



COVID-19 PANDEMIC REPORTING

A SAFETY AND PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY FOR JOURNALISTS

Introduction

The International Press Center (IPC), Lagos-Nigeria has drawn up this safety and professional advisory with the objectives of promoting the personal safety of journalists and ensuring compliance with ethical, professional and conflict-sensitive standards, in the coverage and reportage of the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

The advisory draws from and seeks to complement other international standards for reporting in crisis situations. This is for the purposes of enhancing the capacity of Nigerian journalists to report the pandemic with the needed depth and diversity. The overall goal is to encourage the media to contribute to orderly conduct and the curtailment of the pandemic.

The advisory notes the potential dangers journalists could face while performing professional tasks of news gathering and updating of reports across the country.

The advisory also notes the important role the media can play in keeping the public well informed about the spread of the virus and governments' efforts to combat it, within the context of its social responsibility and the constitutional obligation to monitor governance and hold the government accountable to the people.

The advisory is therefore divided into the three parts of Safety, Ethics and Professionalism and Social Responsibility

1. SAFETY

a. Before Assignments

- ❖ Journalists should ensure that they put on disposable face masks and hand gloves as primary protection kits in the course of covering assignments related to the pandemic;
- ❖ Journalists with underlying health conditions should make these known to their management with a view to seeking to be excused from assignments that may put them and their families at risk during this pandemic;
- ❖ Journalists must ensure they take their medications and have on them the ones they might need during the day;
- ❖ In all instances, journalists must do daily check up on their health status;
- ❖ Journalists on the field should work with their professional bodies or associations to obtain insurance cover from their management that details the scope and value of support in the event that they fall ill while on assignment, taking into account the possibility of self-isolation and/or being grounded in a quarantine/lockdown zone for some period of time;
- ❖ Journalists should inquire in advance about the hygiene measures in place before participating in any assignment to avoid being infected and infecting others including their relatives. If in any doubt, do not visit;
- ❖ Journalists should have on them their organisational identity cards as this is the approved means of recognition and grant of access by security agencies.

b. During Assignments

- ❖ Journalists should maintain and observe the minimum prescription for social distancing and body contact as recommended by the relevant health authorities;
- ❖ Photo journalists and cameramen should take particular note of the need for personal safety and exercise as much discretion as is professionally possible while on the field;
- ❖ To minimise physical contact and possible infection, journalists should as much as possible make use of wide range of Online, New and Social media channels to conduct interviews including Email, Skype, Whatsapp, Telegram, Signal, teleconferencing, SMS and phone calls;
- ❖ Journalists should use directional 'fishpole' microphones from a safe distance instead of clip mics; the use of their android phones as recording devices during coverage of the pandemic should be avoided;

- ❖ Journalists should be wary of putting their phones, gadgets and related appliances in open places where they could be in contact with droplets from the virus, especially when covering COVID-19 assignments or interviewing sources in hospitals, isolation centers and related places;
- ❖ Journalists should carry along with them food packs, bottled water, cutleries and cups to avoid drinking/eating from cups, crockery, or cutlery that may have come into contact with other people;
- ❖ Journalists should ensure to regularly apply anti-bacterial gels, hand wipes and the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers (with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol) while on duty. Where the facilities are available, regular hand washing with soap under running water should be done.

c. **After Assignments**

- ❖ Journalists should ensure all equipment, camera, microphone cover, midget, etc, are thoroughly disinfected and decontaminated at the end of every assignment. Persons responsible for handling the equipment should be made fully aware in advance and trained on how to safely clean the equipment;
- ❖ Journalists should regularly wash their hands properly, and thoroughly, for at least 20 seconds, at all times using water and soap; They should ensure that their hands are dried in the appropriate way with strict adherence to the stipulated guidelines on how to wash and dry hands properly by WHO and other health authorities;
- ❖ Journalists should also use anti-bacterial gel or wipes. If water and soap is not available they should follow this up with hot water and soap wash as soon as possible. As much as possible, journalists must not substitute regular hand washing routine with hand sanitiser use.

d. **General**

- ❖ Journalists should always avoid touching their face, nose and mouth with unwashed hands and cover their mouths and noses when coughing and sneezing which should be done into their bent elbow, or tissue paper, which must be disposed off immediately in the appropriate manner;
- ❖ Journalists should ensure they regularly monitor their health for any signs or symptoms and also monitor latest updates and information on COVID-19;
- ❖ Journalists should follow the advice of the WHO, the NCDC, or local health authorities on how to continue to protect themselves.

2. ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global crisis, albeit a public health one. The attendant lockdowns and various matters arising from its effect including the issues of relief measures for citizens make it particularly so. It therefore becomes imperative for journalists to adopt ethical and professional standards and apply the principles of conflict-sensitive journalism in the reporting of the pandemic.

To this end, journalists should:

- ❖ Ensure factual accuracy of stories and features on the pandemic by exercising the discipline of verification especially through fact-checking and cross-checking with credible sources including experts;
- ❖ Stay above bias and avoid presenting their opinions as facts; at all times stories must be fair, balanced and reflect diverse sides to any pandemic issue or related matters at stake;
- ❖ Rise above fake news and resist the temptation to share information, including images, that have not been independently verified in the name of 'breaking stories';
- ❖ Apply the principle of equitable access in covering the pandemic particularly in conduction interviews as to give voice and space to diverse stakeholders in the country;
- ❖ Avoid limiting reports to the daunting challenges posed by Covid-19 in terms of the number of deaths and new infections, but also give deserving journalistic attention to the successes being recorded in combating the pandemic in terms of the number of those being successfully treated and discharged;
- ❖ Monitor closely the social media so as to promptly correct any circulating disinformation or misinformation by way of text and images; A regular feature of Covid-19 reporting should be constant use of fact checking and investigative tools to identify fake stories, photographs and videos;
- ❖ Exercise ethical and professional discretion in the use of information on victims of the pandemic especially where such may lead to stigmatisation and threats to individuals, families and communities;
- ❖ Avoid reports that may create panic or exacerbate tensions associated with the lockdown;
- ❖ Pay attention to and report Early Warning Signals (EWS) of conflict and possible outbreak of violence arising from tensions or grievances over lockdown palliative measures so that government and its relevant agencies could take prompt action;

- ❖ Adopt temperate language and avoid the use of pejorative words in the reporting of the perspectives and reactions of individuals and groups to the pandemic and measures to curtail it.

3. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Covid-19 pandemic and efforts to curb it have thrown up the important issues of transparency and accountability on the part of the Federal, State and Local governments and their agencies including the various ad-hoc task forces. It has also thrown up the issue of the vulnerable segments of the society that may be facing greater hardship as a result of the pandemic as well as the need to provide enlightenment to the populace on preventive measures.

To this end, journalists in their reporting should be solution-driven by:

- ❖ Making the government and its agencies accountable to the society in the course of managing the pandemic and providing relief measures. This should be done in a most constructive manner;
- ❖ Providing feedback through investigations on the effectiveness or otherwise of the social palliative measures;
- ❖ Highlighting the effects of the pandemic and the attendant lockdowns on more disadvantaged and more vulnerable groups like women, peoples living with disabilities, young peoples and rural dwellers; and
- ❖ Constantly reminding the citizens of the health and safety measures they must adopt as a matter of regular habit to avoid being infected or spreading the infectious disease.

IPC recommends this advisory to all umbrella media professional bodies, associations and support groups for possible intervention in relevant areas.

This advisory is produced in furtherance of the objectives of Component 4b: Support to Media of the European Union Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria, EU-SDGN. The contents of the advisory are the sole responsibility of the International Press Centre (IPC) and therefore can no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

