what makes him beam with pride is his personal growth. "Prior to Covid, I was always thinking what my next question would be. Given the Covid-related stories I covered, it has really made me listen carefully and digest the information as a journalist," he says. He has become very patient. Patient with himself and patient with the world.

Finding Meaning

This essay is a meditation on the questions that arose during two years of teaching and my pursuit of understanding the changing world of journalism and finding comfort and solidarity in shared experiences. I am very grateful to my students who took time to share their experiences, long after they completed my course.

I am left with the quest: How to continuously create a learning environment that is relevant to our changing times? And such an enquiry cannot be conducted in a silo. Journalism educators and the industry need to welcome diverse voices and influences to discuss journalistic values and practices, expand the idea of objectivity to include empathy and self-reflection, critically investigate news consumption models, and focus on making news a meaningful part of our lives. And I am confident the pandemic can act as a catalyst for growth.

As I look back at my own experience, I am humbled. The transition to distance learning and the shadow of the pandemic can be compared to the turbulence experienced as a plane takes off. But in retrospect, these were the very moments when I became aware of strengths and weakness in my instruction style, as well as of more in-depth understanding and appreciation for the role and impact of a teacher in a student's life. This was particularly helpful as I am at the very early stages of my academic career and still exploring the power and privilege of my position.

And in seeing students overcome challenges and blossom, lies the greatest joy of teaching.

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