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**THE COMMUNITY PRESS REMAINS ALIVE UNDER COVID-19:  
LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY JOURNALISTS**

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**Acceptance Page:**

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## Biographical Sketch

Leia Fidelis Gisela Fiadchongan Castro-Margate is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of the Philippines Baguio.

She was born and raised in Baguio City in a Barlig-Isinai-and-Ilocano household. She graduated with honors from UP Los Baños with a degree in BS Development Communication, Major in Science Communication in 2003. She finished her Bachelor of Laws at the University of the Cordilleras in 2013.

She was a former assistant publisher and editor of the longest running community paper in the country, *The Baguio Midland Courier*. For over two decades now she has been providing seminars and training on journalism for children and professionals. She was a fellow-turned-resource speaker of the Graciano Lopez Jaena Community Journalism Workshop in UP Diliman. She also taught communication and media studies courses in UP Tacloban College in a remote setup under the pandemic.

She has published works on the portrayal of LGBTs in newspapers, social mediatization of biodiversity, risk communication, and environmental education.

When Covid-19 struck, she found inspiration for this Master's Thesis from former media colleagues who continued working despite so much hardship to inform the public about what was happening in the locality.

She lives in Baguio City with her husband Karl Anthony and their children: Amihan, Tala, and Alon.

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All community journalists who remain  
passionate and committed to the profession  
despite all challenges.

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## **Abstract**

### **The Community Press Remains Alive Under Covid-19: Lived Experience of Community Journalists**

This interpretative phenomenological study answers how the lived experience of members of the community press under the Covid-19 pandemic shaped their practice of doing community journalism under the new normal. In-depth interviews with seven community journalists, who live and work in the Cordillera Administrative Region, were conducted and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Results showed that the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the many crises that threaten community journalists ranging from threats to their physical safety, legal safety, psychological or mental health, digital safety, and financial or economic status. The biggest challenge is disinformation. To cope with the difficulties of living under the threat of Covid-19, community journalists had to adjust their data gathering, news writing, and publication methods. They had to learn new journalistic skills in order to adapt to digital publication and find alternative sources of income apart from advertising such as applying for story grants. Camaraderie and a tight community of media practitioners fostered by the Baguio Correspondents and Broadcasters Club (BCBC) also helped a lot in their survival, particularly their physical and mental well-being. These experiences paved the way for their personal and professional transformation. It also shaped a new form of community journalism: one that knows its audience—the community it serves, understands their circumstances, and tries to reach them through hard copy or digital platforms. The new form of community journalism combines traditional methods of data gathering with technology-assisted data gathering tools. It upholds traditional news values packaged in a form and language appropriate for modern multimedia platforms. It is a kind of journalism that continues to wage a war against disinformation by adhering to the age-old journalistic principles of truth, service, and ethics. In essence, it is a kind of journalism which carries with it the same heart and passion for, and commitment to community journalism albeit with different tools.

Keywords: Community journalism, community press, lived experience, Covid-19

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

*“Under these circumstances, our responsibility as publishers and journalists is more important than ever. It is probably the greatest challenge we have faced in the past 100 years. The citizens of all countries now have a greater need for our journalistic work... Never have we been so necessary. Never has our role of social cohesion, of defending the democratic values, of stimulating solidarity and public awareness been so obvious. Never before has our desire to do the best journalism been so great. Never has our commitment to the truth been so laudable. It is an indispensable social and ethical duty.” --*  
Fernando de Yarza López-Madrado, President of WAN-IFRA, 30 March 2020

The above quote came from an article about the fundamental role of a free press in an uncertain world, written by World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) President Fernando de Yarza Lopez-Madrado on March 30, 2020. This was just a few days after the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 pandemic. As most people remain isolated in their homes due to the threat of Covid-19, a small number of media professionals continue their vital function of sharing information. These frontliners using traditional media channels (radio, TV, newspapers) and new channels (website, social media) continued vetting accurate information, bringing to light the issues and struggles of people, and delivering these messages where they are needed.

Even the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), showed that the coming decade will be decisive for the future of journalism, with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting and amplifying the many crises that threaten the right to freely report independent, diverse, and reliable information (RSF, 2020). A most dynamic force among them are the community journalists.

With predictions on the extent of the pandemic from two years (Woodward, 2020) to forever (Wan and Johnson, 2020), adjustments to the profession and practice of community journalism became a must to cope with the difficulties under the threat of Covid-19. The community press, a tag preferred by media practitioners outside of Metro Manila and even those in highly urbanized but geographically isolated cities, had changed a lot in character due to the developments brought about by Covid-19.

Everyone faced a hard time under this pandemic, but community journalists faced a unique set of difficulties from financial problems because of the lack of or limited number of advertisers, limited coverage opportunities due to the quarantine, the stoppage of production for some newspapers, to eventual work stoppage. They also had to contend with the physical, psychological, and mental burden of being frontliners tasked to inform the people about Covid-19. Add to this the general anxiety that working and being under the pandemic brought, which resulted in stresses on the physical and mental health.

Since social and physical distancing have become the norm, the means and methods of news gathering have also changed. Community journalists have turned to other ways to cover the news and even deliver the news, i.e., via social media, online press conferences, websites, mobile and computer apps.

In particular, social media became a big part of the Covid-19 pandemic coverage. Many news outfits and community journalists relied on their social media accounts to relay the news where people still follow them and read their work. They

remain trusted sources of information. The almost free channel has allowed the switch to online and social media as a venue for publication/broadcasting. Add to this the speed and convenience of using social media as a tool both from the sender's and receiver's end. However, social media has its set of weaknesses.

Disinformation, malinformation, and misinformation abound. Disinformation is content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm; misinformation is sharing false content but the person sharing doesn't realize that it is false or misleading; and malinformation is where genuine information is shared with an intent to cause harm (Wardle, 2020). Journalists also had to contend with trolls and hackers. Social media itself allows virtually anyone to compete in posting information. This mass self-publication/broadcasting in social media poses a threat to the continuing relevance of community journalists. Nora Quebral said that "in many cases, the mass media have been edged out by digital media, mobile media and social media, all of which are associated with the computer, broadband and the internet (2012). How will community journalism remain relevant in the age of social media?

These practices are expected to continue as the threat of the pandemic remains and will continue to define what community journalism would look like in the future. The future looks grim, especially for journalists who fail to adapt to online-based news production. With lesser funds due to a decrease in advertisers, it will be harder to sustain the business of community journalism. Historically, many community papers thrived on sheer passion and love for journalism (Maslog, 1993) even when sales were virtually nil. Personal ethic, values, and social responsibility

weigh down on community journalists as they continue working even if there is financial uncertainty.

This study allowed us to look at community journalists as part of the bigger picture of the communication process. This study not only shed light on the conditions of community journalists as frontliners in the battle against Covid, but it also focused on the conditions of their profession and how they are adapting to the new normal. It shows us how community journalists as development communicators have adapted to the pandemic and what we can learn from it in case we face similar scenarios in the future.

### **Major Research Question**

How did the experiences of community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic shape their practice of doing community journalism under a new normal?

### **Specific Research Questions**

More specifically, this study wanted to find out:

1. How did the participants experience or practice being community journalists before and after the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What challenges have they experienced being community journalists since the Covid-19 pandemic began and how did they cope with these challenges?
3. What opportunities have they experienced being community journalists since the Covid-19 pandemic began and how have they prepared for these opportunities?

4. How did they feel about themselves as community journalists before and after the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. What changes and directions do they see for community journalists/community press from their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic?

### **Significance of the Study**

For development communication, the media has never been at the center of the stage. It is the audience that takes the center stage, often people who are at the receiving end of messages and for whom communication is being tailor-fitted so that they may benefit most from the messages and the process of communication. Rarely do we encounter studies that focus on the communicators themselves. This self-excluding stance of development communicators is common, we prefer to stay in the background and focus on the messages instead. However, in this unique case of the Covid-19 pandemic we find that the experience of development communicators, in this case the community journalists, must be given focus too. Development focuses on people, journalists are people who have been given tools to use for communication purposes. Their very lives are at risk of exposure to the virus every time they go on field to cover the news. Quebral (1988) said that if we are to help remake our society, it “requires understanding of the human elements that compose it and of the forces that impinge on them.”

The findings of the study can help us look at the state of community journalism under Covid-19 and its aftermath. Dr. Crispin Maslog has been documenting the state of community papers since the 1960s. In a way, this study

provides an update on the evolution of community newspapers, particularly in Baguio City, one of Maslog's study areas.

The findings of the study can help us in the academe determine what skills and tools to equip our students with, as well as what values to instill in them as they aim to become future communicators. Value formation and the information to reinforce values worth preserving and to cultivate others worth adopting is again within the sphere of development communication (Quebral, 1988).

Also, Quebral adds the importance of appraisals of the present in order to help improve the future for “in so studying we can evolve our own wisdoms instead of copying and uncritically accepting foreign conceptions and then forcing our realities to conform to their image” (1988).

In evolving our own wisdoms, I reflected on this paragraph from Lewis (2020) while working on this study. He said:

“These disruptions around the world have been much harder for colleagues who were forced to hastily shift their teaching online, home-school their children while juggling work, or face potential furlough—or all of the above at once. For women, who already shoulder a greater share of family responsibilities, the pandemic may be anything but research-productive. Some journal editors report a sharp decline in the number of manuscripts submitted by women as compared to men during the lockdown (Kitchener 2020). And, looking ahead, higher education as a whole faces a financial shock that will slash research budgets and job opportunities, and thus may require us to rethink what kind of scholarly output we should reasonably expect from ourselves and one another.”

The time between the lockdown in March 2020 to the end of classes last semester in May 2020, and the time I was finally able to finish an output in 2024 was borne by a process of self-reflection and quiet introspection: what do I want to study?

One which could help my colleagues, the community journalists, still striving to do their best under the pandemic. What are my objectives for conducting this study? Will I be able to do it? How will I be able to do this on top of my daily responsibilities, as a woman, a working mother, an online teacher, a graduate student, a pregnant woman locked at home? These open ended questions were similar to the questions my participants reflected on in this study.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on community journalists who continued practicing their profession under the community quarantines and Covid-19 in general. Quebral (1988) explained that newspapers outside Metro Manila produced in provincial cities and towns and circulate there as well, has prompted journalism scholars to call them the provincial or community press.

Only community press members or those writing for community newspapers whether hardcopy or online were considered. Members of the local media in Baguio, where this researcher is based, were purposely selected for this study.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The mother of Development Communication Nora Quebral once wrote “Can our communication system cope with its share of the job? A free press, in itself, has no intrinsic value after all. It is prized insofar as it can help fashion a better world for us and our children to live and develop in” (1988). This was from an old essay in the book *Development Communication*, the context of which it was written was as a discussion on the People’s Right to Know way back in 1984.

The Right to Information upheld in that pre-EDSA Revolution colloquium in 1984 is the same right we are trying to uphold in this unique situation under the Covid-19 pandemic. The propositions and questions Quebral posited in her essay ring louder now. She mentions that freedom of the press does not guarantee that the people’s right to know will be fully served. She added that “we need a communication system that is free but also physically able, intellectually competent, and socially responsible. And it must have the backing of the people in whose name it exists and for whom government too, for that matter, exists.”

Even under the pandemic we do have a free, physically able, intellectually competent, and socially responsible communication system. This communication system relies on the work of local journalists as they give a sense of order to the way communications about Covid-19 have been strung out from the government or from other important sources, as they try to break down scientific facts for the ordinary

citizen to understand, and as they try to correct disinformation, fake news, and malinformation.

The pandemic has forced us to revisit our hyperlocal communities, the threat of the disease entering our communities has put us on guard of our borders. This is where community journalists play an essential role in the communication system. Despite the difficulties posed by Covid-19 and the initial strict protocols to stem the spread of the disease, journalists remain on the lookout for news and even on ways to distribute the news to the waiting public.

In this review of literature, I present a brief history of print journalism in the Philippines, the community press, the threats and the opportunities for the community press under the Covid-19 pandemic leading towards why a study on community journalism under the pandemic is an important research topic.

### **Overview of Print Journalism in the Philippines**

“To understand Philippine mass media at present, one has to look at them in the light of history. They have roots that go back quite a way to the country’s colonial past,” Crispin Maslog (1988) wrote. Maslog, a veteran journalism and communication educator, is also widely known for his dedication to studying the community newspapers which he called “the dragon slayer of the countryside.”

Maslog (1988) traced print journalism in the country as being introduced by the Spanish colonizers. The American occupation brought western influence to the look, layout, and style of writing of Philippine journalism. More importantly they

started the tradition of libertarianism and Press Freedom. After the war, communities started to rebuild and this increased the need for information. The post-war period saw the birth of many newspapers, among them was the community newspaper, Baguio Midland Courier which came out in April 1947.

By the late 1960s, Maslog noted that there were around 100 privately owned community newspapers in the country. Community papers in the country were largely underdeveloped back in the 1960s. Maslog (1988) said that of the 100 or so weekly newspapers in the provinces, probably only 40 were profitable and the rest were just breaking even.

Martial Law saw the closure of almost all media outlets. A few years after Martial Law was declared media entities that were allowed to operate, had to abide by strict regulations and censorship. Community newspapers were relegated to “publishing government press releases and singing hallelujahs to the government” (Maslog, 1988).

After Martial Law, the community press grew in number amounting to 164 local newspapers circulating in the small cities and big towns of the country by 1987 (Maslog, 1988). Of these papers, 12 are dailies mostly based in Cebu City and 117 are weeklies. It is worth noting that Sunstar, the only daily community paper in Baguio, originated from Cebu.

In 2015, Reynaldo Guioguo wrote out an overview of the mass media industry in the Philippines. He described that the country “boasts a rowdy and vibrant

press that likes to think of itself as the freest in Asia.” He added that there is strong popular support for a free media among Filipinos in part because of our history of colonization, writing being a form of resistance.

Guioguo (2015) noted two general patterns in the evolution of the Philippine mass media. First, media have long been privately owned and are market-oriented. Second, in order to compete and become economically viable, the media has been forced by audiences to adopt a much more critical stance. The second one, Guioguo said, “opened the way for independent journalism to emerge and for journalists and media practitioners to be sensitive to public opinion.”

We note these patterns because the first one has a direct correlation to the survival of the media under a situation where there are no advertisers or when the government prevents a private enterprise from conducting its business. The second one has implications on press freedom, where critical journalists and media entities are singled out. Also the latter has implications on the emergence of citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism in communities where no professional journalist covers and delivers news.

### **The Community Press**

Maslog (2014) said the term community press has been used in the Philippines since the 1970s to refer to local newspapers published outside Metro Manila, usually in the provincial capital cities. Before that, they were referred to as provincial newspaper, a term which editors and publishers did not like because it connotes being from the rural or backward areas of the country. The use of the term

“community newspaper” came after an agreement among publishers and editors during a Philippine Press Institute seminar in 1970.

Maslog (2014) described the community newspaper in the 2000s as:

“A typical community newspaper is a 12-page weekly with a circulation of 2,000 printed in newsprint by offset. It is still published in English predominantly, with the rest using a combination of English and any of the regional languages: Tagalog, Ilocano, Cebuano, Visayan, or Hiligaynon. The main reason for this is that up to now the readers of the local papers in the provinces are the elite and middle class who are educated in the English language. The papers sell at P6 per copy in the streets and charge advertising rates at P3,500 per page.”

We take note of this description of the community newspaper in the 2000s because apart from the addition of pictures, color, and more pages this remained the general characteristic of community papers upto the pre-Covid era.

Maslog (2014) added that majority of the community newspapers have been in existence for only 20 years or less, with many of them being established between 1981 and 1990. Only a few papers like the Baguio Midland Courier, which Maslog referred to as the oldest existing community newspaper, were founded before 1981. He added that this is an indication of the still unstable nature of the community newspaper enterprise in the country. “Many of these papers do not last long,” Maslog said.

A typical community newspaper in the 1990s has a fulltime staff of four operating in a big city of about 181,000 people (Maslog, 1993). Some papers employ part time reporters. Very often the publisher also serves as editor, reporter, printer, business and advertising manager, bookkeeper, even messenger (Maslog, 1988).

By 2002, the community press had a full time staff of six for the weeklies, and 10 for the dailies publishing in a city of 244,000 people (Maslog, 2014). At present this can still apply to some community papers like the Northern Dispatch. Other papers like Sunstar Baguio and Baguio Midland Courier have a staff size of around 20 people.

Maslog in his 1993 book defined a criteria for successful community newspapers. He said:

“Particularly important was the balance between financial viability and editorial quality. Even if a paper was a smashing financial success, if it did not serve the community with a good editorial product, it was considered a failure. On the other hand, no matter how good the editorial product was, if the paper was not earning enough to keep it going, it would fail after a while, unless it was subsidized, in which case it would have lots its independence.”

We take note of this criteria because the same balance between financial viability and editorial quality still applies to community newspapers post-Covid.

In general, Maslog (1988) said the media took on the following traditional roles in a democratic society: to inform the people and comment on issues so that the people may be more intelligent and active participants in government, to entertain, and to educate the people. As to the last role, he said that it ranked lower than the other roles assumed by Philippine media and is often relegated to the government. He said that “as privately owned enterprises in a democratic capitalist society, the Philippine mass media saw their greatest role as watchdog on government. Hence, the adversarial relationship between the Philippine press and the government.”

More than 20 years later, Maslog (2014) wrote the following on the role of the community press in a democratic society:

“The community press will always have a role to play in any democratic society. They are newspapers of record that tackle local issues in their communities. They promote literacy and provide alternative voices in cities where the radio stations have become part of big networks which have no local loyalties except for advertising. They also provide plurality of voices in a country where the big mass media have been merging to become giant monopolies.”

These roles are in line with the classic four functions of the media which were identified first by Harold Lasswell in 1948, with the addition of the fourth function by Charles Wright in 1959 (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). These four are:

1. Surveillance of the environment: collecting and distributing information about events in the environment; in other words, news reporting;
2. Correlation of the parts of society: explaining, interpreting, and commenting on the meaning of events (thus, editorializing, persuading, or even propagandizing by the press);
3. Transmission of the social heritage: communicating values, norms, and styles across time and among groups. Newspapers therefore function as both windows into other contemporaneous cultures and time capsules for future generations; and
4. Entertainment.

This functionalist theory has remained unchanged over the decades. It has guided teaching and research in communication during the last half century and still continues to be the dominant paradigm (Ables, 2003).

## **Community Journalists as Development Communicators**

Quebral described the journalist as “the doyen among professional communicators.” By tradition the journalist is “more socially aware, more zealous about his or her mission” (1988). It is perhaps the aspect of social responsibility to report on what is happening to keep the community updated on what is happening that pushes journalists, despite the numerous restrictions, to continue to play their role and practice their profession under the pandemic.

Quebral (1988) called journalists as development communicators, whether they accept the role or not, because they write about development and belong in the communication profession. Years later, Quebral added that any communication practitioner who helps disadvantaged people better their lives so that they can realize their potential is a development communicator (2012).

Quebral (2012) described the development communicator as one who understands the process of development, the process of communication, and the environment in which the two processes interact; is not only knowledgeable in communication skills and techniques but is also proficient in the subject matter to be communicated; has internalized the values inherent in equity and the unfolding of individual potential; has firsthand knowledge of the several kinds of end users of development communication. But most of all, the crucial requisite for a development communicator is a sense of commitment, the acceptance of individual responsibility for advancing human development.

Community journalists play at least four basic tasks that help in a developing country like ours. Quebral (2012) lists these as:

- Circulate knowledge that will inform people of significant events, opportunities, dangers and changes in their community, the country, the region and the world;
- Provide a forum where issues affecting the national or community life may be discussed;
- Teach those ideas, skills, and values that people need to achieve a better life; and
- Create and maintain a base of consensus that is needed for the stability of a state.

Using these as jump off points, we explored the following or similar lines of inquiry: Are community journalists able to fulfill all these four tasks? Or beyond these basic tasks, what other tasks do they perform as a service to the community under the Covid-19 pandemic?

A community can be described as “geographically defined social units within a larger society, served by an aggregate of institutions, economically self-sufficient, and characterized by closed contacts and common interests and activities” (Quebral, 1988). Simply put, Quebral states that a community is a collectivity that is held together by a commonness expressed or strengthened by interaction. What is salient is that “it is through communication that a community begins and persists.”

For individuals to be able to participate well in its community, they must be given appropriate information on which to base their actions. This is the essence of

journalism, to reach the readers and provide them with accurate and appropriate information so they can make sound decisions. Quebral (1988) says that “in general, the communication needs of any community... revolve around companionship with other human beings; participation in the decisions that affect its members, or access to problem-solving information for daily living.”

If we look at these communication needs under the pandemic, we cannot help but think about the role that community journalists play in addressing these needs of their communities. How do they describe the communication needs of the community under quarantine due to the pandemic? If communication needs revolve around companionship with other human beings, what impact do the community quarantine and stay home policies have? How can the community participate in making decisions that affect themselves or find answers to the problems they have?

### **Impact of Covid-19 on Journalism**

The full impact of Covid-19 on journalism cannot be ascertained even now, nearly four years hence, but a lot of indications point out to drastic impacts on the field and on the profession. This all the more gave us the impetus to study the phenomenon.

How essential is journalism under the pandemic? In countries around the world, journalism is being considered as an “essential service” and journalists as “essential workers,” with permission to continue reporting and to be exempt from movement restrictions (UNESCO, 2020). Even in our country, journalists are

considered Authorized Persons Outside of Residence (APOR) during the Extreme Community Quarantine (ECQ) in March and April 2020.

According to UNESCO (2020) the Covid-19 crisis has brought to the forefront the importance of the media and of access to verified information. The agency said “Free and independent media serve as a key source of credible and lifesaving information, and they help people by detecting and debunking the lies of the disinfodemic.”

The World Health Organization used the term “infodemic” to describe an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (UNESCO, 2020). WHO considered the infodemic as a second disease accompanying the pandemic, one which can be cured by journalism. WHO added that “Journalism is key to supplying credible information within the wider “infodemic”, and to combating the myths and rumors. Without it, false content can run rampant.”

However, the health agency pointed out that journalism must be the kind done by professional journalists. It said that:

“Professional journalism – publishing verified facts and informed opinion – has given people an alternative to disinformation and has helped to disprove the falsehoods. Operating in the glare of the public square, it contrasts with the hidden and hard-to-challenge content that is shared in private messaging services” (UNESCO, 2020).

### **Press Freedom under Covid-19**

Press Freedom is a basic right enshrined in the Philippine Constitution. Sec. 4 of the Bill of Rights states that “No law shall be passed abridging the Freedom of

Speech, of Expression, or of the Press, or the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances.”

There are four aspects of Press Freedom recognized by Philippine jurisprudence. These are: Freedom from prior restraint, freedom from punishment subsequent to publication, freedom of access to information, and freedom of circulation (Aquino, 2016).

Prior restraint means “official governmental restrictions on the press or other forms of expression in advance of actual publication or dissemination” (Bernas, 2003). This, along with the second aspect of unrestrained threat of subsequent punishment, have to be exercised within acceptable limits by the government in order for the press to remain free.

The third aspect, freedom of information, is enshrined in Sec. 7 Art III of the Philippine Constitution (1987). The first line of Section 7 states that “The right of the people to information on matters of public concern shall be recognized.”

The last aspect, the freedom to circulate, refers to the act of disseminating information gathered by the press to the public. It refers both to the content and the circulation or the number of prints per publication.

Another way of looking at press freedom is to divide it into two facets: the right of the people to know (freedom of information) and the freedom of the press to satisfy that right (Lopez as cited in Quebral, 1988). In the 1987 Philippine

Constitution, Freedom of Information (Section 7 of Article III) is a separate right from Freedom of the Press (Section 4 of Article III) but both rights are meshed together in the praxis of journalism.

How was freedom of the press practiced by community journalists under the pandemic? Were there overly broad restrictions that threatened their practice?

UNESCO (2020) listed restrictions linked to the pandemic which are limiting the people's right to access information and the media's ability to fight against falsehood. Threats to Press Freedom, in all its aspects, have been noted by UNESCO from all over the world. These threats include: Passage of laws proposed to counter disinformation or "fake news" are putting journalists at criminal risk often simply for raising criticisms; Suspension of the public right to request information has strained the right to information; and Intrusions on privacy through enhanced surveillance often related to contact tracing and enforcing quarantines, which could sometimes be disproportionate and abused.

UNESCO also cited a report from the International Press Institute (IPI) which recorded 140 instances of media freedom violations related to the Covid-19 pandemic, including arrests and charges, censorship, restrictions on access to information, excessive 'fake news' regulations and verbal or physical attacks (2020).

Reporters Without Borders came up with a tracker to monitor cases of abuse against journalists covering the pandemic all over the world. It has documented attacks against at least 129 journalists in 29 countries including expulsions, arrests,

interrogations, police violence, withdrawing of press passes, demands for public apologies, and seizing electronic devices (UNESCO, 2020).

Index on Censorship, a non-profit organization that campaigns for and defends free expression worldwide, recorded 46 cases of journalists blocked from reporting on Covid-19 as of August 18, 2020. Index on Censorship has also verified 63 cases of detentions or arrests of journalists, four cases of government U-turn on media freedom, 18 cases of legislation change to restrict media freedom, eight cases of social media restrictions, two cases of surveillance, 28 cases of crackdown on fake news, 50 cases of attacks on journalists/cartoonists, and 21 other cases of attack all over the world in the time of Covid-19 (Index on Censorship, 2020). Of these 240 verified incidents, four cases are from the Philippines.

### **Risks that Journalists Face**

To keep the public informed, journalists are putting their own safety at risk. The UNESCO report (2020) states that journalists risk their physical, legal, psychological, and digital safety.

***Physical safety.*** UNESCO reports that journalists risk their health through lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). Even with PPEs, the risk of infection is an imminent threat to journalists covering on field as well as to the people surrounding them. At least 16 journalists have died of Covid-19 based on reports from the Poynter Institute (in UNESCO, 2020).

Philippine Press Institute executive director Ariel Sebellino said the ongoing health crisis has made it more difficult for the community press to perform duties such as news gathering in the field and, in the process, risk getting infected by Covid-19 (Santos, 2020).

Worth noting is the personal experience of broadcast journalist Howie Severino as a Covid-19 survivor. He revealed his Covid status at a time when most patients were still hiding their identities for security and privacy reasons. Severino even documented his experience while undergoing treatment for the disease (GMA Public Affairs, 2020). His documentary on I-Witness focused on the realities that patients face, from battling the disease in isolation to bidding farewell to your loved ones with death waiting at your door.

In Baguio, the local media community mourned the passing of one of its members, People's Journal photojournalist Cesar Reyes, due to complications of Covid-19 in May 2021.

**Legal safety.** Overly broad legal restrictions justified as countering Covid-19 disinformation has caused the arrest and detention of journalists around the world (UNESCO, 2020). This includes where they have raised questions about the limits of official statistics, or provided a platform for debate about the extent of lock-down restrictions and the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators. UNESCO added that it is becoming dangerous to report on corruption and assault by state officials who commit these crimes under the cover of the Covid-19 controls. The Poynter Institute (as cited in UNESCO, 2020) has recorded more than 300

people in 40 countries arrested and accused of spreading false information about Covid-19, with most arrests in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the Philippines, the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (Republic Act 11479) has been hailed by many groups as an affront to liberty including Press Freedom. The law can be weaponized to systematically stifle dissent (Sobel, 2020). Section 9 of the law punishes Inciting to Commit Terrorism by means of speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners or other representations with imprisonment of 12 years. The provision on detention without judicial warrant of arrest up to 14 days with a maximum 10-day extension (Sec. 29, RA 11479, 2020) is also a major cause for concern. Other countries have used laws like the Philippines' new antiterrorism bill to jail protesters, journalists, and opposition politicians en masse (Sobel, 2020).

Apart from RA 11479, another law directed to focus the country's battle against Covid-19 is also seen as a threat to journalism. Section 6. (f) of the Republic Act 11469 or The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act penalizes individuals or groups creating, perpetrating, or spreading false information regarding the Covid-19 crises on social media and other platforms. The provision has also been called the "most dangerous" feature in the law because it is vaguely worded according to lawyers (Tantuco, 2020). Freedom for Media, Freedom for all network reported that 60 people nationwide have been charged by government officials on the basis of this provision as of April 20, 2020 (Tantuco, 2020).

Also, under this law, journalists who are critical of the government face possible arrest and those without government-issued IDs can be prevented from covering news outside their homes (Tantuco, 2020). This law was used by police officers who prevented news teams of broadcasting company ABS-CBN from passing through checkpoints saying their franchise has expired right after the company ceased broadcasting operations pursuant to an order from the National Telecommunications Commission on May 5, 2020 (Tantuco, 2020).

Although the law seems reasonable, the pattern of attacks on the media being voiced out by President Rodrigo Duterte himself – as can be deemed from the cases filed against Rappler and its founder Maria Ressa, the attempt to sell Philippine Daily Inquirer, and the closure of ABS-CBN – poses an in terrorem effect on journalists.

Ressa, CEO of Rappler, in an interview with Sasakawa Peace Foundation (2020) described the state of democracy of the Philippines, in light of the Duterte administration and the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, as:

“I think that like the state of democracy all around the world, democracy is dying if not dead, and a lot of that is largely because of the shift in our information ecosystem... I call it death by a thousand cuts. If you don't have facts, you can't have truth, you can't have trust, and you can't have democracy.”

Ressa (2020) ended that interview with the following statement on journalism and democracy:

“If people don't know what the facts are, what is right and wrong, what the truth is — and these are blurry things already — but if the facts aren't there, if they don't know who to trust, that's the first goal of influence operations. It's not to actually make you believe one thing. It's to make you doubt everything. If you don't know what to believe, they can tear apart the institutions you used to believe in and make you distrust everybody. In a situation like that, the voice with the loudest megaphone wins. That's the world we live in today. If

we don't move to restore the integrity of facts, then we will be manipulated. It's quite insidious, and we will lose our democracy."

**Psychological safety.** The psychological safety of journalists is also at risk as they face increased pressure, extended hours and never-ending fact checking, fears over job security, and trauma of reporting on severe illnesses (UNESCO, 2020).

In the Philippines, the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) or lockdown initially put in place caused the stoppage of public transportation leading to additional stress for community journalists who had to go on foot to their area of coverage. The looming fear of acquiring the disease in the course of work is also anxiety inducing. Fears over job security are well founded with thousands of journalists losing chunks of their income with newspapers streamlining production, or losing their jobs entirely because of closure due to lack of ad revenues or due to government policy.

**Digital safety.** UNESCO (2020) reported that increased surveillance and hacking have undermined journalists' ability to ensure the confidentiality of their sources, at a time when some governments have cracked down on whistleblowers.

In a forum hosted by the Philippine Press Institute, Julius Mariveles, a journalist for DNX Digital News in Negros Occidental, said:

"We noticed a public in FB that wants to be reporters, the problem is unverified and inaccurate information. We have a public that is antagonistic to reporters or storytellers. The anger is focused on reporters. The public wants to live in their fragmented reality and want reporters to confirm it to them as real" (2020).

Digital safety has also become a cause for concern since many community papers have decided not to print hard copies and instead migrate their content online.

### **Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Community Papers**

UNESCO states that the economic impact of Covid-19 may pose an existential threat to journalism. It even described the phenomenon as a “media extinction event” (UNESCO, 2020). The organization credits drastic drops in advertising revenue which have reached up to 70 percent decline according to the Global Forum on Media Development. The losses in revenue at many media companies have led to layoffs, pay cuts and furloughs in media organizations around the world (UNESCO, 2020). The report goes on to say that “the media organizations that fold may never come back – creating news deserts for the public and in the absence of verified information, disinformation fills the gap” (UNESCO, 2020).

This is a fact that even community papers deal with. An important factor for the success of community papers is a balance between financial viability and editorial quality (Maslog, 1993). The economic impact of Covid-19 is even harsher for community papers which are often run on a financially losing model or break even scheme.

Even without Covid-19, there are already existing threats to community journalism, the biggest of which is their business sustainability in the face of other competitors. Wahl-Jorgensen et al (2016) mentioned that among the long-standing institutional threats to journalism include crisis in the business leading to the demise

of even established and well-regarded newspapers. They reported losing audiences and advertisers which in turn results in the “growing casualization of the workforce, which means that employment is less secure.” Freelancers or contributors are taking on the bulk of the job with the rise of what they call “low-pay, no pay” journalism or what local community journalists in Baguio refer to as “free-lunch” journalism — a free meal is often the most they could get from publishing a piece they have covered in a press conference. “Certainly at a local level, the economic viability of professional journalism is under serious pressure with the traditional democratic role of local news being undermined as costs are cut and newsrooms hollowed out (Franklin 2011 in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016).

Philippine Press Institute (PPI) president and *Manila Standard* publisher Rolando Estabillo said one of the hardest hit industries during the pandemic is journalism. “There will be more adjustments until the plague is over. Expect things to get worse until a vaccine is created. Many industries will not recover at all, the newspaper industry is no exception,” (Estabillo in PPI, 2020). He added that if newspapers in highly urbanized areas like Metro Manila are already reeling from lack of ad revenues, how much more for provincial newspapers?

Community papers saw a steep decline in their street sales and revenues from the beginning of the pandemic and the initial lockdowns. “How do you sell newspapers at a time when people are afraid to touch?” Herbie Gomez of Mindanao Gold Star Daily said this referring to the pandemic-generated fear of touching objects that might have come in contact with Covid-19 carriers (Elemia, 2020).

Even after the initial lockdowns many community papers were forced to reduce their circulation and number of pages to cut on costs (Elemia, 2020).

Carolyn Arguillas of MindaNews, a community paper in Mindanao, said community papers are given three options under the pandemic: stop publication, shift to online, or stop altogether (PPI, 2020).

Ariel Sebellino, executive director of the PPI, said that in an informal survey conducted among its members, eleven community papers have stopped printing since March 2020 (PPI, 2020). Instead these papers have switched to online versions. By July 2020 another community paper opted to forego its print version. “This is really survival of the paper, not just of journalists,” Sebellino said.

Amalia Bandian of the Mindanao Times, another community paper in Mindanao, said lack of paper for printing caused them to switch online as early as March. The lockdown prevented shipment from reaching their location. The lockdown also ensured curfew hours which prevented them from running their printing press at night. She added that some other local papers stopped printing but couldn’t go online because they were not prepared for it (PPI, 2020).

In Visayas, Alex Rey Pal of MetroNews said the pandemic was really bad for daily community papers because of the lack of ad revenue as even the local courts, where they usually get judicial notices as a regular ad source, stopped operations for a while. They were also forced to forego colored pages to lessen the cost of production. He admitted that they thought about closing “but how could you when

there is a dearth of information on Covid and what is happening in the community?” (PPI, 2020).

In Northern Luzon, PPI trustee Dexter See said that of the close to 20 community paper members of PPI in the region, 80 to 90 percent ceased print operations, most shifted to online platforms as part of the shift to blended journalism in new normal times. He added that apart from lack of supply of paper, the absence of mobility caused by the lockdown prevented the transportation of copies. He also bemoaned the poor interconnectivity in the Northern Luzon area (PPI, 2020).

On May 3, 2021, just in time for World Press Freedom Day, Sunstar Baguio, the only daily community paper in Northern Luzon announced that it was closing (Cabreza, 2021). After discontinuing its print edition in the latter months of 2020, it continued publishing online. Economic viability, according to the owners, forced them to shut down its operations.

### **The Threat of Social Media**

The landscape of journalism has changed drastically with the aid of technological, social and economic developments, and forms of innovation (Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2016).

Smartphones, a cross between a laptop and cellphone with high quality cameras and internet access, have been touted as a very handy tool for media practitioners. These have allowed increased possibilities for news and photo production and sharing. They offer “new possibilities which are particularly significant

in enabling reporting in distant locations, and often empowering disenfranchised groups... This feeds into an emerging trend whereby citizen journalism plays a key role in covering distant communities” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2016).

With the advent of social media, anyone can now produce content, including newsworthy content thus providing another challenge to the business of journalism. Ressa (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2020) said that journalists and news organizations have lost the power to be gatekeepers to technology and social media platforms, including digital authoritarians. She added that social media changed the way that people consumed news. Since 2016, she said, social media companies began to prioritize growth over the protection of the users, and growth over facts.

The content given by mass self-communication rivals that of mass communication from organized media entities. In a way this is liberating as Quebral once said that a truly participatory society can be gleaned when discerning individuals freely communicate with each other in a community which has evolved means by which ordinary people can become direct participants in any dialogue with as much right as the government and the press to talk back, initiate discussion, and talk to one another. Social media has allowed for this to happen.

However, Quebral (2012) added that normative research is needed to see how the new media including social media is being consciously used to lift communities out of poverty and isolation. Perhaps isolation is a fact that many of us have encountered during the pandemic with the imposition of the community

quarantine. Social media, the internet, and mobile phones saved many of us from total isolation.

In fact, social media has rendered some mouthpieces useless in the speed by which information, factual and otherwise, reaches the community. There lies its weakness too, disinformation, malinformation, and misinformation have seen unprecedented heights because of the advent of social media.

The implications of social media usage from the community journalists' point of view may be great. But the move to solely publish/broadcast on social media deters the masses who can only rely on airwave broadcasts of the radio and television. Indeed, radio remains the medium of the masses. The option of most barangays to use Group Chats and Community Forums on Facebook keeps out citizens who do not have social media accounts or cannot afford Internet connections.

Despite its weaknesses, social media fosters participation among its users. Hence it is a preferred media suitable even for development communication. Quebral described such an ideal medium decades before social media came into existence. She said "the media preferred are those that foster participation, not those that immerse people in a passive bystander role."

Information and communication technology has become pocket-sized, portable, personal, and affordable. It has changed the nature of mediated communication, eaten into the traditional preserves of mainstream media, and virtually segmented its users by age and income. It has made direct participation in

governance possible, for one thing, exemplified by the relatively peaceful political revolutions since the last century (Quebral, 2012).

There has been a blurring of the line between producers and audiences and this has generated new forms of audience participation, maturation of more established forms of participation, including user-generated content, social media and citizen journalism.

Wahl-Jorgensen et al (2016) describes aptly how embedded Social media is in the journalism profession:

“Social media are now well-established tools facilitating audience participation and journalistic practice. The widely documented normalization of Twitter has taken place alongside the cementation of Facebook and YouTube, and the growing importance of Instagram. These platforms allow audience members to share news and information and participate meaningfully in local and global debates. Such participation may range from that of “accidental journalists” providing user-generated content, to the social sharing practices that shape engagement with news events small and large. Research... shows that journalists increasingly draw on these same social media platforms for crowd-sourcing, to find vox pops, and to enhance their professional profiles and virtual identities.”

The “fifth estate” (Dutton 2009 in Walh-Jorgensen, 2016) composed of networked bloggers and alter media was welcomed as it was supposed to increase audience participation in journalism through articulating important news, generating public debates, and facilitating new forms of accountability. “Technology has facilitated a de-professionalization of journalism with many economic, quality related and ethical questions raised as a consequence—alongside opportunities for greater participation” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2016).

## **Changes in the Local/Community Press**

Wahl-Jorgensen et al (2016) mentioned the importance of re-invigorating studies of local news production, sources, and audiences. The authors mentioned that there have been attempts to shed light on both hyperlocal and established local news but most studies focused on news production and content. They said traditional (and even new) local news providers are viewed as “only partly responsible for the proliferating information flows in local communities.”

The other information flows directly from what is traditionally referred to as “sources” i.e. local officials, politicians, and other experts routinely cited in the news. “We no longer interview or observe only local journalists in our research, not least because “the people formerly known as news sources” are now often communicating, unmediated, to local publics using various new media platforms and playing ever-greater roles in framing local life,” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016).

Work from home setups have changed the way journalists gathered and covered the news. Coverage has changed from actual field coverage or face to face interviews to online press conferences and computer mediated interviews. Journalists have learned how to use Facebook Live, Google Meet, Zoom, and other similar applications for data gathering and interviewing (Tantuco, 2020).

Local Government Units have stepped up their digital presence by maintaining social media pages for information. This has become an easy source for the media without sacrificing information vetting (PPI, 2020).

With these sources now using their own social media accounts to communicate directly with local audiences, will this now lessen the relevance of community journalists?

### **Opportunities for the Community Press**

Despite the dire state of production and publication under the pandemic, there is a silver lining for community journalists as the new normal also brings about exciting changes.

The difficulty of competing with social media as a source of news brings the opportunity to focus instead on reinventing content and coverage. Amalia Bandiola Cabusao of *Mindanao Times* echoed this by saying they do not break the news but their readers look up to them for real news. “We would rather be a little late but with the real information,” she added. Journalists can develop “slow journalism,” which gives premium to quality instead of speed; solution journalism, which facilitates finding answers; lifestyle journalism; or even long form journalism (PPI, 2020).

Let local journalism shine was one of the tips written by Imelda Abaño (2020) on How reporters in the Philippines cover Covid-19. She said: “Covering the unfolding pandemic can be even more challenging for local-level journalists, who have few resources and staff to adequately report on all the ways in which this pandemic will impact their communities.”

Because they work in and for communities, these reporters should “look out for solutions-focused stories by seeing how communities are responding and

including the voices of the underprivileged, covering best practices and exploring how local governments are responding” (Abaño, 2020).

Community Newspapers are also forced to think outside the box in order to make up for the losses in ad revenue. Options include co-branding as a marketing strategy focusing on community based businesses to help in publishing the news. Another would be to offer online subscriptions or membership support. Another would be to offer discounted rates for advertisers in the interest of rebuilding businesses direly affected by the pandemic in the community.

UNESCO said that the pandemic “offers an opportunity to recognize journalism as an essential element of our lives and livelihoods, and as a moment for strengthening news media.”

When the pandemic is over, in a few years or in the next decade, we would have time to rebuild. Some of the rebuilding will be on the structures that we have developed over time during the pandemic itself. The survival of community journalism is essential. Journalists need to adapt to the changing times, the most difficult of situations, in order to fulfill its responsibility to society.

“In this society that we are rebuilding, let us have a free press by all means. It will be one of our salvations. But for it to be free, let it also be a physically and intellectually strong press. And a socially committed press. And then let us place it in the service of all Filipinos, who will ideally have the economic means and the personal ability to communicate with one another” (Quebral, 1988).

## **Related Studies**

The 2020 Digital News Report conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) at Oxford University is an interesting study that included around 2,000 respondents in the Philippines. Using Survey Research Design, the online survey carried out by YouGov was conducted in January to February when the Covid-19 pandemic was starting. There were 40 countries covered including the Philippines with a total sample size of 80,155 adults. The sample is reflective of the population who have access to the internet and the news. The sample will tend to under represent traditional media habits such as radio, television, and print (Chua, 2020).

The Digital News Report 2020 found that interest in news and belief in the importance of independent journalism run high in the Philippines but are accompanied by a low trust in news and high levels of concern over misinformation (Chua, 2020). Results also showed that social media and television are the primary sources of news accessed largely through smartphones. The respondents, however, were mostly those from urban, richer, and more connected areas.

The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) is studying the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for journalism in partnership with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. The aim of the Journalism and the Pandemic project is to inform how the field of journalism recovers from the devastating crisis. It is a long range study which analyzes changes in journalism practice and the effects on business models and audience engagement. It also explores the changing nature

of disinformation challenges, media freedom threats, and journalism safety risks (icfj.org/research-journalism-and-covid-19).

Nieman Lab at Harvard conducted the global survey to track and assess the impacts of the pandemic on journalism worldwide, and to help reimagine its future. The survey which available on their website (<https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/05/take-this-survey-about-the-effect-of-covid-19-on-journalism/>) aimed to find out what is needed to keep journalism viable: What does the field require in both short-term and long-term support and training? How are journalists responding creatively to the challenges of reporting during the time of coronavirus? What can be done to help protect journalists and defend media freedom during the pandemic? (Posetti and Bell, 2020). They justified the urgent need for the survey saying:

“The pandemic has rapidly accelerated trends already evident worldwide: the migration and disappearance of advertising; the shrinkage and disappearance of print; the erosion of investigative reporting capability; and the collapse of local news. It is also being used as a cloak by despots, dictators, and autocrats to ramp up attacks on journalists, demonize journalism, and undermine media freedom” (Posetti and Bell, 2020).

Although the study uses quantitative data gathering, the questions summing up the themes of the survey questions are good jump off points for a qualitative study such as this when done in a more local scale.

A year from the declaration of the pandemic, a growing number of studies that view journalism through the lens of the pandemic have been published.

The study of Hess and Waller (2020) on Local newspapers and Corona virus in Australia is very informative. They were working on a project that would gauge the civic value of Australia’s country press and develop an innovation model for the

sector. Their research echoes what other studies on the same topic show: “Local news matters to audiences and a healthy democracy.” Many of Australia’s rural newspapers which cater to hyperlocal audiences are almost in the same boat as Philippine community newspapers under the pandemic i.e. suffering from declines in media advertising revenue, freezes in operations, shift to digital-only formats, or closures.

Their study made use of a novel approach to exploring the relations between Covid-19 and the future of local newspapers using a framework of analogic reasoning conceptualized by Claudia Schwartz Plaschg. They employed analogy “to develop, and begin to explore, a new set of arguments generated by how other powerful institutions have responded to the pandemic and the key challenges and issues that arose in debate about the news.” Of the five analogies they used, I picked the analogy they used on Journalism as an essential service.

Hess and Waller (2020) said:

“it is important to look beyond the role of journalism itself as an essential service to the communities and broader society it serves to also consider the ‘essential service’ role that the printed newspaper plays in rural and regional Australia within a digital world. This factor sets country mastheads apart from many of their national and metropolitan cousins, for whom print is no longer the main game. Journalism scholars, immersed in the increasing scholarship around platformization, could be forgiven for missing this crucial point as print is fast becoming redundant in much international research on media innovation.”

As an essential service, journalism must be within reach of the masses. Hess and Waller added that “Online content about Covid-19 is not a service for those with poor connectivity or limited socio-economic circumstances in rural and regional areas.” They said that in these places, local journalists are best placed to provide

accessible news and information and contextualize global and national stories for their audiences; and significantly, to report how a crisis like Covid-19 is affecting their own institutions, businesses and people (Hess and Waller, 2020).

Journalism provides a record of history in these times as well as in everyday life, especially when digital archiving of rural and regional publications is inconsistent and often incomplete in libraries and across archiving platforms (Hess and Waller, 2020).

Hess and Waller suggested that we must “look beyond the normative role of journalism as ‘an essential service’ to more specifically understand the importance of the printed product in non-metropolitan areas due to demographics and a continuing digital divide” (2020).

A paper from Dela Salle University in the Philippines showed preliminary insights on Covid-19, journalism, and public health. The authors Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) said Covid-19 has brought to our attention the often-overlooked relationship between journalism and public health. They added that health reporting in the country during the pandemic can be connected to journalistic practices, technological changes, and structural restraints.

They observed that the pandemic has taken a toll on both the physical and mental well-being of journalists with reported cases of journalists experiencing high levels of stress, undergoing self-quarantines, and contracting the virus. These all

point to the need for broader safety measures at the organizational level of news outlets.

Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) said Covid-19 has changed the way journalists conduct field works and encouraged journalists in the Philippines to reimagine news production. Some journalists have been able to navigate the consequences of Covid-19 on the profession by reimagining newsgathering, taking advantage of online resources as well as doing collaborations.

They added that journalists have been coping with the challenge of limited access to information by interviewing sources through phones and attending webinars with experts to learn more about the pandemic. They also adapted open-source and non-mainstream techniques of data gathering such as 'citizen and collaborative journalism' and 'social journalism'. In practice, this set of methods includes monitoring Facebook and Twitter feeds, joining Facebook groups created for a specific cause or geographical area, following hashtags and using keywording to find leads and sources (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020).

Another way of coping that Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) mentioned is that journalists organized themselves to raise their unanswered questions in media group chats of government organizations. Organized peer support networks were also critical for minimizing stress and trauma among journalists who reported about and during Covid-19. Lastly, journalists continue to maintain records of their activities and sources with whom they interacted for purposes of contact tracing.

Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) called digital media a double edged sword. On one hand, the use of digital media for news coverage and reportage was seen as advantageous for journalists “to help Filipinos make better sense of the pandemic.” Digital media such as social media and video conferencing apps enabled journalists to talk about their lived experiences in covering Covid-19. It also made it possible for journalists to attend webinars and trainings on how to cover the pandemic, as well as organize press briefings on the state of news reporting via video conferencing.

On the other hand, Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) said digital media has “complicated the work of journalists as they had to deal with the spread of health mis- and/or disinformation.” They said digital media played a big role in the diffusion of online fake news. It made it challenging for journalists to delineate and verify information sources. It made correcting mis- and disinformation about the pandemic more difficult. The threat of data breach and the rise of fake social media accounts were also noted among the disadvantages of digital media.

The study of Perreault and Perreault (2021) talked about the role of journalists in a Covid-19 communication ecology. The study considers Covid-19 as a disaster in that it is “a potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time-delimited.” Hence the Covid-19 communication ecology refers to the resources and information individuals use under the pandemic.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) used a two-step qualitative methodology to find out how journalists discursively placed themselves in the Covid-19 communication ecology and how they construct their relationship with crisis

information in relation to the pandemic. The researchers first conducted interviews with eight journalists about their work during the pandemic. Then they conducted discourse analysis on 83 articles from 25 sites where journalists discuss journalism and the coronavirus.

According to this study, journalists discursively articulated themselves in a vulnerable position in the Covid-19 communication ecology as a result of the economic consequences of market pressure, given that many were experiencing the effects of the pandemic in their own communities, families, and careers. The pandemic laid bare and even accelerated the endangered nature of journalism.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) said journalists saw community newspapers as suffering the most substantially from the pandemic. Journalists had to contend with reduced staffing to comply with restrictions, adapting the use of digital media and work from home schemes, the lack of a guarantee to their job security, the risk of contracting Covid-19, and the emotional labor that goes with the job stemming from the “expectation to do more than they had done before the pandemic and to do it well” and fulfilling their mission of public service.

This study also found that journalists constructed their relationship with information during the pandemic as innately problematic given the circulation of misinformation. Journalists had to find and adapt ways of reversing the flow of misinformation.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) concluded that further study is needed on the Covid-19 communication ecology as “there is not an end in sight to the pandemic, despite the early arrival of vaccines, and certainly no end in sight for the effects of the pandemic on the media industry, journalism, and journalists”

### **Theoretical Underpinning of the Study**

A commentary published in the Digital Journalism journal by Lewis (2020) titled “The objects and objectives of journalism research during the Coronavirus pandemic and beyond” is quite insightful. He said that “As scholars, we should pause, when so much of our working lives seems thrown out of routine, and critically consider what has brought us, individually and collectively, to this juncture in our research and where we aim to go in the future.” This is precisely what my research intended to do: to stop and talk about the lived experiences of community journalists under the pandemic.

Lewis (2020) suggested two areas of journalism research under the pandemic: our objects of scholarly analysis or what we study and our objectives as researchers or why we study. This way he said we can reorient our research agendas to be simultaneously responsive and reflective as we address the current crisis and prepare for the uncertainties ahead. He suggested three objects of study: the business of news gearing up towards a business model; news consumption or how people are experiencing the news; and the underplayed aspects of the lived experience of journalists. On the first and second propositions he suggested making studies on the “value proposition” of news from the perspective of the news audience. On the third proposition he said “we need research approaches that better

account for the affective, complicated lived experiences of journalists just as we do for the experiences of news audiences” (Lewis, 2020).

I hinged my study on Lewis’ third suggestion – the lived experiences of journalists. The study of lived experience is characteristically a phenomenological study. Hence, this study is underpinned by the phenomenological tradition of theory, particularly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I will first explain about the phenomenological tradition of communication theory and then discuss IPA.

### **Phenomenological Tradition**

The term phenomenon refers to the appearance of an object, event, or condition that is perceived (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008). A phenomenon may be characterized by sensory qualities, but it is also enriched by experience (Smith, 2018).

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena or “the appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience” (Smith, 2018). It is the way in which human beings come to understand the world through direct experience (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

Phenomenology focuses on the conscious experience of phenomena contextualized within the world individuals inhabit (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). It is the study of essences, or the person’s lived experience in his or her lifeworld before this gets categorized or theorized. It makes actual lived experience the basic data of

reality. All you can know is what you experience (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008). Lived experience is simply experience-as-we-live-through-it in our actions, relations and situations (Van Manen, 2007).

Phenomenology as a philosophical and methodological approach focuses more on the descriptive rather than on the prescriptive (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

There are three general schools of thought under the phenomenological tradition: Classical phenomenology, the phenomenology of perception, and hermeneutic phenomenology (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

Edmund Husserl, to whom classical phenomenology is primarily associated, said truth can only be ascertained through direct experience but we must be disciplined in how we experience things (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008). Experience is described by Husserl as the “natural attitude” (standpoint) that occurs within the context of the world the individual is engaged with. This engagement is often taken for granted and becomes an absorbing, self-immersed collection of happenings that are implicitly understood without a conscious response (Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2017). Only through conscious attention, where we put aside or bracket our biases, can truth be known. In short, we must suspend our categories of thinking and habits of seeing in order to experience the phenomenon as it really is (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

Under the second tradition, experience is seen as subjective not objective, with subjectivity seen as an important kind of knowledge in its own right (Littlejohn

and Foss, 2008). Maurice Merleau-Ponty is seen as a major figure in this phenomenology of perception. He saw the human being as a unified physical and mental being who creates meaning in the world. "We know things only through our own personal relationship to these things. As persons we are affected by the world, but we also affect the world by how we experience it." (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

For Merleau-Ponty, things do not exist in and of themselves apart from how they are known. Rather, people give meaning to the things in the world, so that any phenomenological experience is necessarily a subjective one. There is a dialogic relationship between people as interpreters and the things they are interpreting (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

The third tradition, hermeneutic phenomenology or philosophical hermeneutics, extends the phenomenology of perception further by applying it more completely to communication. It is closely associated with the works of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, a student of Husserl, introduced the concept of "Dasein" or "being there" and the dialogue between a person and her world (Groenewald, 2004). Dasein represents the unique existence of human beings or literally being there in the world to express the inter-relationship and inter-connectedness of human experience (Tuffour, 2017).

For Heidegger, the reality of something is not known by careful analysis or reduction but by natural experience, which is created by the use of language in everyday life. Hence, what is real is what is experienced through the use of language in context. Language is packed with meaning and the discourse available to us in

everyday life constantly affects our experience of events and situations (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

The process of interpretation is central to most phenomenological thought. Interpretation or understanding is the active process of assigning meaning to an experience. It is an active process of the mind, a creative act of clarifying personal experience (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008).

The study of interpretation is called hermeneutics (George, 2020). Interpretation involves going back and forth between experiencing an event or situation and assigning meaning to it in what is called a hermeneutic circle (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008). Meaning in this context is deemed as something fluid that is continuously open to new insight, revision, interpretation, and reinterpretation (Tuffour, 2017).

In doing phenomenological studies, Littlejohn and Foss (2009) listed some basic assumptions for researchers to take heed of:

First, reject the idea that researchers can be objective. Since the participants in phenomenological studies talk about their personal lives, there can be no objectivity there. At the same time, the researcher is also not objective when trying to interpret the meaning of the accounts he or she has gathered.

Second, a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of life exists within analysis of our daily practices. Phenomenological research encourages an

attentiveness to the taken-for-granted experiences that are reflected in our everyday interactions; these same experiences reflect microcosms of larger cultural, political, and societal structures.

Third, it is important to explore persons as opposed to individuals. Although individuals can refer to any number of things, persons are understood through the unique ways in which they are reflective of particular social, cultural, and historical life circumstances (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The fourth assumption relates to how persons are situated within the research process. In phenomenology, researchers are interested in gathering *capta* (conscious experience that is given significance through one's own interpretation) instead of traditional data (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

The final assumptions of phenomenology relate to process. Phenomenology is a discovery-oriented methodology that does not specify beforehand what it intends to find. As such, it approaches scholarly inquiry through an open, non constricting manner. Phenomenology is interested in meaning questions— those that seek understanding of the possible meaning and significance of certain phenomena. Meaning questions are never fully realized; instead, they are answered with an acknowledgment that other possibilities can and do exist (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

A modern way of conducting phenomenological research is through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA identifies more strongly with

hermeneutic traditions utilizing the works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre to explore and interpret personal lived experience of the participants (Tuffour, 2017).

The approach is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's lifeworld; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but rather they come to interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

IPA also emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process. One is trying to get close to the participant's personal world, or get an 'insider's perspective', but one cannot do this directly or completely (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

IPA gives researchers the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the 'lived experiences' of research participants. As an approach that is 'participant-oriented', IPA allows the interviewees (research participants) to express themselves and their 'lived experience' stories the way they see fit without any distortion and/or prosecution (Alase, 2017).

The main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, and states held for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

This study on community journalists tried to look into aspects of their lived experiences under the Covid-19 pandemic and what these experiences mean to them. IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Under IPA, there is no attempt to test a predetermined hypothesis of the researcher; rather, the aim is to explore, flexibly and in detail, an area of concern (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Our area of concern revolves around how community journalists were adapting to the new normal of doing community journalism being ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lived experiences of community journalists can be studied under the lens of Development Communication. Development Communication is the science of human communication linked to the transitioning of communities from poverty in all its forms to a dynamic, overall growth that fosters equity and unfolding of individual potential (Quebral, 2012).

We are at a crucial time in history where the world as we know it is undergoing tremendous changes and along with it aspects of development and changes. Over the decades, paradigm shifts have been observed in the aspect of

development. Maybe the pandemic will cause another paradigm shift in development, but it is now causing shifts in the area of communication.

In IPA, access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions; indeed, these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity. Thus, a two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, is involved. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Admittedly, I had my own conceptions, I got to compare how it was when I was still in the practice of community journalism pre-pandemic and how it is now being done under the pandemic. I expected that the second stage of the two-stage interpretation process would be a long period of reflection for me as I tried to make sense of the new world community journalists are living in.

IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It sounded so easy when I tried to envision data gathering and analysis, but a word of caution is always given to those who undertake phenomenological studies – that the study must be as close to the reality it tries to uncover. Indeed, the data gathering was easy but the analysis, far from it. Trying to capture the realities of my participants in full and as accurate as possible was challenging.

IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state. At the same time, IPA researchers realize this chain of connection is complicated – people struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling, there may be reasons why they do not wish to self-disclose, and the researcher has to interpret people's mental and emotional state from what they say (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

## **Chapter III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This case study on the lived experiences of community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for its methodology.

#### **Research Design**

The study called for a case study research design. Yin (2015) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. According to Yin, a case study is preferred when a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which a researcher has little or no control.

#### **Locale and Period of the Study**

The study was conducted in Baguio City where most of the community journalists covering the Cordillera Administrative Region are based.

The lived experience of the participants in this study were relayed through a series of interviews done via Zoom and FB Messenger from August to October 2021. This was the time when General Community Quarantine (GCQ) was still in place in the community with lesser travel restrictions.

But as a colleague and friend of the participants some of my reflections cover other occasional informal conversations beyond the study period.

### **Participants of the Study**

The participants of the study are seven community journalists or members of the local press who continued to cover news under the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study employed theoretical sampling choosing only those whose qualifications meet the criteria set for being a community journalist. The criteria are the following:

1. Must be a community journalist covering the Cordillera Administrative Region;
2. Must have the designation of reporter, photojournalist, or editor;
3. Must be employed in or retrenched from (as a result of the pandemic) any of the community papers based in Baguio City whether operating in print or online;
4. Must be practicing as a community journalist prior to the Covid-19 pandemic; and
5. Must have experienced working as a community journalist under the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a way for phenomenology to have uniformity in the 'lived experiences' of research participants, Polkinghorne (1989 in Alase, 2017), another phenomenologist, advised that phenomenological researchers should interview between 5 to 10

participants who have all experienced similar events (phenomenon). As such, the commonality of their experiences can be captured and interpreted.

I was able to interview seven community press members with a variety in age, gender, and length of experience via Zoom and Messenger.

These are the list of my participants who gave written consent that their names would be used in the manuscript and offshoot publications:

1. Khim Russel Abalos of The Northern Dispatch
2. Lita Jane Cadalig of The Baguio Midland Courier
3. Maria Elena Catajan of SunStar Baguio
4. Karlston Lapniten of The Baguio Chronicle, Philippine Daily Inquirer, and Mongabay
5. Rimaliza Opiña of The Baguio Midland Courier
6. Aldwin Quitasol of The Daily Tribune
7. Kimberlie Ngabit Quitasol of The Northern Dispatch and Philippine Daily Inquirer

I have known six of the participants since 2005 when I started working alongside them as a community journalist for the Baguio Midland Courier. I regularly meet with four of them under the Kordilyera Media-Citizen Council, a press council which aims to engage media, civil society, artists, and the academic community in policing the media and advocating for press freedom. I engage constantly with one of the participants as a co-member of the Cordillera News Agency. The youngest participant was a former student of mine in several journalism courses at the

University of the Philippines Baguio. But at the time of the interview, he was no longer a student of the university.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

I used semi-structured interviews with the participants. Smith and Osborn (2003) said “a strategy often employed in this type of interviewing is to encourage the person to speak about the topic with as little prompting from the interviewer as possible.” They added that this form of interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise.

A semi-structured interview is characterized by the following:

- There is an attempt to establish rapport with the respondent.
- The ordering of questions is less important.
- The interviewer is freer to probe interesting areas that arise.
- The interview can follow the respondent’s interests or concerns (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Given the new normal situation forcing us to avoid unnecessary face to face meetings, I used Zoom and Messenger to interview seven community journalists. The interviews were done in a mixture of Ilocano, Tagalog, and English which proved a little challenging for Zoom to accurately transcribe. Hence, I had to resort to employing the services of a transcriptionist to transcribe more than 22 hours of interviews.

My last three intended participants were senior journalists whom I interviewed in a group over lunch. I was able to take down notes during the interview but the recording could not be transcribed as well as the initial interviews with the other participants. I could also not prod in detail as much as I wanted to. Hence, I decided for uniformity of data gathering, not to include them in the analysis.

Further tips on conducting semi- structured interviews were gathered from critical evaluation of IPA study by Brocki and Wearden (2006). This includes the use of probing questions or other data gathering methods such as the creation of written narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

After conducting the interviews and transcribing them, data analysis can begin. Smith & Osborn (2003) give a very detailed discussion on how to analyze the data from an IPA study.

1. First, the transcript is read a number of times, and annotated for what is interesting or significant about what the respondent said. The transcript can be commented on remembering the facial expressions and demeanor of the participants. Some of the comments are attempts at summarizing or paraphrasing, some will be associations or connections that come to mind, and others may be preliminary interpretations. As you move through the transcript, you are likely to comment on similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions in what a person is saying (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

2. The analysis of the transcript can now closely follow content analysis or free textual analysis. General themes can then be derived from the text. Smith & Osborn (2003) says the skill at this stage is finding expressions which are high level enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases but which are still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said.

3. The emergent themes are listed on a sheet of paper, and one looks for connections between them. So, in the initial list, the order provided is chronological – it is based on the sequence with which they came up in the transcript. The next stage involves a more analytical or theoretical ordering, as the researcher tries to make sense of the connections between themes which are emerging.

Using the theories in journalism and development communication discussed in the earlier chapter, the researcher attempted to find order among the emergent themes.

4. As the clustering of themes emerges, it is checked in the transcript to make sure the connections work for the primary source material – the actual words of the participant. This form of analysis is iterative and involves a close interaction between reader and text. As a researcher one is drawing on one's interpretative resources to make sense of what the person is saying, but at the same time one is constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person actually said.

5. The next stage is to produce a table of the themes, ordered coherently.

The clusters are themselves given a name. The table lists the themes and an identifier is added to each instance to aid the organization of the analysis and facilitate finding the original source subsequently. The identifier indicates where in the transcript instances of each theme can be found by giving key words from the particular extract plus the page number of the transcript. During this process, certain themes may be dropped: those which neither fit well in the emerging structure nor are very rich in evidence within the transcript. answer the research questions.

6. A single participant's transcript can be written up as a case study in its own right or, more often, the analysis can move on to incorporate interviews with a number of different individuals. One can either use the themes from the first case to help orient the subsequent analysis or put the table of themes for participant 1 aside and work on transcript 2 from scratch. Whichever approach is adopted, one needs to be disciplined to discern repeating patterns but also acknowledge new issues emerging as one works through the transcripts. Thus, one is aiming to respect convergences and divergences in the data – recognizing ways in which accounts from participants are similar but also different.

7. The final section is concerned with moving from the final themes to a write up and final statement outlining the meanings inherent in the participants' experience. This stage is concerned with translating the themes into a narrative account. Here the analysis becomes expansive again, as the themes are explained, illustrated and nuanced. The table of themes is the basis for the account of the participants' responses, which takes the form of the narrative argument interspersed

with verbatim extracts from the transcripts to support the case. Care is taken to distinguish clearly between what the respondent said and the analyst's interpretation or account of it. And when one sees the extracts again within the unfolding narrative, often one is prompted to extend the analytic commentary on them (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

As a form of validation and to ensure the authentic voice of the participants, I shared a copy of the final manuscript, which was also given to the Thesis Advisory Committee, to the participants for their review. They fed back that their opinions were captured accurately and signed their consent to have their names used in the manuscript.

### **Ethical Consideration**

As a student of the University of the Philippines, the values of Honor and Excellence have been my guiding principles in conducting this work. Relevant provisions of the Intellectual Property Code of the Philippines, Data Privacy Law, and Libel were also weighed in the choice of words, citations, and omissions for this study. Since this study focuses on journalism, the Philippine Journalists Code of Ethics was also in the back of my mind while giving context to the lived experience of the participants. Lastly, the academic principles on plagiarism, the UP Principles for Responsible and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence Use as well as the UPOU Guidelines on the Use of AI in Teaching and Learning were adhered to in writing the manuscript.

In this study, I tried to present my research findings as accurately as possible based on the transcripts and notes from interviews and informal conversations with my participants. This manuscript is my original work. I analyzed the data and came out with the findings and implications based on my perspective as a Development Communication student, two decades of teaching journalism, and my experiences as a former community journalist.

As mentioned earlier, I have known six of the participants since 2005 when I started working alongside them as a community journalist for the Baguio Midland Courier. I also meet regularly with some of them as members of a press council, the Cordillera Media-Citizen Council, and of the Cordillera News Agency. Hence, my personal experiences as a community journalist and 'one of them' also shape my analysis – as an insider yet looking from the outside.

Since this study relies on human participants, I have endeavored to ensure that they freely and willingly participated in the interviews. The initial consent was verbal, prior to the interviews when I was still inquiring about whether or not they wanted to participate in my study.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained what my study was all about and what the interview would entail, the questions I would be asking, how long it would take, and how I would be using the information they shared. Since I interviewed the participants via Zoom, they have on their end an accept button signifying that they consent to the recording of the meeting. Audio versions of these recordings were then shared with one transcriptionist who converted these into text.

The Zoom recordings both video and audio, as well as the transcripts of these interviews are stored in my computer and in my Google Drive.

I then edited the transcripts for spelling and punctuation. These were then coded and analyzed. The coding sheets were shared with my adviser via a link to my Google Drive. Direct quotations were taken from the transcripts, properly attributed, and given context when used in the manuscript. Some of the facts mentioned by the participants were triangulated with published news articles related to them (i.e. shooting, libel cases, red tagging, and Covid-19 confinement). Vernacular phrases, particularly the Ilocano phrases, were immediately given English translations. The rest of the Filipino quotes were given English translations after the final presentation of the results to my Thesis Advisory Committee.

A copy of the same manuscript given to the Thesis Advisory Committee was shared with each of the participants for their review and validation. After they have reviewed the manuscript, I then asked the participants again via Facebook Messenger and Email if they still consent to have their identities revealed in the study. All seven of them agreed without reservation. To ensure written consent, I sent each of the participants an informed consent form which they signed. A copy of the consent form is appended to this study (Appendix B).

In compliance with the University of the Philippines Principles for Responsible and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence Use on meaningful human control and transparency under Research and Development, I disclose that I did not use Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications to write any part of the text. I confined my use of AI to that integrated in Google Docs and Microsoft Word which

suggests edits in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I used Canva to help generate images for the figures I included in the manuscript.

I used my personal money to pay for this research particularly in the cost of transcription.

With respect to the intellectual property of authors cited in the manuscript, I have tried my best to ensure that all the reference citations in the Review of Literature as well as other parts of the manuscript have a corresponding entry in the Reference List found at the end of the manuscript. I declare no intention to plagiarize any of the works cited in the manuscript.

## **Chapter IV**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings of the study as aligned with the research questions.

As I mentioned in Chapter III, I did the online interviews from August to October 2021 when General Community Quarantine (GCQ) was in place in the community but with lesser travel restrictions. Vaccines were now being offered to media personnel. Covid cases remained high but manageable in Baguio City. This was the perfect time to interview the participants since their experiences were still raw and everyone was still living in the midst of the pandemic.

The participants were all willing to be interviewed about how they were doing under the pandemic. This was my first observation. Many of them have never been asked about how they were doing, how they were faring. The opportunity to talk about their experiences was a way of dealing with the pandemic too.

Since the initial interviews, I constantly kept in touch with all the participants meeting them face to face or conversing online. This way I was able to see how they have been faring. Sometimes I would posit direct questions, other times I would just observe and listen to what they had to say.

I started interpreting their lived experiences based on the transcripts of the interviews, my notes during the interviews, and the constant informal exchanges with

my participants. This was a start and stop process that went on for two years until I finally got to sit down and finish my analysis in January 2024.

In over two years since I started data gathering, a lot has changed in the world vis-a-vis Covid-19. Although the World Health Organization declared an end to its status as a public health emergency of international concern on May 5, 2023, the threat of the disease remains and its status as a pandemic will not be removed.

Hence, the reflection process in interpreting this phenomenon is also influenced by my current state of mind. First the fear brought by Covid-19 has been lessened with the vaccines and what we already know about this disease. Second, there are no more government mandated Covid-19 related restrictions that would stifle the process of journalism and we can safely compare it to the pre-pandemic conditions albeit with observance of minimum health protocols and reliance on technology. Third, there is a general feeling that Covid-19 is a thing of the past although it remains present. The time and distance from initially listening to their experiences allowed me to reflect on them in a different light had I finished my interpretations earlier on. This became my way of bracketing.

In this chapter I would focus on identifying common threads that link the experiences of the participants together and try to interpret the meanings they attach to these experiences. The experiences are grouped in themes rather than chronological arrangement with the end goal of answering the major research question: How did the experiences of community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic shape their practice of doing community journalism under a new normal?

## **Experience of Community Journalists Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The participants were first asked to define the timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic. This way a clearer identification of what is meant by “before” can be gleaned. The term “after” was not defined by the participants since the end of the pandemic could not be determined at the time of the interviews. They instead defined the “new normal” as something that pertains to how life was going on or would go on despite Covid-19 with a present and futuristic outlook.

All the participants agree on this timeline: Before Covid-19, lockdowns, and the new normal. The first two events had a clear commencement date. There is no definite reckoning point for the new normal.

The World Health Organization declared that Covid-19 was a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As the impact of Covid-19 trickled in the local scene, the Philippine government under President Rodrigo Duterte declared the first of the series of quarantine orders which took effect in Metro Manila on March 14, 2020. This was declared in other parts of Luzon including Baguio City and the Cordillera Administrative Region on March 16, 2020. Thus, the participants of this study look at the pandemic timeline as starting from March 16, 2020. Anytime before this reckoning date was called pre-pandemic.

### **Pre-pandemic Lives**

***‘Routine with flexibility’ in the workplace before the pandemic.*** Life for community journalists followed flexible working hours depending on the news to be covered for the day. The routine was similar for each of the participants: go to news

coverage, write the story, and file it in your news desk for publication. Additionally, if the participant was assigned to be on the news desk on that particular day then they have to report in the office to edit and bed the paper.

Malen Catajan, associate editor of Sunstar Baguio, described it as:

“So parang [for example] look for the story where it is or at random you talk to people. You go to their offices, you go to areas. You shoot photographs, we get videos. So walang naka set in stone na schedule basta ang alam ko naka field ako. Tapos may deadline ako alas dose ng tanghali. It depends kung merong nagbanggaan or merong naaksidente ng maaga, so kung kailangan in person mong habulin, pupunta ka. Kung kailangan over the phone gising ka ng maaga. [There is no schedule set in stone, all I know is I have to be on field and I have a deadline at noon. It depends if there is a vehicular accident or any accident in the morning. If you need to be there in person to cover then you have to be there in the morning. If you need to interview on the phone then you have to wake up early, so it really depends] So it really depends, pero sa'kin [for me] since I have most of the contact numbers and contact persons, one phone call away I usually call them. Tapos if need be, I go on field pero very rare na yon kasi most of the stories and the field work na kailangan for example photos and videos meron naman kaming staff. Pero may mga times pa rin na ako personally ang pumupunta. [But there are times I still go personally.]”

Kimberlie Quitasol, EIC of the Northern Dispatch (Nordis) and correspondent for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, described working for Nordis as typical of a community news agency or news community media where “you only have three, four people working. Di ba you only have three people — the EIC, the managing editor, and the voluntary reporters. So you also write, you edit, but you also write so you share almost all of the tasks.”

She added that her usual routine would revolve around news gathering in person. She said:

“Gather news and then you write, you go out, interviews are more face to face, you have press conferences you attend face to face. So yun yung nakasanayan mo [that is what you are used to] if you need documents, for me

I'm not born in the age where everything is online, so parang iba yung feeling na yung document na hawak mo is print, I mean hard copy diba? Ako nasanay ako sa hardcopy ganyan. Parang lately na lang yung realization na talagang online na ang karamihan ng sources mas nag-kick in netong pandemic kesa dun sa pre-pandemic. [It feels different if the document you have is in print or hard copy. I am used to hardcopy. But lately I realized that most of the sources are now online, that realization kicked in under the pandemic as compared to the pre-pandemic.]”

Rimaliza Opiña, reporter and desk editor for the Baguio Midland Courier, said pre-pandemic she would be rushing to do news coverage. “Kailangan kong tumakbo doon kasi may biglaang coverage. [I need to run to wherever they need immediate coverage.]”

All the participants were assigned to cover the Baguio and Benguet beats, but four of them occasionally cover other provinces in the Cordillera region on a regular basis. Most of the travel were confined within the city to visit offices and other news sources. There were no restrictions in movement. Karlston Lapniten, a correspondent of Philippine Daily Inquirer and Mongabay, captured it as: “Very mobile with no restrictions. Diretso lang sa community na pupuntahan mo. [You just go straight to the community you need to go to.]”

Karlston was the only one with his own vehicle which he uses for work trips around the region. Compared to the six other participants, he was always on travel being a photojournalist and national/international correspondent. He usually traveled around twice a month on out of town coverage and stayed much longer.

“For one trip maybe a week, seven days kasi [because] I would travel either Saturday or Sunday then I'll come back Friday but during the pandemic it was

shortened to like around three days four days aalis ka na [you have to leave already],” Karlston said. He added that pre-pandemic you can hop from one barangay to another so in a trip you can schedule at least four destinations. These were all greatly lessened during the pandemic.

There was also no need for any travel documents. You can travel just about any time as long as you have money for fare or gas money, Kimberlie said. Sometimes a source will call you for immediate coverage out of town and you can respond as easily, she added.

Jane Cadalig, assistant editor of the Baguio Midland Courier, described it as:

“Pre-pandemic, as a journalist, you were free to move, free to go to offices and talk to sources, gather information and gather data. So walang restrictions in terms of mobility so parang ang comparison na dito yung nakatali na tayo na kahit gusto mong pumunta even if you want to go to one office and get information you really could not. [There were no restrictions in terms of mobility, in comparison to this situation where you are tied up even if you want to go to one office and get information you really could not]. Pre pandemic I would say that my movement as a journalist to gather information for my articles was never restricted, so free. Free kang gumalaw. Free kang kumausap ng mga tao. [You are free to move. Free to talk to people.] Although pre-pandemic we've been using naman na the emails and the telephones to talk to our sources but noon kasi rare yun kung talagang [because that rarely happens and only if] your source is not within your area of coverage. So yun [that's it] there was really freedom of movement for me.

Three of the participants were working for local daily publications, two for a weekly newspaper, one was a correspondent for a national publication, and one was a correspondent for an international online publication. All of them work on a daily basis to cover the news. Weekends are usually a break unless there are newsworthy breaking events that need coverage.

Because their schedules were very flexible, it was not uncommon for these journalists to have side jobs. Jane and Malen teach part time. Jane at the University of Baguio and Casiciaco Recoletos Seminary and Malen at the University of the Cordilleras. Karlston was doing documentation work for government agencies while Khim did the same for various people's organizations.

***Upheaval and changes in the domestic front.*** Domestic life did not really factor in their being community journalists pre-pandemic, but it was a big aspect for consideration when Covid-19 struck.

The majority of the participants' domestic life setup consists of living with their children, elderly parents, and pets. Six out of the seven participants were living with their extended family members except for Khim Abalos, who was fresh out of college and was living with colleagues in the Nordis staff house.

Kimberlie and Aldwin Quitasol are parents to two teenage sons. Aldwin wakes up earlier than the rest of his family in order to cook and feed their dozens of cats and dogs. Kimberlie said they had their own schedules and they all left the home together in the morning. Only Aldwin's mother remained in the house, unless she needed to go for a checkup or go to the bank for her pension.

Malen is a solo parent to a teenage daughter who was in her final years of high school. Her daughter is very independent which allows flexibility in Malen's schedule.

Jane was living with her elderly mother, son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter.

Rima, meanwhile, lived with her mother, three uncles, and two teenage nephews.

Khim was living with other staff members in the Nordis staff house.

Karlston was the only one who lived outside of Baguio City in their family residence in La Trinidad, Benguet. With him in the house were his four-year-old daughter and his parents. They live in a compound with extended family members.

### **Covid-19 as Threat yet Unknown Danger**

In the months prior to the declaration of the pandemic, some of the participants were already aware of the threat the yet unnamed virus was posing.

Rima and Malen described the pre-pandemic behind-the-scenes in the weeks before the pandemic began such as the limited in-person coverage to five journalists and RSVP requirement for Department of Health (DOH) and Philippine Information Agency (PIA) press conferences. If you do not confirm attendance at once, you would have to resort to covering the online feed of the presscon.

Rima described it as:

“Wala naman masyadong pagbabago except that yung DOH na madalas namin kinocover ano na linilimit na nila noon yung number of attendees ng presscon so tsaka nag aano na yun RSVP. Magbibigay ng advisory ang PIA so only five media can physically cover ganun. So unahan na niyan na ano na

mag-text, mag-reply sa PIA tapos ililista na nila yung pangalan mo. [There were not a lot of changes except that the DOH, which we often cover, started limiting the number of attendees to the presscon, you need to RSVP. The PIA gives an advisory that only five media can physically cover. So you would have to text or reply as fast as you can so PIA can list your names.]”

The five-person limit includes crew members for TV, so an outfit can field two persons for example. This greatly lessened the opportunity for other practitioners to cover the presscon in person. Rima said this began in February 2020. “So literally ang daming naging armchair journalist. If you can’t be there physically ibigay mo naman sa ibang media na gustong magcover na hindi agad agad nabasa yung text message na interesado ka na magcover pero via ano lang online [Literally so many became armchair journalists. If you can’t be there physically then give the slot to other media who want to cover but are not able to reply immediately to the PIA. Anyway you still have the option to cover online,]” she added.

Malen said as a journalist her brain had to be ten steps ahead trying to comprehend what was happening. She said there have been trickles of news about the virus from all over the world since December 2019. There were weekly health advisories so they were alerted to this emerging disease. But the details were unclear. The facts show people getting sick of flu-like symptoms. She described this period as:

“So alam na ng consciousness ko yun as journalist. Tapos nagpro-progress na siya, so yung alarm levels tumataas nang tumataas. So ang ginawa ko nun, ang ginawa namin nun, was to monitor yung respiratory illnesses from the Baguio Health Department. Tumataas ba yung nagkakaroon ng flu? Meron ba tayong mga flu vaccines, anti pneumonia? Kaya lang at that time that was December, January, and Feb those were the coldest months of Baguio. So normal pa rin siya kung baga. Yung utak mo nasa ten steps ahead pero yung data mo it’s normal. Kasi talaga naman malamig, talagang season yun ng magkakasakit, magkakasipon. Medyo na-i-impede yung alert levels sa utak namin, until tumataas na nang tumataas yung national orders in-acknowledge na ng national yung emergency. And then nag-declare na siya

(Baguio Mayor Benjamin Magalong) ng walang pasok (on March 14), so I knew it was bad. [My consciousness as a journalist was aware of what was happening. As the situation progressed, the alarm levels in my brain were also increasing. So what I did was to monitor the respiratory illnesses from the Baguio Health Department. Are cases of flu increasing? Do we have flu vaccines, anti pneumonia? But that was in December, January, and Feb and those were the coldest months of Baguio so the situation was still normal. My brain was ten steps ahead but your data signifies that everything is normal. Because it was really cold, and it was the season for illnesses like colds. The alarm levels in my brain were impeded for a while until we saw the national orders acknowledging a national emergency. And then the Baguio Mayor canceled classes, so I knew it was bad.]”

At that time, journalists covering the DOH already had an inkling of the chaos that would happen if it would ever happen. They have been asking the right questions but the government did not have answers.

Rima relayed the contents of the initial advisories on Covid like:

“Do not eat raw food. Mga ganun yung mga dinidistribute pa nilang leaflets noon. Wala pa yung respiratory etiquette kasi hindi pa na outline noon yung exact na symptoms ng Covid. Puro ano lang noon, in general na mayroon kang viral infection na ano na para kang trinatrangkasong mga ganun lang. Tapos yung belief na, ay yung theory na galing sa pangolin at tsaka sa mga bats ganun pa lang noon yung kokonting information na alam ng lahat noon. [The leaflets being distributed contained initial advisories like ‘do not eat raw food’ and the theory that Covid came from the pangolin and bats. There was no respiratory etiquette yet because the exact symptoms of Covid were not yet outlined. They just say that it was similar to the flu.]”

She also said that their line of questioning was of course on preparation: how much budget the DOH has, what would we do in worst case scenarios within the Local Government Unit, the law on disclosure of Infectious Diseases, and the role of the Bureau of Quarantine. These were all new not only to the journalists but even to their sources tasked to speak on them in the press conferences. They simply answered based on what they knew at that time. They were all working in an

environment of uncertainty.

Although they knew what was happening, Rima said it still came as a shock when the lockdown orders were issued. “I never imagined na magsasara walang masasakyan na magtutuloy-tuloy ito sa loob nang ano magdadalawang taon na. Walang inkling whatsoever, [I have never imagined that there would be closures, and no transportation and that this would continue for the next two years. I had no inkling whatsoever],” she said.

### **ECQ and the Quarantine Alphabet: Experiences Under the Pandemic**

The Extreme Community Quarantine (ECQ) that was announced by President Rodrigo Duterte took effect over the entire Island of Luzon and lasted from March 16, 2020 to April 30 but was extended until May 31, 2020. The ECQ rules specifically prevented the movement of people, the operation of non-essential businesses, and travel to and within the country. The closure of roads with barricades and checkpoints as well as the absence of public transport had the most negative impact on everyone.

A series of modifications to the ECQ followed suit. The participants refer to this as the alphabet soup of quarantine protocols from the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) to the Modified GCQ. All these and variations in their implementation were accompanied by varying guidelines for the community.

**Loss of mobility.** Malen remembers the local declaration of class and work suspension the day prior to the Luzon-wide ECQ. She said:

“I went to the office nagdeclare na kami na kami ng walang pasok and work from home set up at the end of the week. Yun syempre yung headline sa pasok, so dun na nag umpisa pahirap na nang pahirap ang sitwasyon namin, natin na journalist. Kasi ang unang una nawala ay transportation. I remember walking to city hall every day because I had to attend the Mayor Benjamin Magalong presscons. Meron pa siyang daily, gustong gusto pa ng media yun eh, kasi the widest dissemination possible. So araw araw siya eh walang jeep walang taxi. Walang wala akong sasakyan. Meron kaming dalawang katrabaho na may sasakyan kaya lang hindi pwede maging service yun araw araw so naglalakad ako. Tinime ko yung lakad ko from the house to city hall, saktong 30 minutes. [I went to the office and we decided that we will not report to work anymore and we will be on work from home set up at the end of the week. Our headline was the cancellation of classes. That is when my or our hardships started as journalists because the first to disappear was transportation. I remember walking to city hall every day because I had to attend the Mayor Benjamin Magalong presscons. He still had daily presscons and the media wanted that because we were aiming for the widest dissemination possible. So everyday there was no jeep or taxi, I did not have personal transport. I had two officemates with vehicles but I could not rely on them every day so I walked instead. I timed my walk from the house to city hall and it was exactly 30 minutes.]”

Aldwin Quitasol said community journalists live and earn just like any ordinary worker and to have their normal flow of lives disrupted economically and socially was a big blow. He said the many restrictions of the ECQ, particularly on movement, was hard. This thought was mirrored by all of the participants to varying degrees.

The first thing they had to do was to secure their identification as APORs or Authorized Persons Out of Residence from the Philippine Information Agency under the approval of the Interagency Task Force on Covid (IATF). This allowed them passage out of their barangays and into the central business district and government offices to do their work.

For Kimberlie, the ECQ period made them feel the worst impact of the pandemic. She said: “Naramdaman ko talaga yung impact ng pandemic nung ano

na restricted na yung movement diba yung implemented na yung ECQ. Wala kang masakyan. Walang bukas na mga photocopy machines. Walang bukas na computer shops. [I really felt the impact of the pandemic when they started restricting movement under the ECQ. There was no transportation. There were no open photocopy machines or computer shops.]” Since she had to report to work on an almost daily basis, the walks were difficult but she had no choice. Sometimes staying in the office, which doubled as a staff house, became her option.

Although the loss of mobility was harsh, the participants had no choice but to adapt. They had no choice but to walk. The mountainous terrain of the city provided an added challenge.

Jane said she really applauds the workers who were forced to walk to and from work daily. She would also walk to and from the office some three kilometers away when she isn’t monitoring reports from home.

Rima saw it as an opportunity to be healthy as she walked the four plus kilometers from her house to the office or to the city hall where she covered the city council beat. She said:

“Pag sa coverage ako talaga naglalakad. So halimbawa city council session usually umaabot yan nang alas siete or seven thirty. So ano maglalakad na ako pauwi, gabi. Okay lang naman, alam mo, yun ang ganda eh yung walang katao-tao. Walang nagrurush na mga tao. Mga ilaw-ilaw lang from the building ang nakikita mo. It’s ang quiet, ang sarap naman maglakad na. Alam mo nakatulong nga yun sa ano pag-e-exercise, sa fitness. Ang nakikita ko lang doon mga pulis sa kalsada na nag, well making sure na ano quiet pa din siguro ang paligid ganun. Pero it’s the most peaceful Baguio na nakita ko. So it’s really, talagang sinasabi nilang nakapag-recharge ang Baguio. Totoo yun. Pati ang mga tao nakapag-recharge. Walang mga sasakyan, as in wala. So you can walk sa gitna ng Session Road or some of the busiest thoroughfares na hindi ka matatakot na baka mamaya masagasaan ka. [I really had to walk

just for coverage like the city council session which usually ends at 7 or 7:30 p.m. So I have to walk home at night. It was ok. You know it was actually beautiful when no one else was around, no crowds rushing. Just a few lights can be seen from buildings. It was quiet and walking became enjoyable. You know it actually helped me to exercise and work on my fitness routine. Policemen were the only ones on the street making sure that everything was quiet. It was the most peaceful Baguio I have ever seen. Indeed, it is true what they said that Baguio was able to recharge. Even people were able to recharge. There were no vehicles at all so you can walk in the middle of Session Road or some of the busiest thoroughfares unafraid that you will be hit by an oncoming vehicle.]”

If she had to rush to do coverage pre-pandemic, this time it was more relaxed.

“Kasi noong pandemic, hinto ang coverage noon. Parang ang bagal din walang mga breaking news. Walang kailangan mong tumakbo para kailangan mong i-cover yung nagaganap. Parang ang coverage mo lang presscon na may set na time and date. Mas siguro mas naging mabagal ang takbo ng oras so walang rush rush talaga nung ano that time. [Because under the pandemic coverage had to stop too. Every day was a slow day, there were no breaking news events. You didn't have to run to reach events you had to cover. Every coverage was a presscon with a set time and date. It felt like time slowed down, nothing was done in a rush at that time.]”

Luckily for them, on press nights and when needed, their editor in chief and their company provided them transportation service.

After the ECQ ended on May 15, 2020, the protocol shifted to Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ) and then to the General Community Quarantine (GCQ). As travel restrictions were slowly eased with each quarantine modification, media practitioners in Baguio started planning their trips for out-of-town coverage.

Karlston, who was more mobile than the other participants, experienced more travel problems post ECQ. He said:

“Let's start first with when I really felt the effect of the pandemic, probably I can say right around May 2020 because prior to the pandemic, part of my

assignments actually was to go around the region. Most of my work during that time was either in Mountain Province or Kalinga. That May medyo mayroon ng mga [there were a few] checkpoints and it already made covering hassle and stressful because you need to have a swab test, you have to make a health declaration, you need to have coordination with the areas that you're going to interview.”

During the pandemic his trips were shortened to three or four days including travel time. Hopping from one barangay to another was no longer allowed and you would have to stick to just one area where you are allowed to go. He said he had to prioritize by interviewing only those who have no access to phones or the internet. The rest just had to be interviewed with the aid of technology.

Kimberlie echoed the same sentiments. She said pre-pandemic “wala ka pang documents na kailangan masyadong ihanda. Basta may sasakyan ka, may pang gasolina ka, pangkain ka, pwede ka na lumarga, di ba? Eh ngayon kailangan mo na magpa-swab, additional expense siya. [You did not need to prepare any documents. As long as you have a vehicle and money for food and gas you can already go. NOW you have to get a swab test which is an additional expense.]”

She bemoaned the expensive RT-PCR (Reverse transcription - polymerase chain reaction) tests required in the checkpoints which at that time cost around P8,000. This deterred her from going on many trips where she resorted to just calling her sources to gather data. “Wala pa kasing ceiling rate noon tas pahirapan talaga noon ang results. Kasi konti pa lang yung nagproprocess na hospitals tapos ibabato pa sa Manila tsaka ibabalik pa dito, [There was no ceiling rate on prices then and results were hard to come by because only a few hospitals were processing swabs then they have to send these to Manila for testing, and then the results would be

returned back here],” she said. Add to that the waiting time “so kung bibiyahe ka, alam mo naman sa atin ano sa media hindi pre planned yung mga travels, madalas kasi kung ano yung pumutok na balita yun yung pupuntahan mo. [So if you need to travel that would be hard, because usually travels are not pre-planned for us in the media, most of the time you hear of a breaking news happening and that’s what you have to travel to].”

In one of those pre-planned trips to Kalinga where they were reinstalling the monument honoring the heroes of the Chico River, Kimberlie tested positive for Covid-19. She doesn’t know where she got it but she and her family of five were forced to quarantine in their house for two weeks. Her colleagues also had to quarantine in their staff house. The media community rose to their aid by sending them food and groceries during the quarantine period.

***Armchair journalism and efforts for flexibility.*** As almost all offices came to a standstill, the circles of coverage for the community journalists also became smaller.

Kimberlie described this experience as:

“Yung usual na sources mo ng news hindi na ganon ka-regular yung press conferences na face to face. Tapos kahit yung sources mo naga-adjust doon sa via online na ang communication like email, calls ganyan. Though before the pandemic may text messaging, you call, kaso at least before the pandemic nagpre-presscon pa sila. So yun, iba pa rin kasi yung face to face na press conference at face to face na interview. Minsan alam mo yung body language yung mas ramdam mo, yung alam mo yun may mga unspoken na mga details na nakikita mo face to face na hindi mo siya makikita kapag online. Iba din yung environment ba pag ka face to face ang press conference kesa dun sa online siya ganyan. [Your usual sources of news were no longer holding regular face to face press conferences. Even your sources were adjusting to the online communication set up like emails and calls. Although before the pandemic we were already using text messaging and calls but face to face presscons still had a different advantage. You see and feel the impact of body language, sometimes there are unspoken details that you can see

face to face but not online. The environment in face to face press conferences is a lot different than online presscons.]”

Jane laments that like it or not, they eventually became what you call

“armchair journalists.” She said:

“Armchair journalism had a negative connotation before the pandemic but when the ECQ was declared you know what naging ganun kami [that is what we became]. During the ECQ naman [meanwhile] we are allowed to go out (as APORs), but even if journalists are allowed to go out where will they go? They would rather be confined to their offices also and monitor social media pages, use the telephone, use the emails. I became an armchair journalist and I think that was justified, that was justified because I cannot go to La Trinidad. I cannot, I even did not want to physically attend the daily press conferences held by the Department of Health.”

Malen said in Sunstar Baguio they immediately adopted a flexible work setup days after the ECQ declaration. They recognized the impact of the loss of transportation so they brought home equipment such as desktop computers for the layout and design team, the scanners and printers for the proofreading process and digitization. It was hard but had to be done. The deadlines remained the same at 12 noon. She said it was a good thing all of them have good internet connection. “Meron kaming tig-isa isang broadband yung mobile kasi kailangan namin yun pag biyahe. Meron kaming editorial fund so yung funding na yun nalalagyan ng load yung mga broadband ng mga walang home internet so yun nakayanan naman yun pero mahirap, mahirap mag-proofread online. [We had one unit of mobile broadband connection each which we usually used during travel coverages. We also had editorial funding which we used to fund the broadband connection of those who had no home internet connection. So we were able to work under this set-up. But it was not easy, proofreading online was not easy.]”

**Covid stories and fatigue.** Malen added that news gathering during the entire ECQ was a bit easier because you only had one source and topic. She relayed:

“Yung sourcing mo isa lang naman ang source nun eh DOH, BHD, at saka si Mayor eh. So, all your stories nakaikot lang sa Covid. Covid special yun so lahat ng kaugnay sa Covid. Parang yung naka-police beat anong ginagawa ng police nagma-man ng checkpoint. Yung nasa Benguet beat anong nangyayari sa Benguet about Covid. So isa lang talaga ang tema. Tapos sa business beat pareho din lang, ilang businesses na yung nagsara, ilan yung hindi pwedeng mag operate. Kailangan ng tao ng araw araw na update eh. So yun lang yun. Pero nahaluan din ng recovery, isa dun sa mga pinaka, pinakamagandang storya na lumabas, yung recovery nung ano grandmother. So yun Covid pa rin, si lola na may ari ng Mother’s, the oldest Covid survivor. Tapos siya yung naging example ng walang binabayaran kapag naconfine ka sa Baguio kasi zero yung bill niya. [You basically had only one source then: DOH, BHD, and the mayor. So all your stories revolved around Covid. Everything was Covid related. Your police beat would be about what the police were doing manning the Covid checkpoints. In Benguet or the provincial beat you would ask what was happening about Covid. There was only one theme. The business beat had the same topic, how many businesses closed, how many were not allowed to operate. People needed daily updates so that was that. We also covered stories about recovery, like the oldest Covid survivor, a grandmother who did not have to pay anything from being confined in the hospital because the government paid for everything.]”

Kimberlie agrees that coverage might have been eased because of only one topic. However, she shared the negative side of only covering Covid stories at that time. “Yung buong ECQ period puro Covid lang ang kino-cover. I mean, halimbawa correspondent din ako sa national no, so kahit mag-pitch ka ng ibang story, lahat ang gusto Covid related so napabayaang yung ibang mga issues. [The whole ECQ period was just about Covid coverage. I mean as a respondent for a national paper even if I pitch other stories, what they would want would still be Covid related so the other issues were actually neglected.]”

Kimberlie added that for correspondents to national papers like her the singular focus led to less opportunities to publish. “Talagang malaking bawas yun sa

income ng media di ba kasi wala ka ng ibang masulat tapos mag-aagawan pa kayo sa space. May ano pa sa national kung ano yung ilalabas at hindi. Ang babayaran lang naman pag piece rater ka eh pag napublish lang. [It was really a big blow to the income of regional correspondents because you cannot write about anything else and you would still have to compete for space. The national news desk decides whether it will publish your story or not. As piece raters you will only be paid once you get published.]” She said this irregular cycle in the news may have led to fatigue. She said:

“Lahat Covid so parang una, nakakaumay. Nagbibilang kayo ng ilan ang positive, anong variant ba ito, later na lang yung variant. Saan ang surge? So sige ano na ang gagawin? Parang wala na ba kaming ibabalita kung hindi Covid. So we found ways to focus: Ano ang impact niya sa magsasaka. Anong impact niya sa urban poor. Ganun na ang ginawa kasi parang nakakaano naman na ang report mo lang ay ilan ang positive, ilan ang recovery ilan ang namatay. Naka-focus ka doon sa kailangan regularly na in-update—ano na yung mga guidelines? Ano na ang mga protocol? Kasi kailangan talaga yan ng mamamayan. Lalo na nangangapa ang lahat o di ba lalo na nung panahong pabagobago ang schedule sa market. So nung puro Covid na ang story napaka-limited nung story mo. [Everything was about Covid so first you get fed up by it. You are just counting numbers or variants. Where is the surge? What will we do? It felt like we had nothing else to report but Covid. So we found ways to focus: What is the impact on farmers? What is the impact on the urban poor? We had to find a way to break out of the usual reports on how many positive cases, how many deaths, how many recoveries. We focused on the regular updates on the guidelines and protocol because those are what ordinary citizens needed. Especially the market schedules.]”

Karlston felt the Covid fatigue after everyone was writing about it already but eventually found he could not really run away from the topic. He said:

“I wrote several stories for Inquirer about the situation and scenario and I think last year (2020) one of the reasons why I asked for a break from Inquirer was because of that. Medyo nakakaumay na [I was getting a little fed up because] you're always reporting about the lockdowns et cetera. So, after I asked the Inquirer for a break, I wrote this story for Mongabay. It's about Covid but it's actually about the cultural practices of Cordilleran's towards Covid. Just to, you know, just to make it something different. So ayun [that's it] I wrote about it in Mongabay and then even the Inquirer asked me to rewrite it for them.

Nire-write ko siya [I rewrote it] from a different perspective, the practices that we did before and the similarities now.”

Karlston said it felt really really good to show that there are stories beyond just showing the numbers, beyond just showing the health protocols that should be followed, the lockdowns in each of the provinces. There are stories beyond that can be written, that can be enjoyed and can be learned. He added:

“They're looking for something different kasi especially now people are in lockdown they are inside their homes and all they hear is about Covid, all they hear is the rising number of Covid, another protocol for Covid, another quarantine measure for Covid and they're looking, they are looking at different stories. Something to color up parang what they usually see every day.”

Rima felt the Covid fatigue almost a year into the pandemic. She felt that she needed other angles. “Mayroon yung time (August 2021) na wala akong sinubmit na kahit anong Covid story, so na call out ako doon sabi ng editor make sure that we always have a Covid story. Mahigit one year ang laman ng diyaro cover to cover Covid lahat, Covid. Walang ibang story akalain mo yun. [There was a time I did not submit any Covid story, so I was called out and the editor said make sure we always have a Covid story. For more than a year the only content of the paper, cover to cover, was Covid. It was hard to imagine that there were no other topics.]”

***Loss of hard copy and street sales.*** The travel restrictions had a negative impact on the printing and circulation of hard copies of the newspapers.

For Rima and Jane, they noted a steep decline in the pages and copies printed by the Baguio Midland Courier. There were no ads and stories were limited. They had stocks of paper for printing but there were no newsstands and no on street buyers too. Luckily, despite the setbacks, they did not have to stop printing,

remaining to be the longest running community newspaper in the country since 1947.

It was a different story from Malen in Sunstar Baguio. They had to slow down printing, then eventually had to stop during the two-month ECQ because they no longer had paper to print on as the supplier cannot send stocks. Their printing plates, which were also being made in Dagupan City in Pangasinan, could also not be sent back to Baguio as the provincial bus and van lines stopped operating. Before the pandemic, they would email their files to Dagupan City before 5 p.m. and the plates were sent back for printing before 7 p.m. “So, there was no way for us to produce the paper,” she said.

However, their digital sales of advertisements reached 100 percent. Malen said the street sales were zero but the ads intended for print were converted into digital ads and broadcast commercials on their website.

Common to both papers is the loss of judicial notices which is a well known source of income for many community papers as the courts of justice also stopped operating for a time.

***Media club rises to the rescue.*** As the initial lockdown began, Aldwin Quitasol had to bear much more than working as a correspondent for The Daily Tribune. He probably had the biggest burden to bear because he was the president of the Baguio Correspondents and Broadcasters Club (BCBC), the biggest media club in the city with over a hundred active members.

When the restrictions happened he had to rise up in his role as BCBC president. In the course of the pandemic, many lost their jobs in ABS-CBN, Sunstar Baguio, and other smaller papers. Also primarily affected were the senior citizen media practitioners who were no longer allowed to go out and work. He said “Tinalakdak met diay members ti BCBC, di insakitdak met adi isakitmi met isuda, kaya maysa nga pamilya met ti Baguio media, Baguio and Benguet media. [They trusted me to be president. They empathized with me, hence I have to also empathize with them. We are after all just one family in the Baguio and Benguet Media.]”

The BCBC started helping media colleagues, even non-members, by collecting aid and relief for them and their families. Aldwin said the first thing was to come up with a media help desk which they situated at the Baguio Public Information Office (PIO) at the city hall. Then they started calling up media friends from government agencies, commercial establishments, politicians, market organizations, among many others. They all came to help—a beautiful practice carried over from decades past seen during the Baguio Earthquake in 1990, various storms and landslides, and mining tragedies.

“Yung community naman di ba yun yung kaibahan ng Baguio media. Close knit yan so merong system ng ayuda para sa isa’t-isa kahit dun sa access, so mga yun nga assistance from government, dahil media merong nakukuha, [Our sense of community sets the Baguio media apart. We are a close knit community so there is a system for relief and access to assistance from the government],” Kimberlie said.

BCBC talked with the mayors and the congressman and they were given supplies of masks, alcohol, and vitamins which were very scarce at that time. Malen said the media club really came to the rescue since even their own news outfits cannot provide them protective gears. She said:

“Wala nang mabiling surgical, so yung cloth facemask na pinurchase, emergency purchase, ng media club ng BCBC. Kasi ang unang inisip namin, aside from of course the daily operation ng Sunstar, how to protect yung mga tao. How to protect each other lalo na kami. Kasi kami lang ang daily so nag-reach out, nag-coordinate kami tsaka nag-coordinate ang BCBC para mabigyan ng facemask na cloth yung mga nagko-cover. Tapos naka-acquire kami ng surgical mask pero P1,500 per box noon. So nakabili lang kami ng dalawa so nagbigay kami ng tig-lima sa covering team. [There were no surgical face masks available, so we bought cloth masks. It was an emergency purchase of the media club (BCBC). Because one of the first things we thought of, aside from the daily operation of Sunstar, was how to protect our people. How to protect each other, especially us who were working daily. We reached out and coordinated with the BCBC so we can provide cloth masks for the covering team. Then we were able to buy surgical masks at P1,500 per box, we bought two and gave five each for the covering team.]”

In the weeks following the ECQ announcement, donations came in cash and in kind. “Pero mas marami yung in kind, through the BCBC efforts mas marami yung in kind na pumasok. Bigas—Dios ko malaking tulong yun, [There were more donations in kind, through the BCBC’s efforts. Donations like rice—my god, that was a very big help],” Kimberlie said.

Sourcing food was the next big problem during the ECQ. The immediate loss of income for many workers meant hunger in the long run. Kimberlie said “May mga pumupunta sa PIO na nagtatanong saan sila pwedeng kumuha ng ayuda. Yun talaga eh food ang problem nung panahon na yun bukod sa madami nga ang nawalan ng trabaho. [There were people going to the PIO asking where they could ask for relief goods. Food was really a problem during that time. Apart from the fact that a lot of people lost their jobs.]”

Vegetables, groceries, and rice became part of the donations received by the media. Khim said he benefited from the media club even if he was not yet a member

of it since he had to be a media practitioner for two years before being invited to the club. “Yung mga relief packs po, mga gulay yung mga binibigay sa PIO. Tas punta ka lang doon bibigyan kayo. So yun na maximize din po namin yung mga ganun tulong. [I benefited from the relief packs and vegetables being given at the PIO, you only have to go there and get them. We were able to maximize that kind of help.]”

Kimberlie said they recognized the position of access that they were in as media workers. “Nagawan natin na makapag-solicit dahil media ka, meron kang access sa ganon eh. Paano yung ibang wala, so yun yung iisipin mo noh? Paano naman yung iba na hindi, wala silang ganitong connection? [We were able to solicit as media personnel because we had access to people and offices. But others do not have the same privilege and you have to think about that too. What will happen to the less privileged? Those who do not have connections?]”

In the months that followed, BCBC was also instrumental in advocating for the media to receive financial assistance from the Department of Labor and Employment. Even colleagues who were not directly involved in the news process like the printers, ad agents, administrative and other office workers were also included in BCBC’s programs.

BCBC also worked with the LGU and the Department of Tourism for the inclusion of media members and their dependents under the A4 priority list. Many members of the media and their dependents were vaccinated ahead of the rest of the population in August and September 2021.

Rima said the BCBC was a very big help to all of them. She said:

“Sila yung naki pag dialogue sa mga officials kasi yun nga ang media parang maipappaigid ngay a kanayun [naisasantabi palagi] so sa local government please help the media also, kasi frontliners din naman kami. So we actually benefited from relief items, plus yung testing naisali rin ang media, plus sa vaccination. Thankful kami na actually nakatulong na organized ang media organization dito sa Baguio. Sa ibang lugar kasi ano sila watak-watak so at least dito sa Baguio mayroon tayong umbrella organization. Kasi dati di ba we know BCBC's just a mere social club, ngayon nakatulong siya na ano na yung plight naman ng media is nabigyan pansin din naman ng mga kinauukulan. [BCBC mediated with the officials for the media who were always set on the sidelines. They asked the local government to please help the media also because we are also frontliners. So we actually benefited from relief items, free swab testing, and being prioritized for vaccination. We are thankful because it actually helped for the media to be organized under one umbrella organization unlike in other areas. Before we just looked at BCBC as a mere social club, but now it really helped advocate for the media's plight.]”

Since one of the major problems identified among the members was finances, BCBC pushed through with the creation of the Cordillera Media Credit Cooperative (CMCC) with the help of the Cooperative Development Authority to accommodate loans. The long-term goal is to help support media members and their families in their finances and for housing. This was part of the BCBC's plan for decades but had never materialized. The pandemic became the impetus for it to be formed.

Malen said she still marvels at the media community within the Baguio community and its role during the pandemic. “Ano ba naman ang BCBC ang liit-liit pero pinush button natin lahat ng resources natin to be able to give journalists food, medicine, face mask, free swab so every week yan buong ECQ. Tutulungan natin sarili natin kasi meron talagang wala. [What is BCBC but a small organization? But we were able to maximize all our resources to give journalists food, medicine, face masks, and free swab testing every week for the duration of the ECQ. We have to help one another because there are media personnel who really have no other

recourse.]”

A BCBC president is only supposed to sit for a year and turnover leadership to the newly elected president a few weeks before Holy Week, when the traditional Search for the Lucky Summer Visitor (LSV) to Baguio is conducted. The LSV is a decades old program of the BCBC where they treat chosen tourists to a three-day free tour and accommodation to the city and nearby towns in Benguet. However, the pandemic essentially stopped tourism in the city. BCBC members joked that Aldwin will remain president until another LSV is conducted. Such is their support and trust in him that they don't want him replaced.

Aldwin said sometimes he feels so stressed about being president because he is obliged to think beyond himself and think about what else can be done for his colleagues. Thinking is stressful, he said, and whatever you plan has to work. “Ta ni kababain ken talaga a nagmadi diay presidenteka in name ngem saanka met agkutkuti. Nagpresidentka gapu lang ta kayatmo nga agbalin a president,” he added. [It is shameful to be president in name only and not do the work. It would be embarrassing to run as president just because you want to be called president]. He added, however, that despite the burden caused by the pandemic he has no regrets in being the president.

***Balancing of domestic life and profession.*** The domestic chores, particularly going to the market, was made difficult by the restrictions. In Baguio City, the LGU assigned twice-a-week market days for the 129 barangays under the ECQ and MGCQ. The same schedule was followed by banks, groceries, and other allowed

business establishments. Each household was given an ID or pass by the barangay.

For Rima, if market day coincided with press work or coverage she would have to leave early in order to fit in the market schedule, lug all her purchases to the office, then go to work and bring everything home at night. Being the only authorized person to leave their residence she found the domestic side of her life more difficult than her work.

For Kimberlie, coming from the biggest barangay in the city, market days were difficult. By the time she reached the grocery after work there were no longer stocks left. Add to that the fact that she and her husband Aldwin were raising teen boys whose growing appetites consumed whatever stocks they had in a jiffy. She said:

“Yung pamamalengke, yung pagbili ng mga pangangailangan mo. Lalo na ang Irisan (barangay where they reside) ang laki-laking barangay, ang dami-dami namin tapos ische-schedule kaming lahat sa iisang araw. Kami pa lang puno na yung grocery, puno na yung palengke. Eh may iba pa kaming kasabay na barangay. Yung added burden doon yung ang haba-haba ng pila. Ang dami daming kuskos balungos na hindi katulad noon na papasok ka na lang kung ano yung nasa listahan mo bibilhin mo. Tas ano ngayon ay may pila, nauubusan ka ng brand na nakasanayan mo, na gusto mo, so mag iisip ka ngayon kung ano ang ipapalit ko dito. [Going to the market to buy your needs is difficult particularly if you are from Irisan, which has a very large population. They give us only one market day in a week. Then we would still be scheduled along with other barangays. Our population alone can fill up the grocery stores and the wet market. The long queues are an added burden. The checkpoints and health protocols before you enter the markets is another, unlike before when you could easily just go in and out. Then when you are finally in the grocery, the brands you prefer no longer have stocks, you would then have to worry about what to replace them with.]”

Malen felt lucky in a sense that she and her teenage daughter, who even started baking, were amply provided for. “Hindi ako masyadong nagpanic buying ng pagkain. Hindi ako naniwalang mauubusan ng pagkain. So hindi ako masyadong na

alarm dun. Na alarm ako sa walang sasakyan, [I didn't really do panic in buying food. I did not believe that food would run out. So I was not alarmed by that, I was more alarmed by the lack of transportation]" she said.

For Khim, living in the office staff house allowed him to survive on their meager allowance. They pooled money for food and thrived on ayuda or relief especially during the ECQ period.

Apart from worrying about food, they had to contend with the needs of their housemates. These included the home schooling of the students and managing the boredom especially among the senior citizens.

Rima who was living with three senior citizens said:

"Thankfully, walang medical emergency. Nung una okay pa kaya pa kahit ilang buwan na naka-stuck doon. Kaya lang it's more of yung halimbawa yung mother ko nagiging irritable na talaga siya. Siguro yung araw araw na nakikita ko itong mga tao na ito. Tapos before siya nagretire she's very busy din talaga working, career woman din siya. So siguro hindi na siya sanay na dagidiay lalaki idiyay balay ket kua garud hindi sila yung magluluto [the men in the house will not cook] mga ganun. So lahat nakaano sa nanay ko na siya ang magluluto. Parang my God sa tanda kong ito ganun. So very irritable siya doon sa dalawa kong uncle na ewan ko bigla silang nawawala. Na pag umaga wala naman sila sa bahay or late naman na nagigising mga ganun. [Thankfully we did not have any medical emergencies. The first few months were ok. Then my mom suddenly became more irritable. Perhaps because she was seeing the same faces at home. Because she was also a very busy career woman before she retired. Then she was relegated to cooking for her brothers stuck with her at home during the pandemic. The burden of cooking, cleaning up after them, and worrying about why they would suddenly disappear for hours or wake up late became stressful.]"

On days when she can work from home, Rima helps out. "Pero pagnakafield talagang hindi ko siya matulungan. Maagang maaga na ako aalis, gabi na ako babalik. So mostly sabi ko nga sa kanya nung career woman ka hindi mo ginagawa

ito, ngayon naging housewife ka bigla. Siguro ano na rin it's more of the age na rin na umiigsi ang pasensya. [If I was assigned to fieldwork I really could not help my mother. I have to leave very early and arrive home quite late. I know that she wasn't used to being a housewife since she used to be a career woman. I think she has become less patient because of these circumstances and her age.]”

Kimberlie shared the same experience with her mother-in-law. She said:

“Senior si mother, iba din naman yung boredom niya kasi bukod sa senior siya meron siyang disability. Medyo hirap sa mobility. Eh dati pag kukunin niya yung kunware panahon ng pension, ano at least rumuar apan idiy [she goes out to] Burnham. Makikita niya ano na nagbago sa Baguio ganyan. Aawayin niya yung traffic so may iba siyang napapansin. I mean may iba siyang environment. Eh ngayon this whole time since the pandemic dun lang siya sa bahay so iba rin yung boredom niya. Tapos ang kasama niya yung mga apo niya eh dati iba rin yung kanyang schedule eh kasi pag umalis na yung mga apo niya eh di iba rin yung gagawin niya. Eh ngayon parang may panahon din na nagkakasawaan sila sa pagmumukha ng isa't isa, may panahon na they get on each other's nerves di ba? So may mga ganon na itro-trouble shoot mo kasi syempre parehas na nakulong yan eh nang matagal. Parehas na nadi-disrupt yung kanilang usual routine ganyan. [My mother-in-law is a senior citizen and a PWD so she has difficulty in mobility. Before the pandemic she would at least go out to get her pension from the bank and visit Burnham Park. She would have a different environment to criticize. She will complain about traffic and everything else. This whole time under the pandemic she was just stuck in the house suffering from boredom. She was not alone since my sons were with her. But she got used to them leaving for school. Now they are stuck with one another and they tend to get on each other's nerves. These are situations we would have to manage or trouble shoot because all of them have been forced to stay home for a long period. All of their routines have been disrupted.]”

She also had to help her children with their school work which she admitted was difficult. She said:

“Buti na lang marunong silang aliwin ang mga sarili nila tsaka malalaki na sila, mga 12, 17 ganyan nung nag-umpisa. Kung iimaginine ko yung mga katulad ng age ng mga anak mo no [*my kids were 4 and 6 at that time*], iba yung kanila di ba kailangan mo bigyan ng something. At least kahit papaano mas madaling kausapin ang mga ito, dahil pre teen at saka teen. Isa pang in-adjust yung online classes yung blended online thing, syempre hindi ka prepared na maging teacher diba? Hindi ka prepared. Kasi kinalimutan mo na

yung mga yun after exams nung high school di ba? [I am grateful that they already know how to entertain themselves and they are already grown up around 12 and 17 when the pandemic started. I could only imagine what it would be like if they were the same age as your kids *[my kids were 4 and 6 at that time]* our situation would be very different since you would have to do something for them. At least my kids are easier to talk to because they are in their teens. One more adjustment is the online classes or the blended learning system. Of course, who would have been prepared to become a teacher? I wasn't prepared. Who remembers anything about our lessons once we finished highschool?]"

### **Vaccines and the New Normal**

The “new normal” has been a by-word generally used to refer to the state of life at the onset of Covid-19. It connotes different meanings from various users. Hence the question of what for them is the new normal was asked from our participants.

***Vaccines for frontliners like the community media.*** Recognized as frontliners, members of the community media were given slots for priority vaccination by the City Government of Baguio and the Department of Tourism. This happened in August and September 2021 with 71 media members and their dependents vaccinated.

By the time of these interviews from August to October 2021, all of the participants in this study have already received at least the first dose of a variant of the Covid vaccine.

Rima was an exception as she fell under the A3 category because of her co-morbidities, hence she was vaccinated ahead of the rest.

There was a delay of the second dose for those who chose the Sputnik

vaccine produced by the Gamaleya company which was offered to the media. Jane recalled the situation as:

“That time there were two grants: one is the Sinovac and the other is Gamaleya. So we chose Gamaleya kasi [because of its] 98% efficacy rate although wala rin akong problema doon sa 50% efficacy [although I didn’t really have a problem with 50% efficacy]. 50% protection is better than no protection at all diba? [isn’t it?] So I chose Gamaleya because they assured us that our supply for our second dose is already secured so sabi nila hindi ho natin gagayahin ang ginawa ng Manila na nag first dose sila na hindi assured yung second dose. [They said we will not copy what they did in Manila when they gave the first dose without assuring the availability of the second dose.]”

When the delivery of the second dose was initially delayed, Jane and the other media members who chose Gamaleya were already at their wits end. She said:

“They said we couldn’t push through because of lack of vaccine supply, so that really annoyed me kasi inassure ninyo kami [they assured us] that the second dose is ready. Andiyan na sabi so kung wala sana yung assurance na iyon di ba [The vaccine is already here they said. Had they given no assurance] I would have chosen Sinovac. Sana fully vaxed na ako [I would have been fully vaccinated], I would fall under the fully vaccinated population. Until now hinihintay pa rin [we are still waiting]. [They said we couldn’t push through because of lack of vaccine supply, so that really annoyed me because they assured us that the second dose is ready. They said the vaccine is already available, had they given no assurance, I would have chosen Sinovac. I would have been fully vaccinated. I would fall under the fully vaccinated population. But until now we are still waiting.]”

The second dose arrived around three months later.

At that point I had also not received the vaccine because I was pregnant and having second thoughts about it. I eventually relented at the advice of my obstetrician and had my shots very late in my pregnancy. As providence would have it, I gave birth during the height of a Covid surge in Baguio City in January 2022, the baby and I were safe. I reflect on this in hindsight as I try to understand how knowing when my participants have been vaccinated and when they considered the new

normal to have emerged, if there is a correlation between the two.

***Varied definitions of the new normal.*** The participants have varying definitions of what is the new normal. Only one of them used the vaccine as a reckoning point. Three used the lifting of the ECQ over the community as the reckoning point. While the rest of the participants said we have not yet reached the point of a new normal.

After vaccination, perhaps. This is how Aldwin perceived when the new normal would occur. At the point of the interview, he had just received his first dose of the Moderna vaccine. Like so many others, he was banking on the declarations made by WHO and DOH that the vaccine will be the start of the end of Covid-19 and usher in the new normal.

Rima did not look at vaccination schedules to define the new normal. She said the new normal entered sometime in June or July 2020 when the ECQ was already switched to the Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ). She said:

“Nasa somehow nagresume ang public transportation although may restrictions. Nag open somehow ang mga restaurants mga ganun, yun na para sa akin ang new normal. Ang new normal na para sa akin kastoyen agma-masktayo nga kanayunen [it’s now this, we will always be wearing masks]. Yung may limit na hindi na pwede ang overcrowding. Yung bawat gawin mo naka appointment, ganun. Hindi na pwede yung ura-urada lalabas ka. And then sa market inalis na rin somehow yung market schedules para sa akin yun na. Yung sa bangko mayroon nakaka-irita yung mga HDF (Health Declaration Form) tsaka mga contact tracings slip. Yung ganun new normal yun. Yung para kang nagpapa-check ng attendance lagi kung saan ka pupunta ganun, para kang may locator slip lagi ganun. [I think it was when public transportation resumed even with plenty of restrictions. When restaurants started opening. That is the new normal for me. This is it, we will always be wearing masks. There will be a limit to prevent overcrowding. All things you do must have a prior appointment. Gone are the days when you could just do what you want, go out when you want to. And the market is now open, there is no need for schedules, that is the new normal. In the bank you would still have the irritating Health Declaration Form and contact tracing slip.

That is the new normal, the fact that you would be having your attendance checked wherever you go, like having a locator slip.]”

In fact, her timeline has her living in the new normal for almost a year when she expounded on the question.

Kimberlie agrees with Rima’s definition that the new normal started after the ECQ was lifted. She said:

“Tingin ko yung new normal nag-start kung sa akin ano after nung strict. Kasi bilang media ano makakalabas pa rin kami diba? Kahit papaano hindi kami ganun ka-restricted. Ang restricted lang naman is travel outside the city. Pero within the city we were able to move about, yun nga lang syempre yung mga offices restricted. For a time noong ECQ time, skeleton force yan eh. So depende kung sino yung andun din sa offices. So para sa akin yung nag-start talaga nag-kick-in yung first, yung ECQ period, talaga yun yung napakalaking adjustment for me, so nung after na noon. [I think the new normal started after the strict restrictions (ECQ) ended. Because as media personnel we could still go out anyway, right? I mean in a way we were not really that restricted. What is restricted is travel outside the city. But within the city we were able to move about, even if many offices are restricted areas. For a time during the ECQ, most offices worked on a skeleton force, interviews would depend on who would be available in the offices. The ECQ period was a very big adjustment for me, and after that came the new normal.]”

Jane paused for a while before answering. She said “Yun nga I'm contemplating nga [That’s true, I am contemplating about it] but anyway I think the new normal, sabi nga [they say] there are projections that we will have to live with this for long. So, I would say that the new normal started when Baguio was classified under general community quarantine (GCQ).” The GCQ declaration was made in February 2021.

Jane said under the GCQ, economic activities were already allowed subject to the guidelines imposed by the IATF to minimize the spread of the Covid-19.

Karlston has an interesting take on the new normal. He differentiated between the new normal of our daily lives and the new normal in journalistic work. At the time of the interview he says we have not yet reached the level of the new normal. “I think wala pang [there is yet no] new normal because the protocols are changing, protocols are changing every now and then. It's either we add more on top of the layer of protocols or would be reverted so we don't really have this established so-called new normal.”

“I think the new normal would be to have yourself checked if wala kang [if you don't have] symptoms. If you don't feel anything then okay you can travel, you can work, you can do this. But if you have, either you test, get tested, or you wait for the incubation period to worsen itself.” This is his take on the new normal in our daily lives which in 2023 has already become the norm.

But in terms of working, he said:

“I think wala pa [we haven't reached it yet] I don't see a new normal because it's constantly changing. We don't have this definite set up. It would be okay sana if the new normal would be logging online, it's all online. But no, in our line of work there are fixes that you really don't do online. There are a lot of things that you do not do online, especially if you take pictures, you take actual scenarios, interviewing people who are not comfortable with technology. I think we cannot really have that classified under the new normal.”

The daily life norm has become new, but the journalistic life, although it has been changed by technology, did not really become new.

Khim defines the new normal as a “condition or state na kinalalagyan natin kung saan nakapag-adapt na yung lahat ng sectors doon sa kalagayan nung health

natin in general, kasi syempre nasa pandemic tayo. [A condition or state where all sectors have adapted to the situation as regards their health because we are in a pandemic.]” For him we have not yet reached the point of new normal because he felt at that period that the government response to allow all sectors to adapt to the pandemic has been very slow.

Asked if he has personally adapted to the pandemic he answered yes.

“Ako kaya masasabi ko naman na naka pag adapt na ako kasi parang ito na talaga, parang andiyan na yung Covid. Kahit ano gawin natin kahit sabihin natin na marami ng vaccinated sa paligid ganyan. Kung titingnan mo kasi siya, generally hindi pa rin maayos yung pandemic response ng government. So parang ikaw sa sarili mo you have to adjust na lang din doon sa kung papaano ka hindi makaka-contract ng virus. Paano mo mapra-practice yung minimum health protocols paano sa bahay or sa office. [I believe I have adapted to the pandemic; I have resigned myself to the fact that Covid will always be present even if a large portion of the population has already been vaccinated. The pandemic response of the government still needs a lot of improvement. You would have to make adjustments on the individual level to avoid contracting the virus, how you would be developing your own health protocols at home or in the office.]”

### **Challenges and Adjustments as Community Journalists During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

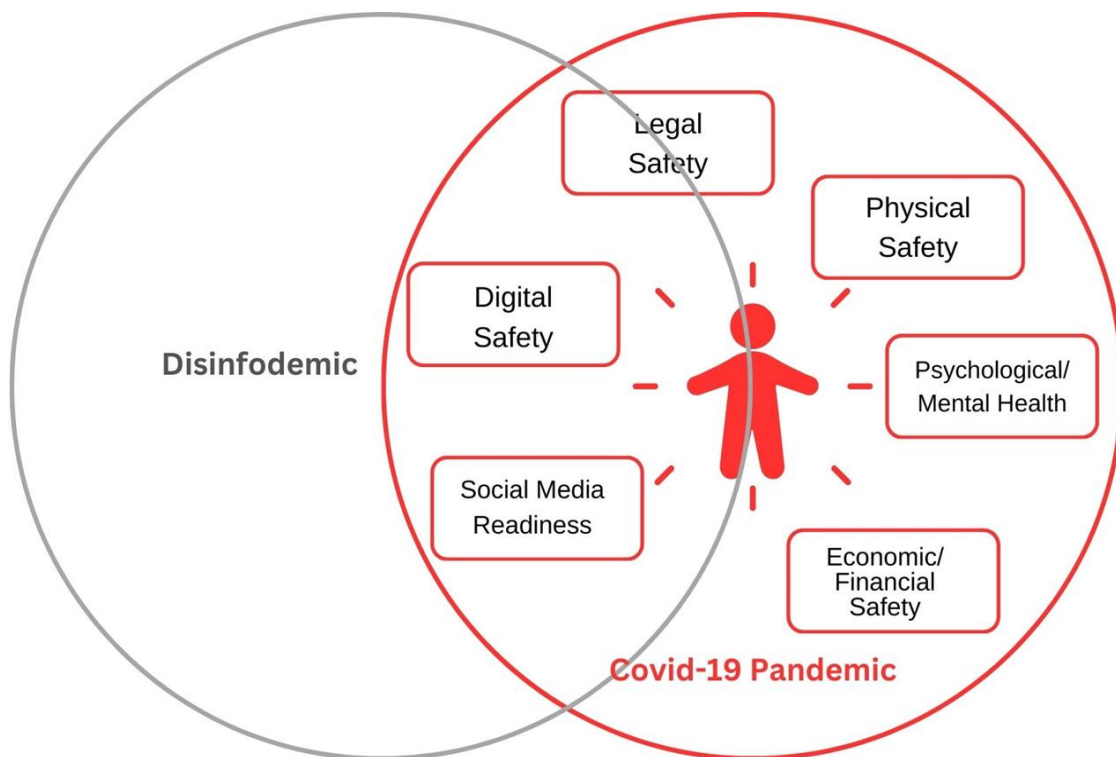
In the literature review, the United Nations (UN) showed various aspects of the lives of journalists where they face the most challenges. Departing from just asking what challenges the participants have experienced and their coping mechanisms, I followed the UN list to guide the questions more specifically. The participants identified whether or not they faced those challenges and gave more specific examples under these challenges.

All these challenges and adjustments are summarized in the figures in the

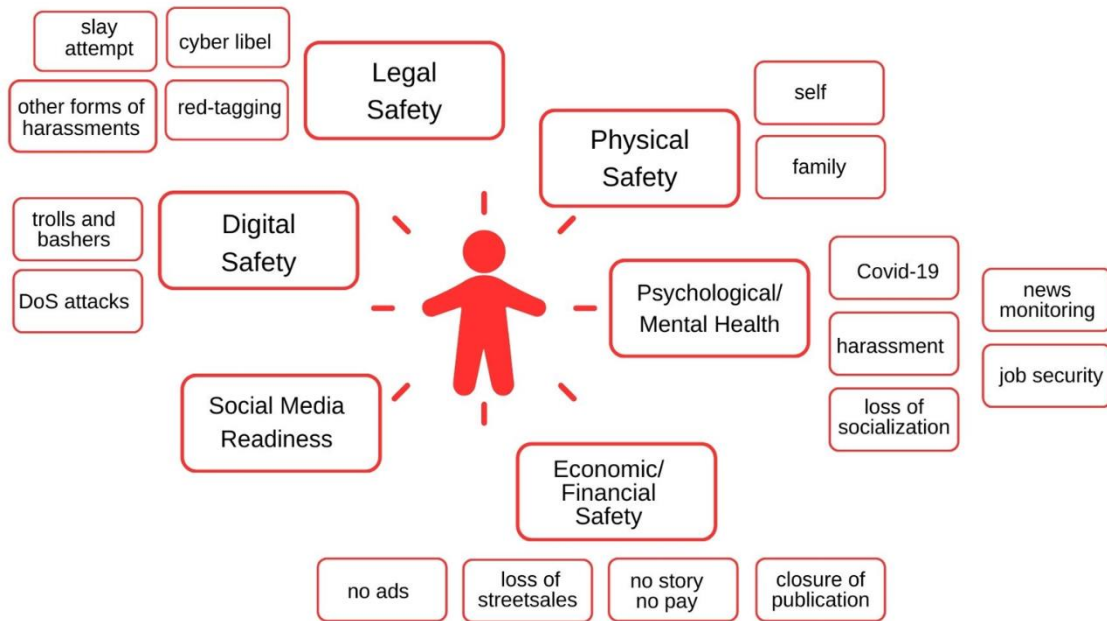
next pages. Figure 1 shows the challenges for community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic including its twin problem the “disinfodemic.” Digital Safety, Social Media Readiness, and some aspects of Legal Safety happen in virtual spaces and share the space with the disinfodemic. The other challenges happen in the real or physical world.

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of challenges faced by community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Figure 1.** *The challenges for community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic*

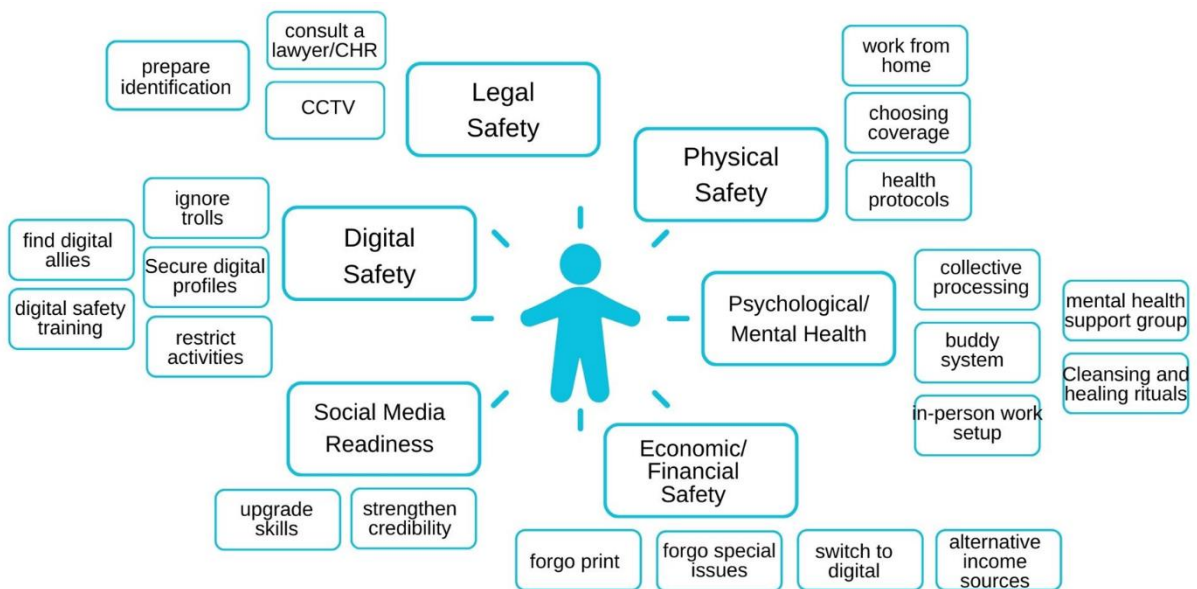


**Figure 2. Breakdown of challenges faced by journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic**



To summarize the adjustments that community journalists had to make in order to adapt to the challenges we can capture them in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Breakdown of adjustments to the challenges faced by journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic**



## Physical Safety

All the participants experienced the challenge of physical safety since they are putting their bodies at risk of contracting Covid-19 everytime they go to work. Despite wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as face masks and face shield, using sanitizers and alcohol, frequent handwashing, setting up disinfection sections in the home or office, bathing upon arrival home, and social distancing, the participants were still at risk. Indeed, by 2021 three of the participants had contracted Covid-19, I had also contracted the dreaded disease.

In trying to capture their experience with this challenge I prodded how they reacted to testing positive and how the threat of contracting Covid was affecting the way they do their work and the way they acted around their families.

Aldwin said: “We are at risk physically because we are frontliners. Even if you have gears, face mask, face shield, you still risk your body because of the nature of your work.” He added that if they did not risk themselves then they would not be able to gather news, without news they wouldn’t be able to earn a living. He said:

“Nu iti kwa, haan tayo met maibaga nga safe tayu ti Covid uray nabakunaan tayu ta diay ngarud awan ti 100 percent nga assurance na nga saan tayu affected. Financially ket haan tayu maibaga latta nga secured tayu. Tuloy tuloy latta met dayta ken ada manen dayta threat ti Delta nga kumarkaro ket anya ngay nu ag lockdown tayu manen karkaru manen didjay. [We cannot say we are safe from Covid-19. Covid infections can happen even with the vaccine, there is no 100% assurance. Financially we cannot say that we are secure. The threat continues and with the Delta variant, another lockdown is possible.]”

Karlston, who contracted the disease along with his family, rationalized that:

“We need to be healthy and safe for us to cover and we need to be healthy and safe so that we could not infect our families especially since well specially

as Filipinos we are very tight knit families. We don't stay in one house na kayo lang. We have our extended families in the house.”

Malen contracted the virus a few weeks after our interview. She was confined in one of the bunkers in the Baguio Convention Center. This is where she was able to write her “Covid Diaries” published under Women Writing Women. Because she was quarantined and her daughter was left home alone, Malen said she felt the stress and anxiety. More anxiety and frustration came when she found out she infected her daughter. However, this was also the time she felt the utmost support of friends, especially those in the media, who would visit her in the facility and later on in her home to leave food and shout out messages of encouragement.

Khim has never been home to his parents since the pandemic struck. “Hindi po during the pandemic,” he said. “Hanggang ngayon hindi pa ako nakakauwi kasi may takot din po ako na baka ako pa yung magdala ng Covid sa kanila. [I have never been home since the beginning of the pandemic. I still fear that I might be a carrier and bring Covid to them.]”

Asked how he felt about it, he said:

“Masaklap po. Mahirap, malungkot, kasi syempre ano kasi nung college parang nasanay ako na binibisita ako. Na kahit at least once or twice a month nakakauwi ako. Pero nung nagpandemic, hindi naman po inexpect na parang ano na magkakaroon ng pandemic kasi umakyat ako ng January tapos pumasok ako ng Nordis ng Feb. Tapos yun na nag-lockdown na ng March tapos tinatanong nila mama, ng family kung kayang makauwi kung may public transpo parang first half (2020) nung ano di ba walang byahe ano particularly papunta sa amin sa Nueva Ecija. Walang dumadaan parang recently na lang na open yung UV express ulit, yung mga van. [I feel devastated. This is a hard and sad situation. When I was in college my family used to visit me all the time. Or I would go home at least once or twice a month. My last trip home was in January, I officially joined Nordis in February. Then the lockdowns began in March. My mom and my family were asking if it was possible for me

to go home but there was no public transportation going to our place in Nueva Ecija. It was only recently that the UV express vans resumed their services.]” As a way of self-preservation, Rima admitted to limiting her coverage areas.

“I admit naging choosy ako noon. I did not attempt na magpunta sa hospital. Ayaw ko kasi. Although hindi rinequire pero mas maganda sana if you can describe what's happening in the health center for example. Pero I chose not to because for protection na rin. Kasi actually more ang iniisip ko noon ang mga kabahay ko ay senior citizens. So that's how I cope—na-limit yung pupuntahan kong lugar na kung alam kong for example hospital alam natin na mas mataas ang rate or the possibility that you can be infected. Kasi nga ang daming may sakit na pumupunta. So I never attempted na magpunta sa hospital. Or I never attempted na magpunta mag-interview na from someone na nasa triage. Yung nanay ko magkatabi kami sa kama so the risk is greater kung halimbawa nahawa ako tapos magkatabi kami so yun. That's how I cope, I make sure na sana as much as possible hindi ako mapalapit doon sa alam kong baka ma-infect ako. [I admit I became choosy with coverage. I did not attempt to go to the hospital for personal reasons. Although I wasn't required to do it, I kept thinking it would have been nice if I could write about what was happening in the health center for example. Pero I chose not to for my own protection. Actually, I was thinking more about the vulnerability of my housemates who are senior citizens. So that's how I coped by limiting coverage away from areas where the possibility of infection would be higher. I never attempted to go to the hospital because many sick people converge there. I never attempted to interview one working in the triage areas. I sleep beside my mother so the risk is greater if I get infected and pass it on to her.]”

Jane's coping mechanism is to work from home but she couched it in the context of journalism. She said:

“I still practice armchair journalism because of the fear, I can't say its unfounded kasi nga may mga variants pa [because there are many variants still emerging]. So I would still prioritize my, our safety, and that is also the policy of the newsroom. Unahin mo muna your safety [think about your safety first], you prioritize your safety before anything else. So the newsroom understands that, so if it's not a matter of life and death coverage and if there are other ways which you could cover then by all means.”

## **Legal Safety**

A number of the participants experienced battling legal safety challenges in various forms from red-tagging, cyber libel, and threats against their lives.

Aldwin had to deal with legal safety and along with it his physical safety even before the pandemic began. In 2018, he was included by the Baguio police in a report on CNN-linked (Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front) organizations. This after he was seen covering the rallies and protests for news reports. In 2021, at the height of the pandemic, he was invited by the police to a dialogue under their anti-insurgency campaign "Dumanun Makitungtong" which are Ilocano terms for visit and discuss, a rebranding of the Visayan terms Oplan Tokhang. Upon the advice of a local lawyer, they held the dialogue in the Public Information Office of the city hall, a public venue. Aldwin says this attempt to red tag him was an experiment to test how the media would react. Since the media banded together, the police had to back away. They removed Aldwin from the list.

On March 1, 2022, while walking home at night, Aldwin was shot at by two unidentified men aboard a motorcycle. Investigation stalled as the suspects remain unidentified. To add insult to injury, Presidential Task Force on Media Security (PTFoMS) Usec. Joel Egco Sy issued a press statement on March 3, 2022 essentially questioning the existence of the shooting. He also said the reports that came out were slanted saying there was no "slay try" and likened these reports to gossip.

Just a few days after this incident, Aldwin again received an invitation to a dialogue with the police still under the guise of the anti-insurgency campaign. This time all he felt was anger.

Red tagging and media visits from the police have been happening all over the country. This added to legal concerns as well as physical safety concerns of local journalists. While Malen did not receive any official order for dialogue, the fact that there were operations like these brought her fear. She said:

“Ah remember nagkaroon ng Tokhang Order so I got so scared I had CCTVs installed in the house. Kasi hawak ko yung left (progressive organizations stories) di ba? Kung merong malalagay sa listahan na sympathizer ako yun, kasi nga beat ko sila. So gumawa ako ng contingency plan noon kung anong gagawin. Halimbawa, kunin ako sa bahay sino tatawagan ng anak ko. Yung kapitbahay ko sinabihan ko tas yun nga naginstall ako ng CCTV. Kasi oo nakakatakot. [I got scared by the Tokhang Order so I had CCTVs installed in the house. I write stories about progressive organizations, remember? If anyone would appear in the list of sympathizers, I would be one of them because of my beat coverage. So I made a contingency plan on what to do in case something happens to me. Who will my daughter call? I also told my neighbor that I had a CCTV installed because the situation was scary.]”

Karlston also had to contend with the chilling effect of red tagging. One of his stories in 2020 was regarding the proposed dam project in Tabuk City, Kalinga. Among his sources were activists or groups who were red tagged by the police. He said:

“When I was there the first time, kasi several times ako pumunta dun [I went there several times] for that story, I coordinated with the local barangay, the police. It was kind of a routine checkpoint na tinanong ako kung ano yung purpose. Why am I interviewing these people? Why these people? Tapos sinasabi na don't you know the personalities of these people are like this? Tapos sabi ko yes I know them, I know these people. And then siguro nung na feel nila na parang magkakilala kayo, tas sasabihin nila [And then they realized that I knew these people and they the started asking] may we know more about your background parang nagkaganon na [that's the direction it took]. So I said I'm a journalist. So ayun again pinakita ko yung identification ko [So I showed them my identification] I said you can search it online if you like. You can search my Facebook profile if you like. Pero hindi naman nila ginawa [But they never acted on it] they said na we are just after the safety of the community, et cetera.”

Because Karlston was constantly traveling, another aspect he had to contend with was checkpoints on his way to his coverage areas. He was accosted twice in

Kayapa, Nueva Vizcaya, on his way to Kalinga and in Bontoc on his way to Natonin, Mountain Province. In both instances he encountered overly zealous checkpoint personnel who would not let him pass even with complete papers. They threatened to detain him in violation of IATF protocols. In one instance they even questioned the validity of his IATF ID. The local media were just given one APOR ID by the Philippine Information Agency (PIA) at the onset of the ECQ. This was never renewed as there was verbal agreement that it would remain valid for practicing media. He said:

“Ang nakalagay lang dun is June (2020) ata. Syempre nung nag-expire na last year, we asked for replacement of the ID. Pero sabi naman ng PIA sabi daw ng IATF it still remains valid you can use it until world end siguro. So in-explain ko nga na ganito yung agreement namin with PIA and then sabi nila no, we did not receive that kind of protocol. So I said can I give you the number of Ma'am Helen Tibaldo (PIA Cordillera Regional Director), you can call her and ask for clarity. Tapos I don't know, I think the officer was offended eh yung pagkasagot is you are asking me, you're mandating me to do something parang ganon eh you're asking me to do something for you parang ganon. [I think what was printed on the ID is until June (2020). Of course that would mean the date expired last year so we asked for a replacement but the PIA said the IATF declared that our IDs remain valid. You can use it until the world ends perhaps. So I tried explaining our agreement with the PIA and the checkpoint personnel said no, we did not receive that kind of protocol. So I offered the number of PIA regional director Helen Tibaldo so they can call her and ask for clarity. But I think the officer was offended when he started saying "you are asking me, you're mandating me to do something" and words to that effect.]”

The police worried that he might be using a fake I.D. but he was saved by an old issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer which had his name on it. He relayed:

“Pinakita ko yung ID ko sa Inquirer hindi pa din sila naniwala eh kasi sabi nila hindi sir ngayon andami daming ginagawa ang mga tao para lang makalusot eh. Good thing na naalala ko na meron akong past issue ng Inquirer sa likod na I bought it pero the issue is a month ago buti nga meron. I remembered something I wrote, pinakita ko so I think naniwala naman. Although I would understand yung sentiment nila kasi perhaps they're just doing their job. [I showed them my Inquirer ID but they still were not convinced and they said anyone can just make an ID so they can pass through. Good thing I remembered having a past issue of Inquirer in my car, it was about a month

old but at least I had a copy. I remembered something I wrote and I showed it to them, thankfully they believed me. Although I would understand their sentiment because perhaps they were just doing their job.]”

Khim and Kimberlie had consolidated cases of disseminating false information filed against them for articles they wrote under the pandemic. They were completely unaware that a case was filed against them in court, only when friends in the justice hall notified them that a warrant was released were they alerted of its existence. The accuser? Then Police Regional Office Cordillera head R’win Pagkalinawan who, ironically enough, is married to a well known broadcast journalist. The story stemmed from a quote from the general which he claimed was taken out of context.

“May panahong alam mo yung umiiyak ka sa bwisit at tsaka sa inis,” Kimberlie said. “Pwede naman siyang nag letter, di ba? Pwede naman niya kong tinawagan. [There was a time I would just be crying out of frustration and annoyance, he could have written to me, right? Or he could have called me up.]” One of her beats was Camp Dangwa, the regional police office unit housed in Benguet. She thought she was on good terms with the general, even doing fist bumps with him in May 2020 and dialoguing with him in June 2020 to discuss the issues being faced by the media. He filed the initial case against them in April 2020.

Dealing with the case under the pandemic meant more online hearings. But they had to attend the non-online hearings physically. Kimberlie said:

“Tapos syempre dahil pro bono ang aming abogado, buti na lang di ba pro bono, gastos yan. Eh yung bail pa nga lang namin patak-patak yan eh from media friends talaga, contribution yan eh. Pero yung syempre nung hindi ka naka-bail kakabakaba ka tapos di ba paano naman ang Covid sa jail? Sabi ko baka dun pa ako, kasi hindi pa ko nagpo-positive nung that time, di ba? Baka sa kulungan pa ko mahawa o kaya ako ang magdala sa kulungan di ba?”

[Thankfully our lawyer worked pro bono because it would have been really expensive. Our bail came from contributions of media friends. But what if we were not able to post bail, I worried about the Covid situation in the jail. What if I get infected there? Or what if I was the one who would bring the virus in?]"

The court sent the subpoena and copies of the complaint to a very old address of their office, which Kimberlie said was part of delaying tactics since they want to catch her unaware. It felt like a very targeted attack against them in Nordis, a paper known for their progressive reportage. Kimberlie and Khim are also active members of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) local chapter, which might have provoked the attacks against them.

What was weirder was that the case was dismissed because of lack of jurisdiction by the cyberlibel court in Baguio, it being titled after an old law. The same case was then filed again in La Trinidad, Benguet, and was again dismissed for wrong venue. Until, using the same complaint, a cyberlibel case was filed against Kimberlie and Khim in the Baguio court. Throughout all the hearings, court processes, and appearances they had to attend Kimberlie found it very taxing. For Khim, who was moving to Quezon City, it was an additional cost that he could not really afford to have. This case was eventually dismissed in 2022.

Khim said while the cases were ongoing he did not feel safe at all. He relayed that:

“Hindi po talaga. Parang tina-try kong maging distracted I mean yun nga parang during coverage tine-take ko yung, syempre medyo mali siya, yung parang pag-interview pagpunta doon sa coverage parang yun yung distraction ko. Yung pag interact sa mga tao yun ang distraction ko para lang hindi maisip ang ala ano ito or what. Parang ganun kasi ang impact sa akin pag nakakita ako ng police. Kahit parang ibandera nila yung safety and security yung mandate nila or whatever. Hindi ko talaga, hindi ko talaga siya ma-feel

parang ganun, lalo kapag may mobile, feeling ko hihilain na lang ganun. [I really did not feel safe. I tried to keep myself distracted during coverage, although I know that was wrong. I interviewed people to keep myself distracted. I kept talking to other people, otherwise when I am alone I would start worrying about my situation. Everytime I see the police, even if they post their mandate to protect and to serve, I would still be afraid. If I see a police mobile, I feel like I will soon be snatched using it].”

Apart from the cases in the regular courts, Khim and Kimberlie also filed cases in the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) for the red tagging and libelous statements issued by the La Trinidad police and Timek ti Cagayan, a Facebook group.

Nordis and its community were branded as terrorists in a Senate hearing in December 2020. “May mga media community, alternative media na pinangalanan ng NTF-ELCAC (National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict) na mga propaganda arm ng communist rebels. So kasama ang Northern Dispatch at Radyo Sagada kung dito sa Cordillera, [There are media communities, alternative media named by the NTF-ELCAC as part of the propaganda arm of communist rebels. Northern Dispatch and Radyo Sagada were named here in the Cordillera]” Kimberlie said. The report was presented by Retired General Allen Capuyan, chair of the National Commission on Indigenous People and member of the NTF-ELCAC. She added:

“So yun parang ano naglalakad kaming may tatak. Syempre online attacks. Meron nga kaming photo na kami ni Khim parang nakaano kami inedit nila na naka ano yung uniform ng mga preso tapos nakaganyan na plaka. Parang naka ano yun, mugshot. Wala kaming mugshot kasi hindi naman kami nahuli pero pinost nila yun tas ang background talaga yung PNP mugshot ganyan. Tas pinost nilang ganyan nag circulate siya sa web na oh eto mga mga ano to tagapagpakalat ng fake news et cetera. [So we are like walking targets. Targets of online attacks. Khim and I even had edited photos made to look like mugshots. We did not have actual mugshots because we were never arrested, but they posted photos of us with the PNP background. Then they circulated these on the web saying we are the promoters of fake news et

cetera.]”

This particular post was circulated by Timek Cagayan, a Facebook group, which disappeared when Facebook did a purge of fake accounts. She said:

“Maalala mo nung nag purge ang Facebook ng mga fake accounts, I mean kasama siya sa mga nawala. Natrace sa PNP and AFP kasama itong Timek Cagayan na napakagrabe ang kanyang puro ganun ang laman niya eh. Against sa ABS-CBN, against sa NUJP, against sa lahat nung peoples organizations na makakaliwa. Tsaka yung mga news media personalities like Inday Varona. So lahat ganun lang laman nung website na yun. [Remember when Facebook started purging fake accounts, I mean that account was one of those that disappeared. Timek Cagayan was traced to the PNP and AFP. All of its content was against ABS-CBN, against NUJP, against progressive people’s organizations, even news media personalities like Inday Varona. Those were the contents of that site.]”

In 2023, the CHR resolved the cases by giving an admonition to the La Trinidad police for their actions. CHR also awarded Khim a token amount as restitution for his troubles.

### **Psychological/Mental Health**

Psychological safety and mental health concerns were acknowledged by all the participants. These stemmed from the difficulty of the situation but they also had specific sources of anxiety.

For Aldwin it was contracting Covid and looking after members of the media club. He said all of us were probably stressed by the pandemic, we all have anxiety just thinking about what happens when we contract Covid. In the two weeks that they had to quarantine when his wife contracted Covid, he felt the hardship. “Diay ngay ti pagbutengam, nga talaga nga maconfine ka lang diay balay mo nga awan ti ar-aramidem. Saan ka a makabiruk ti pagkuartaam, pagpanggedam kasdiay. Diay ania

nu ma-Covid kayu amin? [That is when the fear crept in, you are confined to your house without anything to do, you cannot earn, you cannot work. What will happen if all of you get sick?]" He describes this aspect as being both a psychological challenge when there is no assurance of no infection even with the vaccines, and a financial concern due to impending lockdowns or quarantine once you get infected.

But as president of the BCBC he felt the weight became heavier. His mindset and concern was not only for his family, but for his colleagues in the media as well. "Haan met nga mabalin nga uy okey-ak met anya ngay, di makaammu metten ah ti kakadua nga agrimedyo kakasdiay. Narigat diay isu a nga panunuten. [He cannot say I am ok and they should worry about their own, solve their problems on their own. He cannot just leave it at that.]"

For Khim it was the threat of harassment from the red tagging and libel cases on top of the trauma of the pandemic. He said they try to process what they are undergoing collectively in Nordis. "Syempre may mga personal struggles akong pinagdaanan. Pero tina-try din naman po talagang i-process collectively within the organization na parang o parang ganito kinukumusta ano ang state mo ngayon, disposition mo ganun. [Of course we all have personal struggles, but we try to process these collectively within the organization. Sometimes it can be in the form of catching up on one's state of mind or disposition.]"

Colleagues in Nordis also assured him that he didn't have to face the cases alone. They implemented a buddy system to make sure Khim always had someone with him when he went out on coverage. They also constantly check on him through

messages.

For Rima it was the loss of socialization. She was grateful for the in-person work set up, when she saw other colleagues physically. She said it was comforting to be able to talk to other people outside of their home. “It helps a lot kasi meron pa ring conversation tsaka dito sa office kasi ano, walang work from home. Yung iba kasing media outfits nag work from home sila, sa amin talagang dito nandito kami sa office we report physically. [Having conversations in the offices helped a lot. Other media outfits were on a work from home setup, but we were required to report physically.]”

For Jane it was monitoring the news that caused her anxiety levels to rise. It is part of their job to monitor different news outlets, TV, social media, other newspapers, and radio. She said:

“It was traumatic in a sense that before we were reporting numbers or figures, just numbers of positive cases, numbers of those who died. Ngayon [now] its becoming closer. Kilala ko na ito. Di ba neighbor ko na yung namatay? Marami nang kasong ganun neighbor ko na siya, relative, friend. [I know this person already. I can’t believe that the person who died was my neighbor. There were a lot of cases like that of a neighbor, relative, friend.] So somehow it’s traumatic. Somehow, it’s depressing din.”

For Karlston it was job security. He said:

“It is a challenge psychologically, yes, in terms of stability of work tenure. Before kumo-quota ka nang [you still had a quota of] at least three stories in a week, two stories in a week, that’s ok. Pero when the pandemic struck you could only afford one story a week until it became one story a month or one story every other two weeks, which was of course very hard. Kasi nafi-feel mo na nadre-drain yung resources mo eh [Because you can now feel your resources being drained]. It was very fortunate for me because I had the international outlet so they were paying good. I felt it last year when last year my focus was on Inquirer. When things were getting slower for Inquirer nafi-feel na din nila yung [they already felt the] effects of the pandemic and eventually numinipis na yung papel [the paper became thinner], even the spaces for stories, I opted to shift my focus to the other outlets. And I’m very

fortunate na they were paying good and I had several story grants na naaprovan [that were approved.]”

For Kimberlie it was a combination of Covid infection and the libel cases, but most importantly, it is how to ensure the survival of the newspaper she was leading.

She said:

“Trauma syempre. Syempre yung job security mas pa dahil maliit lang ang community paper di ba? Tapos bagong avenue bagong platform ka na hindi mo alam kung papaano ka kikita sa platform na yan. Tapos nagkaroon medyo humigpit pa sa mga funding opportunities, di ba we get by with story proposals and project proposals? Tapos biglang dahil diyan sa anti-insurgency campaign ay naghigpit pati diyan sa avenue na yan. So syempre yung security hindi lang ng job ko kundi nung buong community paper ay iniisip mo din. Papaano mo siya isusustain lalo na advocacy ka eh, I mean syempre advocacy journalism. Ito ay lagi kong sinasabi, hindi ko tinatangi na may bias kami. Syempre may bias kami for truth and may bias kami for the marginalized sector and Nordis has been very open about that since it started. So hindi nagbabago yung bias na yan eh. Mas pa yung fear mo paano mo siya isu-sustain ganyan. So ano siya syempre mentally draining siya. Hindi lang dahil income as a person pero yung sustainability ng diyaryo or ng media outfit itself yung at stake. Tapos eh di syempre bilang kayo-kayo naman yung nasa leadership, syempre it fits mas mabigat di ba on the shoulders of those at the top of it ganyan. [Trauma of course. Your job security since you are only a small community paper, right? And the new avenue or new platform where you wonder how you could earn enough to make it work. Then came more restrictions to reach funding opportunities because of the anti-insurgency campaign, and remember we survive largely on story and project proposals? Now you are thinking not only about your own job security but the sustainability of the community paper too. How would you sustain it especially since you practice advocacy journalism? We admit having a bias. Of course we have a bias for truth and for the marginalized sector and Nordis has been very open about that since it started. So our bias has not changed. Our fear stems from how to sustain the paper. It is mentally draining. There are only a few of us leading the paper, of course the weight is heavier on the shoulders of those at the top.]”

Malen felt the trauma brought by the pandemic way before they even lost their jobs at Sunstar Baguio but having a support group helped her cope fast. She said:

“It was traumatic kaya lang [but] I’m very lucky in that aspect kasi when the pandemic begun kaming mga [us] professors sa [in] UC (University of the Cordilleras) we built a small mental health group so yung anxieties ko parang nasalo nung grupo [my anxieties were addressed in the group]. We fund therapy for those in need, so yun ang naging mental health outlet ko. Yung

mental health aspect ng ano pandemic na bear ko siya. Hindi ako masyado naapektuhan [that became my outlet so I was able to bear the mental health aspect of the pandemic. I was not really bothered by it.]”

The media club also helped in allaying the effects of the pandemic on the psychological and mental health of its members. Unique to Cordilleran media is the incorporation of cleansing and healing rituals for the community.

On June 12, 2021, the Baguio Correspondents and Broadcasters Club (BCBC) conducted a thanksgiving gathering at the Tam-awan Village following the *Senga*, which is a Cordilleran tradition of offering and butchering animals.

The *Senga* and *Daw-es* are cleansing rituals common to many indigenous communities in the Cordilleras, usually celebrated after someone dies. The *Daw-es* has been celebrated many times in the past by the local media after the coverage of tragic events (bus crash, plane crash, landslides, mining accidents, et cetera). In this case however, the deaths of two media members, Cesar Reyes and Jerry Mayona, from Covid-19 was covered more appropriately by the *Senga* because they died of a disease, Aldwin clarified. In the thanksgiving ritual, the community asked for healing and protection for the media. It was also an opportunity to gather and check up on one another, especially the more senior members of the media who were restricted from going out of their homes for a long time.

On November 2, 2021 the BCBC members again gathered at Camp Peppot in Burnham Park, this time with a priest who led them in prayers for the dead. The BCBC prayed for colleagues who lost their jobs, for those who are being persecuted

with the slew of cases filed against local media, and for the sick. The group then took stock of what they should do next, with the elections for the next set of BCBC officers in the month that followed. This is how Aldwin's leadership of BCBC started to wind down.

### **Economic/Financial**

With the lockdowns, travel restrictions, and closure of businesses and courts, community newspapers had virtually no income coming in. Indeed, the pandemic was hastening the death of the newspaper industry.

According to Aldwin, around 20 members of the BCBC working in newspapers lost their jobs under the pandemic, including 13 from Sunstar Baguio and seven from other local papers that had to stop printing. This does not include workers of ABS-CBN Baguio who also lost their jobs under the pandemic.

Journalists from the other papers that stopped printing attempted to go online as independent news producers. However, they remain struggling in their attempt, Aldwin added.

He said the hardest part was waiting for money to come in. Although you did not lose your job as a journalist, there were no ads coming in. The company had no income. You in turn will not receive a salary. Waiting for something to arrive was the hardest.

To aggravate the injury, at the height of the pandemic, the City Government of

Baguio issued an order to remove all vendors on the sidewalks including newsstands. This is in line with their beautification programs for tourism as they considered the vendors an eyesore. The BCBC issued a statement asking the government not to remove the vendors but to instead extend assistance to them.

Aldwin said:

“Eh di natural maawananda met lang ti pagbiagan. No saanda a makalako epekto met lang kadatayo iti media. Haan met lang nga malako dagiti diyaryo tayu. Tapus nu awan ti naka-display nga diyaryo kadagiti main streets bumassit manen ti agadvertise, hindi naman kami magiging visible diyan kasdiay. Liliit yung visibility namin di walang silbi kung mag ag-ads kami sa inyo o di awan ti ag-ads, awan ti sumrek nga revenue. [Naturally, the vendors would also lose their income. If the vendors cannot sell, then it will also have a direct effect on the media. If our newspapers don't sell, if we cannot display our papers on the main streets then there will be lesser advertisers, there will be no revenue.]”

One option the vendors and the media proposed was for the city to design creative racks for the vendors to sell their goods. The proposed design was rejected by the vendors themselves for being highly impractical. Aldwin said there should be genuine consultation on this, not force something designed by someone who has not even tried a day selling on the street.

Even established papers like the Baguio Midland Courier, the oldest and longest running paper in the region, had cause for concern. Rima and Jane said the circulation was at an all time low, and there were no advertisers.

Jane admitted worrying about her job because of the very low circulation during the ECQ when no one was going out to buy the papers. “We live on street sales; the paper survives through our sales.” They opted to sell from the office and

from one grocery owned by a distant relative of the publisher. It was a good thing they did not have to cease printing but because there were no advertisers they offered the pages instead to the Department of Health and other government agencies to print their advisories for free. The paper also did not print special issues for their anniversary and for the Baguio Day celebration in 2020 since there were no advertisers to support the publication.

Rima voiced her fear of losing her work but admitted that she felt hopeful coming from the news department. She said:

“Yes, ay oo nag-worry-ak. Nakikita ko yung mga kasama may mga nag-stop publications or dito mismo sa office may ibang department na hindi muna pinapasok kasi hindi sila kailangan. Yung kasi kami news, so kailangan nandoon kami lagi pero yung ibang departments hindi na regular yung pasok. So nagworry ako sa income din ng kompanya kasi kung nagsuffer ang company lahat ng empleyado magsa-suffer din naman so it’s the economic and the mental challenge din. Kasi ECQ, sarado ang newsstands so sino ang magdi-distribute nung product niyo? So kung walang nagbabasa wala ring mag-a-advertise. So, it’s more the economics. Ang confident ko kasi nasa news department, yung parang we will always work parang ganun kasi kailangan kami. Na pag nasa news department ka they will need people na maghahanap ng balita at magbibigay ng balita. Trabaho lang nang trabaho let the others handle yung other aspects na hindi ko naman expertise din or hindi ko talaga saklaw. Let them handle yung finance. Let them handle the marketing. Let them handle how to improve circulation kasi mayroon din naman mga taong naka-deploy diyan so it’s their job. Siguro back-up kami ganun so mas sarili ko lang yung iniisip ko somehow at this point ganun. [Yes, of course I was really worried. I saw colleagues from other other publications who had to stop working. Here in the office the other departments were not asked to report to work anymore. We were in the news department so we had to report regularly unlike the other departments. I worried about the income of the company. If the company suffers, all the employees would also suffer, so it was both an economic and mental challenge. Under the ECQ, there were no newsstands, so who would distribute our product? If there were no readers, now one would also advertise. So it’s more the economics. I was confident because I belonged to the news department, I felt like we would always have work because we were necessary. If you are in that department they will always need people to look for news and produce news reports. I just kept on working, letting others handle the other aspects which were not assigned to me nor are within my expertise. Let them handle finance. Let them handle the marketing. Let them handle how to improve circulation, there are people assigned to do that, so it’s their job. We might be needed for backup. But

really I was thinking more about myself at this point.]”

Rima, who came from Sunstar before moving to Midland, also thought about closure constantly. She knows it could happen to any paper. “Andun din yung fear siyempre habang tumatanda ka what if mag-stop operation? May mag-employ pa ba sa akin? Yung mga ganun na fear saan ako pupulutin if ever, ganun na concerns ko personally. I think even my officemates have that ano din issues na saan tayo pupunta if ever. [The fear of stopping operations is there, especially since I am getting older, will anyone else still employ me? Where do I start again, that was my concern. I think even my office mates were worried about the same issues, where will we go if ever?]”

Quite the opposite, Karlston could not just think about himself. He voluntarily gave way to the other Inquirer correspondents like Kimberlie to allow them a better shot at publication. He said:

“Syempre [of course] I don’t want to get into the competition because I know that I have other outlets and I think they need it more than me. So sabi ko sige [So I said] I will take na lang the other provinces. So naghati kami [so we divided the provincial beats], I got Abra, Kalinga, and Mountain Province for my beat and then kinuha ni Ate Kimberlie yung the rest. At least my thinking that time was at least I was more mobile I can go to this area. For Kimberlie mas mahihirapan siya, ang hirap piman ng [she will find travelling more difficult, since there was no] transportation that time. Then even that kind of setup mahirap ding mag-source out ng story, ang hirap hirap mag-source out ng story then [it was very difficult to source out stories then]. So eventually I abandoned that idea. I already told the management that I might not be able to write as often.”

A journalist does not really have to concern themselves with sales of ads and streetsales of the paper. However, many community papers run with journalists doubling as publishers and operations managers. In the case of Nordis, Kimberlie

was already worried about how the online paper would continue to sustain itself. She said:

“Actually ano heartbroken ako na nawala ang print. Print talaga ako. Lalo na Cordillera, ang connectivity natin pupugak-pugak. So yung dating naabot ng diyaryo na mga kasuluksulukan, halimbawa pupunta ako ng Dananao (in Kalinga) noon, ang diyaryo lang na nakakarating dun ay Nordis at Bandera. So yun, kaya parang medyo touched ako na nakita ko yung diyaryo ko dun. Tapos radyo syempre ang nakakarating sa kanila. Eh yung internet natin dyan lang sa Bontoc (Mountain Province) di ba hirap na hirap? So heartbroken talaga ako na nawala yung print ang hirap hirap. Siguro yun yung isa kung bakit natagalan bago ko aralin ang digital, etong bagong platform na ito, dahil umpisa pa lang hindi ko talaga siya gusto. [Actually I was heartbroken when we had to forgo our print issues. My heart is really for printed newspapers especially here in the Cordillera region where we have no reliable internet connection. I worry about the far-flung areas that used to be reached by the paper like Dananao. The only newspapers that used to reach them were Nordis and Bandera. I was touched when I saw my newspaper being circulated there. Of course we have radio in those areas, but the internet is really a problem even in capital towns like Bontoc. So I was really heartbroken when the print disappeared. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why it took me a while to study and embrace the digital platforms since I didn’t really have the heart for it.]”

Since Nordis only switched to full online in January 2019, they were still learning the ropes of how to earn income online. Kimberlie said:

“Ang laking challenge ‘tong income generating side pag-online hindi pa siya ganon ka-established. At least sa print, sa radio, sa TV established na yan na per second ganito ang charge. Per column inch each ganito ang charge, pag dating sa online wala pang rules. Kung baga kinakapa even Rappler and the bigger online pages even yung big GMA and ABS-CBN kinakapa pa rin nila kung papaano yung itsura nung pagbenta. Kasi bagong territory so most of our time was spent on aralin yung online. [Income generation online is really a very big challenge since the rules are not as established as in print, radio, or TV where there is a set charge per column inch or per second. Online publishing has no rules yet. Even Rappler and the bigger online pages like GMA and ABSCBN are still finding ways to market their pages. This is new territory so most of our time is spent studying the online structure.]”

She added that learning how to earn from their social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube was another challenge. “Magkakaibang nilalang na kailangan mong aralin ang mga character kung papaano mo talaga siyang

gagamitin. [These are separate entities with distinct characters which you really need to consider so you can learn how to make them work for your paper.]”

To sustain the paper, sometimes Kimberlie and her colleagues in Nordis who successfully apply for story grants pitch in the money they receive. That is the closest they have done to shelling out their own money for the publication.

The worst economic or financial challenge is the actual closure of the media outfit such as what happened to Sunstar Baguio.

Malen described the experience as:

“Bad trip yun kasi, as I said, hindi kami lugi. Nag-close to P800,000 kami nung pandemic eh in terms of sales. I mean in terms of digital sales so hindi namin matanggap na isasara yung franchise ng Baguio. Tsaka mahirap as a journalist na tanggapin na magsasara yung platform mo in the time that it is needed most. So mahirap, para kang namatayan. Para kaming namatayan. Tapos specially dun sa beat ko di ba hawak ko ang progressives, so isa-isa nang tumatawag sa akin nagpapasalamat na. Tapos sasabihin na nung mga grupo sino na magsusulat sa amin, nakakaiyak. [That was really bad, because as I told you, we were not in the red. We closed around P800,000 in digital sales during the pandemic. That’s why we cannot accept the fact that they were closing the Baguio franchise. It’s hard for a journalist to accept that your media platform will close in a time where it is needed the most. It was difficult, it felt like we were bereaved. My sources from the progressive beat started calling me to say thank you. Then they started asking who will write about them in the future. I was in tears.]”

Malen said that in the two-month ECQ period they had to stop printing because they no longer had paper to print on. But it wasn’t a total loss since their digital ads were booming hence they still had income coming in, their salaries were still being paid. By the end of December 2020, however, management already informed them of its plan to close the paper. She said:

“December nila in-announce ang stop operations pero hindi niyo napapansin

nun kasi nag-decide ang editorial to take it upon ourselves na, habang nagde-decide ang management, itutuloy namin ang digital version kahit walang bayad,” Malen relayed. “So ang public hindi nila alam na December pa lang medyo may problema na, undecided sila eh. So ang iniisip kasi namin nun na kapag tinigil namin ang broadcast, yung following na nabuo namin kapag nag-decide sila magtuloy, sayang. We had no choice na but to continue. [The management announced that we were to stop operations in December 2020 but the public did not notice the stoppage since we took it upon ourselves in the editorial team to continue the digital version even without pay while management was trying to make a final decision. The public didn’t know that we were having problems since December when the management was undecided on our future. We were thinking about the following we generated in our broadcasts, if the management decides to continue the paper later on, then we would have lost our following. We had no choice but to continue.]”

Asked if they were still clinging to the hope that management would change its decision, Malen replied:

“No, not, well yeah you can put it that way. But we’d rather look at it in a way na since you’re undecided we don’t want to waste the following that we worked hard for. Kasi it’s the effort of the editorial so kung ang sa amin nun kung isasara niyo isara niyo. Huwag ganyan na hindi ko alam. So ang ginawa namin kami ang nag-fund ng allowances ng editorial. [It was the effort of the editorial team so we were thinking if you decide to close it, close it already. Do not leave us hanging. So we started funding the allowances of the editorial and news team.]”

Malen and Roderick Osis, the Sunstar Baguio EIC, used their personal money to pay the reporters and give an allowance to the layout team. They used the editorial fund and divided it among the editorial staff members and printing press operators who were not members of the BCBC as they were support staff. So whatever Malen and the other reporters could get from donations and relief during the pandemic, they divided it among everyone.

Malen said what pushed them to continue is the lack of a reliable and hard-hitting daily media outfit who could continue watchdog work. She said:

“Sinong magbabalita? Hindi naman reliable yung weeklies kasi yung mga weekly hindi naman lumalabas. Sunstar lang ang nagko-cover, kami lang ang nasa city, kami lang nasa city hall, ako lang ang nasa city council. So at that point okay lang samin na sa amin kumokopya ng balita. That was one of the rare times na sige na ipamigay mo na, okay lang kasi wala hindi ko alam kung ano ang naging policy ng ibang mga diyaryo, pero napakawalang bayag kasi. Walang reporter so sinong magbabalita? Kawawa naman yung mga tao. [Who will report the news? The weeklies are not reliable since their reporters do not really cover stories. Sunstar was the only one covering daily. We were the only ones in city hall, I was the only one in the city council. So at that point we felt okay when our reports were being copied by other papers. That was one of the rare times we said just give it away. I really do not know the policy of the other papers, but I felt like they did not have the balls to do the reports. There are no reporters present, so who would report the news? I feel pity for the citizens.]”

Sunstar Baguio, the only daily newspaper in the region for 26 years, closed down on May 3, 2021 – World Press Freedom Day. The employees subsequently filed a labor case against the publisher. They won the case but they have yet to see the award of their benefits and back wages as of this writing.

### **Digital Safety**

Most of the participants do not really feel that their digital safety is threatened. What they raised, however, were the related issues of poor internet connectivity, trolls, and bashers online.

Aldwin said to begin with, going digital is premised on having a good internet connection which many media workers do not even have. “You cannot even compete with correspondents from NCR because you don't have good internet access. It will take time for you to submit your stories,” he said. “There is too much competition online and you have to think of ways on how to compete. You also cannot go full online in our locality considering the unstable internet signal or lack of internet connection,” he added.

For Jane and Rima, working at the Baguio Midland Courier under the pandemic meant they had to improve their social media content. “We had to do that, we also had to adapt to the changing landscape, changing times, to the needs of the times. We now have breaking stories. We now break stories online,” Jane said.

Contending with trolls and bashers on their Facebook page became taxing at some point. As a policy they say they do not really reply back to comments on their news posts and just ignore them. “Kung may pwedeng message ano din ipriprint nila, babasahin ganun lang. Kung it's worthy to be published as a letter to the editor then we do. But if it is just a comment na ano ganun lang let it pass kung ano kasi siguro freedom to express to give their opinion naman, [If there are valid messages then we include them in the print issue, or just read them. If they are worthy to be published as letters to the editor then we consider them. But if it is just a comment, we just let it pass because we also respect their freedom to express, or to air their opinion,]” Rima said.

Malen said the trolls and bashers actually increase the engagement of their posts so they no longer have to pay for boosting their site. “Sanay na kami. Hindi na siya bago. Nagpasalamat na lang kami hindi na kami nagbu-boost ng post, tapos yung engagement 100 percent na. Nag-aaway-away na sila dun, binabash-bash na kami. Okey lang, hindi kami naba-bother dun sa digital safety. [We are used to them. It's nothing new. We are just thankful that we no longer have to boost our posts and our engagement is at 100 percent. People are fighting online, bashing us. That's okay, we are no longer bothered by digital safety.]”

Karlston feared that some of the troll-like comments on stories he wrote would translate into actual harm. And he said he had good reason to fear so he had to decline some projects and kept his head low. He said:

“Yung dam story namin [Our dam story] on Tabuk when it was shared by those the people who I have interviewed—the organizations who were against that dam—lumalabas dun sa comments [it came out in the comments]. They were looking for who, kung taga saan ako [where I was from], who I was, so they were asking those kinds of questions. That was one reason why I laid low from Tabuk for a while kasi I still have another project with an agency which required me to go to Kalinga but rinequest ko na i-extend yung [I requested an extension of the] implementation period. I was really, medyo nabagabag ako eh na [bothered by the comments] because I know the capability of the person behind the dam. I know his temper and I know his attitude because I’ve heard a lot of people already talking about him.”

Kimberlie and Khim painted a different picture altogether. They have been constantly under attack on the digital space. Because of the slew of cases he was involved in, Khim had to keep his digital profile secure. He said:

“Yun yung ano isang reason bakit ako nagpapalit ng pangalan sa Facebook. Kasi hindi ko lang siya ngayon ginawa, ginawa ko na lang siya noong past months lalo na nung may period na may isang Facebook page na nagre-release ng materials against progressive individuals. Tapos as in inisa-isa talaga mga spokesperson, mga personalities na lumalabas doon. Tapos yun doon ko siya sinimulan na parang okey parang for a period of time palit muna ako. Tapos pag okey na ulit magpalit, palit ulit ganun. Kasi yun nga napansin ko yung mga troll pages, yung mga online accounts kinukuha nila yung materials doon sa ano sa personal accounts mo sa profile mo. [That is one of the reasons why I changed my name on Facebook. I did that a couple of times in the past months especially during that period where a Facebook page kept releasing materials against progressive individuals, where they identified each of them. I kept changing my name for a time because I noticed that troll pages and online accounts grab their materials from your personal accounts or your profile.]”

Even if he keeps his account private he has posts that remain public. “May mga post, may mga photos na naka-tag sa akin so nakikita pa rin nila. Pero ang sa akin na lang po sige pahirapan natin sila ng kaunti palit muna tayo ng pangalan, [There are still posts, usually photos where I am tagged, which are visible to the

public. I just think let's make it a little harder for them to research about us, so let's change our profile name,]" he added.

Personally, his accounts have not been hacked yet because of his awareness of digital security. He remains careful about what kind of posts he makes and what level of security is involved per post. He also constantly updates his security and apps with two-factor authentication tests.

Apart from the personal attacks, the Nordis website also became the target of DoS or Denial of Service attacks. Kimberlie explained that someone would flood their website with visits until it crashes due to the sheer volume of users. She said:

"Yung unang biktima nun ay Bulatlat. Nag-crash talaga. Yung most recent ngayon is Karapatan website yung inatake. Ang kagandahan neto nakahanap kami, naka-connect kami sa mga meron din pala naman group ng mga digital security warriors na ang kanila namang gustong gawin sa buhay ay protektahan ang mga katulad namin na inaatake ng mga online websites. Halimbawa yung mga independent media na under attack kasama yung mga iba pang mga progressive groups na under attack. Parang ano nila ay parang bigyan ng equal space sa online and access sa online. So nakahanap kami ng mga allies kasi kung kami-kami lang anong malay mo dyan hindi ko inaral yan di ba? Baka down lang yung internet or kasalanan ni PLDT ang iisipin kong rason. [The first victim of DoS attacks was Bulatlat, which really crashed. Another recent attack was on the Karapatan website. What was good about the attacks is that we were able to connect to digital security warriors. These are groups whose goal is to protect online websites like ours, usually independent media or progressive groups, which are constantly being attacked. Their goal is to give equal space and access online. So we were glad to be able to find allies because I really had no idea what to do. I might think maybe we are just having connection problems or blame the likes of PLDT, the internet service provider.]"

Part of these allies are the groups Deflect.ca, a Canadian social enterprise, and UK-based company Quorum Cyber. Kimberlie added that:

"These are international groups and they were able to trace yung sa Bulatlat nga nila na trace nila sa accounts ng DOST (Department of Science and Technology) na account na pinapahiram nila sa iba. Parang may mga

accounts ang DOST na pwedeng gamitin ng ibang sectors ng government. Kasi DOST syempre, sila yung high tech so ipapagamit nila kay PNP ipapagamit nila kay AFP. Tapos di ba ang sagot lang diyan ng DOST ay hindi kami yun, ginamit ng iba yun. [These are international groups and they were able to trace that the accounts used to attack Bulatlat were linked to the accounts of DOST. This agency, as the technology expert, had existing accounts which can be used by other government agencies like the PNP and AFP. Because when these were traced to them, DOST's only reply was that it is not us, other people used those accounts.]”

She said on an individual level they were also taught to use two-factor verification and restrict certain activities.

In May or June 2021, Nordis was again the subject of a DoS attack. The most recent attack before our interview. Kimberlie said:

“Ongoing ang analytics kasi nga naka-enroll nga kami sa digital security program nitong Deflect. Hindi namin alam naaatake pala kami kasi yun hindi naman kami yun. So inalert lang kami na oh yung traffic ninyo tumaas. Eto yung style, yung paliwanag. Yung para lang ma-visualize ko pinaliwanag sa akin kasi hindi ko talaga siya ma-visualize kung yung graph graph lang nila. So nag-effort naman sila na ipaunawa sa akin. Sabi nila ung DoS attack. Yung traffic ninyo sa website for one year ay na doble in just one day. So parang talagang na flood yung website eh ang aim talaga i-flood siya hanggang mag crash siya on its own ganyan so yun. [We have ongoing analytics since we are enrolled in the digital security program of Deflect. We did not realize that we were under attack until we were alerted that there was unusual traffic to our site. They explained everything to us with visualization. I could not understand what the graphs meant if I were left to my own devices, they really took an effort to explain everything to me. They said under the DoS attack, our web traffic for one year doubled in just a day. So in essence it was a flood on our website with the goal to make it crash.]”

### **Opportunities Experienced and Preparations for the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Even if the pandemic brought about so many challenges, community journalists also found opportunities opening for them. Among these are social media, story grants, seminars and trainings, personal growth, and bonding in the media community. The word opportunity itself has been interpreted by the participants in

various ways as we will see in the next paragraphs.

### **Social Media is an Opportunity Not a Threat**

In the literature review, social media was touted as a double-edged sword both an opportunity and a threat to journalism. So it was interesting to know how the participants regarded social media as part of their work. Most of the participants saw social media as an opportunity not as a threat

Social media complements the traditional media in terms of speed is how Rima sees it. “Ang bilis kasi, yung parang sa bilis niyang basahin ang bilis ding makalimutan ng tao kung ano yung nabasa niya. So ang social media is more of sa immediacy. Siguro parang radyo noon di ba? Na ibabato mo agad kung ano yung nangyari. Hindi naman siya kalaban. [Social media is really fast, but the speed at which you post and read something means the same speed at which people would forget what they have read. So we use social media more for its immediacy, perhaps like the radio before where you can immediately report what was happening. I don’t see it as an enemy.]” She said in Midland they use social media for breaking news reports but the comprehensive articles remain in the newspaper.

Meanwhile, Jane said her mindset about social media has changed over time. She said “Well before when social media was not a thing I considered it a threat. But as things are going, it is actually an opportunity. If you see it as a threat you would not be able to adapt, talagang [truly] you will be threatened.” She added, “Whether we like or not the newspaper has to learn to adapt in order to survive. Masakit man, talagang we are going in that direction. [Even when reality hurts, we really are going

in that direction.]”

Jane, however, clarified that social media cannot replace journalism. She said:

“This practice will never go obsolete. In fact, with all the misinformation and disinformation in social media, it’s all the more we need journalists to combat those? Because they know how it is to come up with genuine stories, genuine journalistic outputs. There are lots of good writers online on social media but when we talk about journalism magkaiba iyon [this is different], you cannot just sit there and write and call yourself a journalist in the process.”

Karlston agrees that it is another opportunity to spread what correct journalism is. “I don’t think social media is a threat, rather it is an opportunity. It is an opportunity because it is another platform, another media for the media. So I don’t think it’s a threat, instead it’s an opportunity to spread what correct journalism is.”

While other papers and journalists are just coming to terms with social media and going online, Sunstar has long been trailblazing in online publication. “Alam mo kasi iba yung orientation namin sa Sunstar about sa social media,” Malen said. “Kasi bago pa magkaroon ng social media, Sunstar na kasi ang number one website. [You know we have a different orientation about social media in Sunstar. Because even before social media came about, we were already the number one website.]” Sunstar was the first newspaper in the country to put up a website in the late 1990s thanks to the foresight of its publisher, the Garcia Family of Cebu. She added that:

“Medyo pioneer ang mga taga Cebu, ang mga Garcia sa pag sa foresight nila. So hindi pa uso ang digital platform meron na kami. So in-embrace namin yun. So nung nag-boom na ang social media we didn’t see it as threat. Kasi sumabay kami, kumbaga ang bragging rights ng Sunstar kami lang ang community daily newspaper with a digital broadcast. So, embrace na embrace namin ang social media, gamit na gamit namin actually. [The Garcias of Cebu are really pioneers in terms of their foresight. Even before digital platforms became the norm, we were already deep in them. We embraced them. So

when social media boomed, we didn't see it as a threat. We just rode the wave along with it. Our bragging rights include that we are the only community daily newspaper with a digital broadcast. We embraced social media and actually took advantage of it.]"

Malen said that having established their credibility as an online news source, they don't really worry that much about the proliferation of fake news on social media. She added that:

"Para sa amin ano the only way to combat the fake news was to build the credibility of the paper so wala na kami dun sa point na save the world. Ang magagawa lang namin ay ayusin namin yung trabaho namin kasi dun lang mako-combat. Halimbawa pag sinabi nila fake news si Sunstar eh di ipapakita namin na hindi. Alam mo mapipikon lang naman diyan yung walang credibility eh ano kung nauna siya kung mali naman sinabi niya. Hindi kami apektado sa ganun ang philosophy namin diyan, the better answer is okey lang mahuli basta tama ka. [For us the only way to combat fake news was to build the credibility of the paper. We are no longer on the point of trying to save the world. What we can do is to perform our job to combat fake news. If they tell us that we create fake news, then we do our best to show that we don't. I believe the ones that will take offense are those that do not have credibility. One might post earlier than us but what if what they posted was wrong? We are no longer affected by early postings. Our philosophy is, the better answer is it's okay to be late as long as you are right.]"

Aldwin echoes the same philosophy on disinformation. He said the threat is not social media but disinformation, since anyone can have access and claim their own truth. Journalists should take the opportunity to use online media to strengthen their skills and capability to show that they are the legitimate news source.

For Khim, social media is their capital. The problem, he said, is the rise of trolls since anyone can have access. He added that troll attacks are a given, and something you must contend with. He said:

"Sa situation ng Nordis, soc med talaga yung puhunan mo. Soc med tsaka web page, website. Doon ka po talaga kumukuha ng reach. Doon mo talaga kinukuha yung manifestations online nung stories—ilan yung nakabasa, ilan yung interaction, ilan yung nanuod, nag-share ganun. So ano siya importante siya lalo na kung multimedia talaga yung peg noong media outfit mo. Yung sa

mga attacks ng trolls andiyan na sila. Parang yun na talaga. Parang ang hirap din po kasing mag-file ng complaint against them kasi hindi naman ma-identify yung individuals behind those accounts. Talagang ano talaga sila troll accounts lang. They exist para lang mag-post ng mag-share ng mga kung ano-anong materials online ganun. [In the situation of Nordis, social media is really our capital along with the web page and website. Social media is where you extend your reach. This is where you can monitor the number of shares, views, reads, and interactions, which are important for multimedia producing outfits. Trolls are a reality but you just have to contend with their presence. It would be difficult to file complaints against them since you cannot identify the individuals behind those accounts anyway. They are indeed just troll accounts. They exist just to post or share whatever materials online.]”

Kimberlie said “Syempre kumbinsido tayo na totoo yung sa troll farms eh.

Walang trabaho ngayon eh so upo ka lang tapos repost ka lang. Repost ka lang ng repost though may mga lumalabas di ba na mga GC na hindi sila nababayaran? [Of course we are convinced that troll farms do exist. A lot of people lost their jobs so just sitting down and reposting is plausible. Although we have also noted reports that some of them have complained in group chats that they have not been receiving their payments?” She said the troll farms make disinformation spread faster.

She added that journalists must work together to counter this challenge in social media. She said:

“Social media is a challenge. It's challenging especially dapat ang journalist ay tignan ito kung papaano dapat magtulong-tulong ang mga mamahayag na i-carve or ibalik yung tiwala ba ng taong bayan sa vetted information. Ibalik yung pagiging critical na hindi lahat ng makikita mo diyan ay totoo. So yun challenging siya kasi parang it's a vehicle, so kung sino ang gagamit depende kung pano niya gagamitin. So challenge sa atin na talagang i-ensure yung fact checking and yun nga i-inculcate sa tao na kailangan mong iverify lahat ng information na nakikita mo diyan kasi unlike yung traditional media na may vetting process, yan wala. [Social media is a challenge. It's challenging especially because journalists should see how it can be used as a venue to carve or reclaim the trust of citizens on vetted information. Or teach them how to be critical with information being posted on social media that not everything they see is the truth. That's why social media is challenging because it is a vehicle which can be used by anyone for anything. It is a challenge for us to ensure fact checking and inculcating the need for people to verify all the information they see on social media. Because unlike traditional media which

has a vetting process, social media does not have that.]”

### **Overflow of Story Grants**

For Rima and Jane, opportunities came in the form of story grants. They mentioned the Philippine Press Institute Commons which paid for Covid-related stories which they republished in the Covid-Chronicles of the PPI website. Jane said:

“PPI launched the PPI Covid Chronicles. It’s a project between I think they got from a German foundation as its partner so they choose from the Covid stories that we published. They chose the best Covid stories. Honestly lang, hindi ko masabi kung ano yung criteria. Basta sinasabi lang, ini-inform na lang kami [Honestly I am not familiar with the criteria. They just inform us] okay congratulations you have made it to the cut off. This number of stories. That you are among those who will receive a stipend for your Covid stories.”

Rima felt happy with the additional source of income saying: “Unexpected na I will get rewarded pala for writing the story. At least dagdag raket. [It was unexpected that I would get rewarded for writing the story. At least that’s additional income.”

Jane said other organizations were also offering story grants but it was up to the journalist to really pursue it. She said:

“Internews has been posting but I just don’t have the time kasi [really]. If I were to do a story about wildlife, nasa Baguio ako so parang [I am in Baguio so] I don’t know if I can get in. Para kasing mas maganda [It think it would be better] if you cover stories on wildlife you have to go to Mountain Province or Apayao, over there is wildlife talaga. There are lots of opportunities on climate change and Covid and other zoonotic diseases etc. The recent I attended was the seminar on trans fat-free Philippines, may grant din doon. And then PPI din itong [also has this] Covid video explainer. We did not, it does not apply naman kasi [does not apply to us]. We still have not tapped that aspect in our online paper. There are a lot of opportunities now. If you are only looking for opportunities and you want to grab them.”

For Karlston, story grants and documentation projects were overflowing. He said:

“I have several projects recently kakatapos lang [just finished]. Aside from Mongabay kasi I got a grant from U&I Global. It's one of those organizations na natap ng [tapped by] COP26 if you're familiar with COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference. So we had a project where we interviewed indigenous people (IP) related to climate change in a sort of a journalistic way, parang investigative but interview type. We conducted it with several IP groups in the Cordillera and another one is a periodic reporting for OPAPP (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process) which is surprising paano ako na-tap [how I was tapped]. They have a project with DENR na ginawa nilang forest ranger yung mga rebel returnees and they want to look into the success and problems of the program so I went to the areas identified in Kalinga and I talked to the former rebel returnees I interviewed them how they feel about the program and how they are as forest guards. I also have a grant from Internews Journalism Network where we made an IP story.”

Karlston's identity as a member of the indigenous community, his mobility, and his photography, interviewing, and writing skills made him a sought after journalist. In 2023, working as a freelance journalist and photographer he eventually opened up his own consultancy firm in La Trinidad.

He added, “For me it was a very fortunate situation that nakuha ko yung mga grants na ito [that I was able to get these grants]. Because without these grants, without these projects if I only stuck to Inquirer, I think I would not have survived the pandemic. Siguro [maybe], I would find another job just to get by.”

Malen also had overflowing story grants which turned up just in time while Sunstar was in a limbo. What surprised her was that she didn't have to look for these grants. She said:

“Bayad lahat ng PPI Commons story ko. Tapos pumasok ang PCIJ (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism). Apat ang investigative stories ko sa kanila advanced payment lahat. Tapos pumasok ang Asia and Democracy

Network so meron akong international. Lahat yan during the pandemic so tanggap ako ng tanggap. Binigay sa akin, kaya dun ko na realize na meron pala akong credibility. Tapos kaya nagtataka ka kung saan nanggaling yung pera na binibigay na pinang-aambag ko dun sa mga kasama ko doon sa Sunstar? So for example sa PCIJ kailangan ko dun ng photographer kailangan ko ng researcher, syempre taga Sunstar ang kukunin ko. Yung Asia and Democracy Network pinaghanap ako ng staffing. Syempre taga Sunstar yung kinuha ko, binuhay ko yung mga kasama ko kasi sila zero ako meron. [All my PPI Commons stories have been paid. Then PCIJ tapped me for four investigative stories, all with advanced payment. Then I have international stories under Asia and Democracy Network. All of these were under the pandemic so I just kept receiving them. I realized I would not have been tapped if I did not have credibility. You were wondering earlier where I got the money to fund our editorial team under Sunstar? For example, if PCIJ needed a photographer or researcher, then I would get my Sunstar colleagues. Asia and Democracy Network asked for staff, so I recommended my colleagues. I kept them alive when they had nothing because I had so many projects going on.]”

Ironically, she felt it unfair that she was getting all the luck. “Di ba parang ikaw ma-swerte ka. Feeling mo ang swerte mo. Ang galing ko no? Kaya lang at the back of your head hindi fair ‘to. Alam mo yung feeling na yun na ikaw kumikita tapos yung mga kapamilya mo hindi? Inuna ko talaga ang Sunstar, yung mga kasama ko. Kasi ako ma-swerte ako. [You know the feeling of being lucky, of having so much luck you tend to see yourself as someone better? But at the back of your head you think this is not fair. The feeling that you get when you are earning but the rest of your family aren’t? I really prioritized my colleagues in Sunstar because I was thankful for being lucky.]”

### **Seminars and Training Now Available Online**

Another opportunity came in the form of webinar offerings. “Ang dami dami. Sa sobrang dami tuloy, may time I was overwhelmed with which one to choose, [They were overflowing, to the point where I was overwhelmed with which one to choose]” Jane said.

“Dati kasi physically ang hirap din nagko-confirm sa mga seminar kasi lalo na kung nagfo-fall siya ng Thursday, Friday, Saturday mga ganyan hindi talaga kami nakakapunta. Ngayon na webinar on journalism ano na, anytime pwede kaming sumali kasi ano it’s at the comfort of your office or of your home so continuous ang training natin, [Before when trainings were being held physically it was hard to confirm attendance immediately especially if they fall on Thursday, Friday, Saturday during press work so we really could not attend. Now we can easily attend webinars on journalism anytime because it is from the comfort of your office or home. So we get to have continuous training,]” Rima added.

Rima was also invited to be a speaker along with other community journalists from all over the country in one of the episodes of Covid Chronicles under PPI. They talked about their experiences under the pandemic. “I’m just glad that I was invited hindi ko rin ini-expect yun kasi hindi naman ako yung I’m not very good at yung mag explain sa harap ng maraming tao. Hindi ako maboka ganun so na invite ako, so thank you. [I’m just glad that I was invited. I wasn’t expecting it since I’m not very good at explaining in front of many people. I am not that verbose so when I was invited I was grateful for the opportunity, so thank you.]”

### **Testing the Mettle of the Media as a Community**

For Aldwin, the pandemic became an opportunity for the media community to test its strength. The media community was tried and tested and it survived. The survival and growth can be attributed to the strong sense of community fostered under the Baguio Correspondents and Broadcasters Club (BCBC).

He said the pandemic pushed the media community to bring out their potential because everyone was just trying to survive. They survived on their own strategies, talents, and by helping one another. He said it was proof that the local media community remains a good and supportive community.

### **Time for Personal Growth**

For Khim as a young journalist, the opportunity to travel and immerse in the Cordillera communities was what he appreciated most. He said:

“Mas ano yun talaga, ewan ko opportunity talaga yun makapunta talaga ako doon sa communities. Nagawa ko siya twice lang before the ECQ. Pero yung larga naman po namin sa Baguio parang ganun pa rin yung interview mo with the organization with the sectors involved, yung kayang i-practice talaga. Under the pandemic nung People’s Cordillera Day April 24, 2021 nagpunta kami doon sa mismong monument site in Kalinga. [I really considered being able to go to the communities as an opportunity. I was only able to go out of Baguio twice before the ECQ. However, even our interviews and field work in Baguio was with organizations and marginalized sectors. Under the pandemic we were able to travel to Kalinga during the People’s Cordillera Day celebration on April 24, 2021.]”

He added that there were also a lot of training opportunities exclusive for the media under the NUJP and Altermidya where he was chosen by Nordis to attend.

For Kimberlie, the pandemic forced her to embrace the opportunities provided by online media. While she bemoans the loss of the hard copy and their audiences in the rural areas, she realized there are other communities that can be tapped online.

She said:

“Siguro ang nagawa ni pandemic ay naipakita niya sa ‘kin yung potential ng digital space. Naipakita niya sa ‘kin yung range ng avenues na pwedeng imaximize dito sa digital platform. So na appreciate ko siya. Kaya nagkaroon ako ng, nakumbinsi ko ang sarili ko na aralin siya at kung papaano talaga siya gamitin. Yung isa syempre, yung linkages na naabot mo through online. Hindi na kung yung paper kasi ano ganyan eh eto international na yung inaabot ng

stories mo. Though yon nga yung mga liblib na gusto mong abutin ay hindi mo na abot kasi wala naman silang internet ganyan. So may downside pero meron din namang other areas na nag-open. Sa analytics naman malaki ang following ng abroad I mean outside of the country halos. [Perhaps what the pandemic did for me was to show me the potential of the digital space. It showed me the range of avenues that we can maximize in this platform. I was able to appreciate it. I was able to convince myself to study it and learn how to really use it. Then we were able to form linkages with many groups and individuals online. You now have to think about the international reach of your stories. Although you still feel heartbroken about the far-flung communities that you want to reach but cannot because of the lack of internet connection. So there are downsides yet a lot of other areas that opened up for us.]”

Faced with a new audience, she added that they had to shift their language to English, even quotes were now translated to English and the context was shifted for an international audience. She said:

“May bago kang audience, lalo na ang daming indigenous people abroad, yung mga nag-migrate tapos gusto makarelate balikan yung ano nang nangyayari sa kanilang bayan. So kailangan mong mag context kasi iba yung Philippine context. Iba yung Northern Luzon context within the Philippines. Lalo na iba yung Cordi context. May ibang may particularity lalo na on IP issues, on IP stories. So medyo mapapadami ang homework mo para mai-contextualize mo at mas mapaunawa na sa wider audience na lalo na yun nga halos pumapatas yung international followers doon sa local, national following ayan. So may mga ganong adjustment. [You have a new audience, especially the migrant indigenous people abroad who still want to relate to what is happening in their hometowns. Our international followers have now reached almost equal numbers as our local and national following. You have to give a Philippine context to your stories, not just a Northern Luzon context. The Cordillera context, for example, has some particularity especially on IP issues and stories. Your homework increases as you have to give better context and make your wider audience understand. So you have to contend with those adjustments.]”

Networking with international media groups was also a bonus for Nordis.

“Aside from NUJP may mga international media groups din na naka-link, nakasalamuha lalo na sa campaign for diyan sa legal campaign at tsaka yan sa red tagging campaign. So may mga relations na nabuo with other media organizations, international media organizations ganon. [Aside from NUJP we also linked with international media groups, we met them through the legal campaign and red

tagging campaign. So we formed relationships with them.]”

Lastly, Kimberlie said they benefited from the online training opportunities. “Lalo na nga digital security training. Yung web management training. Tapos yung particularity ng language sa web, yung layout. [Especially on digital security training, web management, and the particularity of language on the web, including layout.]”

She saw it also as an opportunity for personal growth as she had to widen her skill set. She described this as:

“Di ba yung kung dati ang iniisip mo lang ay photo at saka yung write up? Ngayon hindi na lang ganon eh. Pwede kang may mga graphs, may mga infographics. Parang mas visual kasi talaga itong platform na ito eh. Dati ang problem nagsusulat ka lang eh wala ka nang problema sa photo kasi bahala na si photographer di ba? Ngayon multimedia ka na mag-isip. So isa yun, napwepwersa ako na i-develop yung aking multimedia skills na kalaunan naman maganda kasi kakailanganin mo naman talaga siya. Kumbaga lumawak hindi na lang siya, hindi na lang ako print mag-isip yung ganun. [Before you only had to think about a story in terms of photos and the write up. That is no longer enough. You have to add graphs, infographics because this platform is really more visual. Before you only had to write as the photographer will take charge of photos. Now you have to have a multimedia mindset. I was forced to develop my multimedia skills which proved beneficial in the long run. My mindset has become broader; I no longer limit myself to print.]”

### **Changes and Directions Seen from the Covid-19 Pandemic**

#### **Journalism in any Form Will be Relevant**

Is journalism still essential? The participants answered a resounding yes. They emphasized the importance of journalism and journalists under the pandemic and in the digital age where disinformation can come from every corner.

Malen said: “Of course, especially now in the time of the pandemic. Kasi

[because] this will drag on. Journalism in any form will be relevant.” Who will do the reports if journalists will not? She asked. “I think journalism will endure kasi [because] we were programmed to be resilient. We were programmed to weather the storm; kasi we will report how people weathered the storm.”

Khim said community journalism, in particular, is very essential to this day. He said:

“Yung basic concept ng journalism na pagpunta mo doon sa interviewee mo doon sa sectors na affected nung stories mo mas nakikita ko siya sa community journalism, sa alternative journalism talaga na you are mandated na makuha talaga yung side nung sectors of people who are affected by the issues. Tapos yun nga, yung pag-present nung side nila, talagang nagmamanifest po siya sa community journalism. Lalo na ngayon na parang ang daming mechanism ng government para mag-spread ng fake news o para i-invalidate yung struggles ng masses. So yung community journalism talaga kailangan nakikipagsabayan ka sa ganung level na kung papaano sinasilence o kung papaano pinu-fuel ng state yung fake news ganyan dapat tumapat ka doon. Kasi yun din yung armas mo, yun din yung kaya mong itapat sa ganung klaseng attack. Apart from legal complaints, yung story mo talaga yung magpapakita nung narrative nung people na naapektuhan ng issue. [The basic concept of journalism where you have to go to the interviewees, the sectors affected by your stories is more evident in community journalism, in alternative journalism where you are mandated to really air the side of the sectors of people affected by issues. Presenting their side is already a manifestation of community journalism. Especially now when the government has a lot of mechanisms to spread fake news or invalidate the struggles of the masses. Community journalism has to be competitive in that kind of situation. If there is silencing and fake news being fueled by the state, you have to learn how to leverage your practice against that. You have to use journalism as your weapon, to fight back those kinds of attacks. Apart from legal complaints, your story will be the one exposing the narrative of people affected by the issue.]”

Rima said journalists are very essential especially in this age where people can barely distinguish real from fake news. She said:

“Kasi di ba ang definition kasi ng fake news sa kanila it follows the format being used pero actually it’s all false or yung pag-compose pa lang nung ano ang daming subjective na words na ginagamit hindi alam ng tao yun. Tayo na practitioners alam natin so very essential pa rin yung may gatekeeper. Very essential pa rin yung vetting. Very essential pa rin yung sundin mo yung

journalistic format of writing. Hindi yung parang essay ba ito, from your personal point of view ganun. Kasi journalism naman it's not your point of view you have to have a source so kailangang-kailangan lalo na ngayon. [They define fake news as something that follows the news format but contains false information. Sometimes people do not recognize that that is not journalism based on the composition and the use of subjective words alone. Practitioners like us know the difference. We know that gatekeeping is still very essential. Vetting is very essential. Following the journalistic format of writing is very essential. It's not just essay writing, or writing from your personal point of view. Journalism is not your point of view you have to make use of sources. That is why journalism is very essential especially now.]”

Karlston echoes the same thought. He said:

“I think especially now that there's a lot of wrong information circling around the so-called fake news. I think credible journalism is very significant, especially now that everything is online, just a click of a finger. Ang dali nang magsabi ng [It is easy to just bring out] information and you don't even know if that is true or not. So we really need credible journalists so we would fact check this information and we would bring about the correct information. Lalo na ngayon [Especially now] people are looking for answers, looking for information. The internet is a very, very good tool and also vice versa. Double blade yan either to sow this information or to correct it. That's why journalism is very important, especially at these times.”

Aldwin said it is passion that fuels journalistic work. Though this is true, he said it must come with a warning for future journalists or those who aspire to become journalists that working in the media will not make you rich. A lot of media colleagues had to switch jobs. The others remain committed to their work even if they are suffering. “Adda passionda and mas-important committedda as journalists. Diay commitment diay awit-awitda. [They have passion but most importantly, they are committed as journalists.]”

### **Roles of Community Journalists Will Expand and Evolve**

Maslog (1988) mentioned the following roles of the media: to inform the people and comment on issues so that the people may be more intelligent and active

participants in government, to entertain, and to educate the people. Meanwhile Quebral (2012) listed at least four basic tasks that community journalists play.

Are community journalists able to fulfill all these roles and tasks? Or beyond these basic tasks, what other tasks do they perform as a service to the community under the Covid-19 pandemic?

In general, the answer to the first question is yes. The participants continued doing their role of informing, entertaining, and educating people. The entertainment part, however, may not have been the priority of the community journalists as most of the stories covered under Covid-19 took on a more serious tone.

The participants have circulated knowledge that will inform people of significant events, opportunities, dangers and changes in their community, the country, the region and the world. Aldwin added that our role is to show society what it can do to be aware of their surroundings, analyze what is happening so people would know what to do.

In their websites and social media accounts, the newspapers have provided a forum where issues affecting the national or community life may be discussed. In choosing the stories to convey such as the good practices and success stories of patients with Covid-19, they have attempted to teach those ideas, skills, and values that people need to achieve a better life.

The constant update of guidelines for people to follow and work with the

government has covered almost each issue of the newspapers under the pandemic and this covered the role of creating and maintaining a base of consensus that is needed for the stability of a state.

Beyond these basic tasks, what other tasks do they perform as a service to the community under the Covid-19 pandemic?

Acting as the third party gatekeeper and vetter of information is one role.

Rima said:

“Yung responsibilidad mo kasi I think ang dami nang hindi nakakaalam why media is here. Kasi nga tayo nga yung magbabantay sana ng pang-aabuso, tayo yung third party. Kung baga hindi mo kakainin hook, line, and sinker yung information. [A lot of people no longer understand why media is here. Our responsibility is to guard against abuse, we are the third party. You do not just swallow information hook, line, and sinker.]” She added that community journalists will continue to thrive despite the challenges. “Ikaw yung parang kapitbahay na ikaw yung mag kwekwento na its straight from the horse’s mouth na ikaw yung direkta na nakikipag-usap doon sa mga sources. You are part of the community so mas attached ka, mas familiar ka sa nangyayari. Tsaka ikaw yung agad-agad makakapunta at makakapag-clarify kung ano man yung nangyayari sa paligid mo mismo, I mean media outsiders cannot do that right away. So ikaw na community journalist ikaw yung agad-agad na nandoon para magsabi kung ano yung nangyayari. [You are the neighbor relaying information straight from the horse’s mouth since you talk directly with the sources. You are part of the community so you feel more attached, you are more familiar with what is happening. You are the one who can immediately go and clarify what is happening around you, I mean media outsiders cannot do that right away. As the community journalist, you are in the position to get the information and report it straight away.]”

“Combating fake news. Delivering information that matters.” This is how Jane captures the role of the journalist. “Now talaga the main talaga di ba well nandiyan na yung well genuine stories, stories that matter to the community people ngayon ang pinaka roel ngayon amidst the pandemic is still yun delivering truthful information na talagang geared towards combating disinformation or fake news.

[Now the main role is to deliver genuine stories, stories that matter to the community. Our role amidst the pandemic is still to deliver truthful information geared towards combating disinformation or fake news.]”

Kimberlie seconded Jane’s statement by saying:

“Syempre pangunahin talaga na kailangan i-assume na role ng journalist is [The first role that a journalist has to assume is] to be truth tellers in this time and age where everybody can make up stories. Journalists should be the truth tellers. Kasi nga [because] our duty as truth tellers is essential in this day and age where anybody can make up stories and put it up online. It’s very easy to fabricate stories but as truth tellers it is our duty to ensure that right, correct, verified, factual information especially about the pandemic will dominate these platforms. Specially kabataan ang next leaders mo. Ang paghubog sa kanila to consume the right information yun ang challenge eh. Anong kinabukasan? Dios ko pag-uugod-ugod na ko tas puro fake news naman mababasa ko. Di ba parang aatakihin ako sa puso? [The youth will be our next leaders, our challenge is to help mold them to consume the right information. What will happen in the future? I don’t want to grow old still reading absolutely fake news, I might get a heart attack.] It’s upon the journalist to ensure that truthful, verified, factual information will proliferate in all of these media.”

These roles they mentioned are the same roles the UNESCO (2020) listed when they focused on the importance of journalists in fighting the infodemic.

“Community journalists set the trend, we dictate what people should look out for,” Malen said about the agenda setting role of the community journalist. She added:

“Actually we have a very powerful role and sadly some community journalists don’t realize it eh. Ako napansin ko yun sa Sunstar, titignan ko kung ano ang headline namin araw araw yun ang headline ng weekly. So ano siya kung yun at yun ang ihihighlight mo yun yun ang magiging mindset ng tao, di ba? So you command the trend pag sinabi mo sa tao. Sabi ko nun yung mga panahon siguro na mayabang ako bigyan mo ako ng bato. Isusulat ko yan. Bukas sasambahin yan ng tao. Pero totoo yun in all honesty kayang-kayang gawin yun ng community journalist. [Actually we have a very powerful role and sadly some community journalists don’t realize it. I noticed that in Sunstar, I read our headlines daily and the headlines of the weeklies. Whatever you

highlight will be in the mindset of people, right? So you command the trend. Like I could tell you to give me a rock, I will write about that rock, tomorrow people will begin adoring that rock. In all honesty, a community journalist has the power to do that.]”

Karlston answered the question on the role of the community journalist very beautifully. He said:

“We link communities to the agencies or to the entities that could help them. Because when you go to the communities to gather information it’s very hard for you to dissociate yourself as a human being. You don’t just go there and get the facts, their stories and go out when you know that they need something. You need to do something, so if you know that their problem is regarding their being taken advantage of legally, then you have this moral duty to connect them to a lawyer that could help them or connect them to somebody within the legal sphere that could help them. Likewise, when you go to the communities, ang hirap-hirap ng health situation nila [their health situation is very dire]. Then perhaps you can link these people to the DOH or people who need their help, because morally it’s the right thing to do. Not just being journalists but you have this you know para sa akin kasi [for me] we have this moral compass that also guides our journalistic principles.”

### **Journalism’s Future Depends on Adaptation**

Towards the end of all the interviews and having relayed their experiences under the pandemic, I asked how they see the future of journalism? What lessons, changes, and directions do they see for community journalists?

Malen feels a bit pessimistic about the future of community journalists. She said:

“Saklap-saklap ang future ng community journalists. Kasi karamihan ng community journalists gutom. Karamihan sa community journalists kinukulang sa pera. Kinukulang sa opportunity. Kinukulang sa education. [The future of community journalists is very terrible. Because many journalists are hungry, living in poverty, lacking in opportunity, even lacking in education.] The next step for community journalists is to become educators and not everybody embraces that path. So community journalism is slowly dimming unless magyu-unite ang community journalists and community paper para itaas ang standard, sumabay sa trend, tsaka i-acknowledge na hindi na traditional ang journalism. [unless the community journalists and community papers unite to

raise the standards, ride on the trend, and acknowledge that journalism is no longer its traditional form. For example, Midland, it's the longest running paper, but the quality and the readability is at question. Not the integrity of the people but the quality of the news and how you present it. Ang dali-dali ng Midland i-topple down ang Sunstar. Hindi nila magawa nun sa digital kasi ayaw o hindi in-embrace yung role na kailangan flexible ka eh. So kapag nagpumilit ang community papers tsaka community journalists na nandyan lang sa kahon, wala didilim nang didilim. [Midland could have easily toppled Sunstar but they couldn't do it in the digital platform. They do not want to embrace the role that you need to be flexible. If community papers insist on staying within the box of traditional practice, then there will be no light for them in the future.]”

If this was how she saw the future, I asked what should community journalists do? And Malen answered:

“Mag digital. Go digital. Embrace digital. Make it work for you not against you wag mong tapak-tapakan yung cellphone mo. Wag mong muramurahin na may digital na. Sumabay ka, ipakita mo na bukod sa meron akong diyaryo meron akong ganito. Bukod sa binibili ako ng mga tao sa papel kuha ko rin yung market ng online. Yun ang community paper kasi hindi na lang isang portion ng community ang audience mo eh. [Use digital. Go digital. Embrace digital. Make it work for you not against you. Do not trample your cell phone. Do not curse the presence of digital platforms. Ride along with them. Show the world that aside from your print issue, you can create a digital issue. Apart from capturing the street sales, capture the online market too. That is what a community paper should be because you no longer just cater to one portion of the community.]”

Jane echoes the hard truth that adaptation was the only way newspapers can survive. She said:

“The newspaper has to learn to adapt in order to survive. Masakit kasing tanggapin di ba yung masakit isipin? [It hurts to think about it] Sometimes I don't want to think about it nga that, that there will come a time that the hard copy of the paper will no longer be printed. Pero nga [But] if you want to continue to exist kailangan, we need to, talagang [truly] we are going in that direction.”

However, she remains hopeful for a vibrant future for the community press saying:

“I still don't want to be discouraged and I am still hopeful for a vibrant community press. A community press that could adapt or that is able to adapt to the changing media landscape and the changing media landscape means doing online. We are fortunate that we still have readers who prefer hard copy, who were reading that time [under the pandemic] but the readers kasi [are] aging na rin yung loyal readers to the print copy. Eventually mag-o-online magsyi-shift online [they will shift online]. The community press will still be there as long as they learn to adapt to the changing media landscape.”

Kimberlie agreed that adaptation is the direction newspapers must follow and it pertains to the embracing of digital platforms. According to her:

“Saan tayo patutungo? Patungong digital, patungong online syempre. Pinaka ideal yung may online ka, may print ka. Or kung radio ka naman ume-ere ka pa rin pero may online ka. Katulad nga ng sinabi ko kanina we have to own the online, we have to own the internet on all the platforms in there. We have more avenues; we have more platforms. Hindi na lang siya strictly radio, TV, print. Meron tayong internet at sa loob ng internet na yan may iba't ibang platform – may Twitter, may Instagram, may Facebook, may websites. Ano lang, lumawak lang ang platform. Dumami lang ang platforms pero dapat hindi nagbabago yung essentials ng journalism. Nabigyan ka lang ng mas maraming avenue, platform for your journalism. So kung papaano mo gagamitin paano mo aangkinin ang mga platforms na ito bilang mamamahayag di ba? Yun mas ganun ko siya tinitignan. Imagine mo nalang 'no, walang journalist, walang mamamahayag tas lahat na lang kanya-kanyang gawa ng nobela ipo-post diyan di ba. [Where are we going? We are going towards digital, towards online. The most ideal situation would be having an online and print version. Or if you are a radio station, that you can air on the free waves and online. As I have said earlier, we have to own the online, we have to own the internet on all the platforms in there. We have more avenues; we have more platforms. It is no longer strictly radio, TV, or print. We have the internet and within it are the various platforms – Twitter, instagram, Facebook, websites. The platforms have become wider, multiplied. But the essentials of journalism should not change. You were just given more avenues and platforms for your journalism. I look at it more from the perspective of how you would own these platforms as a journalist. Imagine a world where there are no journalists online? Anyone can just create their own stories and post them.]”

But even as they embrace the digital platforms, Khim said they should not forget traditional journalism. He added:

“Hindi dapat mawala yung appreciation or recognition na kung papaano nagsimula yung journ. Na parang yung traditional journalism talaga na yung print, ganyan newspapers, sa television din. Kasi mayroon at mayroon pa rin

yung mga tao pa rin talaga na walang access doon sa online space. Yun yung naging isang kahirapan din sa Nordis na parang we post online sa website, sa Facebook, sa Twitter, Instagram pero naabot ba niya yung ano yung target audience mo na yung community? Yung ano malaking factor sa journalism ngayon, pag-translate niya talaga online. Kasi even yung mainstream grabe na yung puhunan ng media sa online space parang ang dami-daming features na naa-unlock sa media. Lalo na sa online kasi ang dami mong pwedeng i-explore. So mukhang malaking factor sa future ng journalism talaga yung pag-shift niya into, hindi naman talaga totally pag-shift kasi feeling ko mag-e-exist pa rin yung mga traditional media natin, pero yung pag-incorporate yung digital media doon sa traditional kung paano sila magmi-meet ganun. [The appreciation or recognition of the origins and history of journalism should never be set aside, including traditional journalism and legacy media. Because there will always be people who do not have access to the online space. We find that as a challenge in Nordis, we post online in our website, on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram but is our target audience being reached? A big factor for journalism now is how it translates to online journalism. Mainstream journalism enterprises have invested a lot on the online space having unlocked a lot of features for the media. You have a lot to explore online. A big factor in the future of journalism is how to incorporate digital or how traditional and digital media should meet.]”

Khim affirms Hess and Waller (2020)’s findings that journalism must be within reach of the masses and for that to happen, the print edition, the traditional hard copy must still be maintained.

Community journalists should also upgrade their skills in order to adjust to the new normal. Rima said:

“Community journalists have to level up, sumabay na sa new normal of journalism. Hindi ka man makapagpagawa ng sarili mong website kasi nga mahal, your social media page can help na as another platform to deliver the news. Sumabay ka rin na kung ang dami-daming bumubuo, kung may mga trolls, gumawa ka rin ng sarili mong credible platform to deliver the news apart from the traditional medium of communication.” She added that “Dapat pinapaigting ngayon ng media yung research skills kasi sa dami ng mali mas dapat mong gamitin yung tinuro sa iyo on paper trail, data mining, human trail kasi doon mo lang maka-counter yung false na nilabas sa ibang social accounts. [Community journalists have to level up and adapt to the new normal of journalism. If you cannot afford to create your own website, you can use your social media page as another platform to deliver the news. If trolls can create their platforms, then you should also create your own credible platform to deliver news apart from the traditional medium of communication.

Media should also work on their research skills because they face a lot of false information. They should use their knowledge of the paper trail, data mining, and human trail because that is where you can counter the false information brought out by other social media accounts].”

Karlston views the future of community journalism with more optimism. He said:

“I think community journalism is the future. Kasi [because] people are now more interested in personal experiences in reading, knowing the stories on the ground, knowing that they can relate to those stories because community journalism is all about telling the stories of people on the ground. And if, like for example now doon sa aming [based on our] assessment sa Mongabay Philippines, people are reading, mas klini-click [clicking], they have more views yung [of] stories taken from the villages, from Banawe than the story about the changes in the policies in the national government. Because they can relate to those people and they see I think, yeah, they can relate to those people and they can learn from those stories. They can relate to the stories kaya mas marami yung nagsye-share nagla-like doon sa mga community stories rather than stories ng policy making, mga changes sa laws on fisheries, they don't care eh. Parang ang nakikita lang namin na trend is talagang yung mga stories lang ng dam ng Tabuk, yun yung mga nakli-click na story, nabi-view na story [They can relate to community stories more so they share it more. People are not interested so much on stories on policy making, changes in laws on fisheries, they don't care. The trend we see is that stories like on the dam in Tabuk, are the most viewed and most read.]”

Aldwin says to ensure the future of community media we have to learn from the experiences in the pandemic. He mentioned the economic realities faced by the media. He said:

“Diay siguro, diay realization tayu as media a siguro makuna nga economic, dakkal a challenge economically ti biag ti media. Haan tayu a maibaga a nu kaanu nga maawan diay pagtrabahoan tayo. Bigla nga agkebebe, diay ti reality a maymayat latta nga adda ti planuentayu nga alternative for kasla nga ania pagkaptan nu matmatnagka. [The realization that you can lose your job any time. That no work equals no pay. You have to think of alternatives, one which you can use as a foothold when you're falling.]”

He added that whatever lessons we learned from the pandemic, both the upside and downside, we hope we can carry it with us so that the community media will not die. Lastly he said, “We need to remind each other, we need to police our

ranks to do what is right.” Part of this policing work was the basis of the formation of the Kordilyera Media-Citizen Council in November 2021 of which many of the participants and this researcher became founding members.

### **Community Journalists’ Feelings Under the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Lived experience or the meaning people attach to their experiences cannot be fully understood without taking feelings into account. Some participants were able to answer how they felt about themselves directly, others only smiled or laughed and talked about the profession in general but not about themselves.

Karlston said in terms of personal growth, the pandemic actually did something good for him. He said:

“The pandemic did actually something good sa akin [for me] because it made me explore a lot of options na I thought would be impossible. Kasi before ang focus ko talaga is local [I used to focus only on local], you write for the local lens but here comes Covid. Now I was forced to adopt writing for something that could be more appealing to the international audience. So it sort of gives me an opportunity to rediscover something and learn something. It also taught me how to adapt to instant change, adapt to pressure which I usually did not feel before the pandemic. In terms of siguro looking at journalism as a whole there is a grave outlook na dito sa Pilipinas talaga ang [here in the Philippines we see that] print journalism is dying. It's dying. Ang print journalism kasi like, for example, Baguio Chronicle nawala na yung print nila for some time although meron na ngayon kunting copies [stopped printing for some time although now they have a few copies]. Sunstar at one time stopped then it ultimately stopped. Even Midland, naging manipis ang Midland [it is now printing less pages]. Even the national daily such as Inquirer naging manipis at nag-merge ang mga bureaus [merged their regional bureaus and have lesser pages]. It also shows a perspective na in the Philippines I think print journalism is dying. We are relying so much on advertisements para i-sustain ang papel which is well hindi talaga maiwasan yun kasi [to sustain the paper, which we cannot avoid since] it's the life of the paper. I think for those who are in the print medyo ang hirap talaga like yun nga [it is really challenging] if I stayed in Inquirer and solely for Inquirer I think I would have not survived because talagang mahirap na [the situation is dire]. So I tried on the online. Good thing we have online media outlets but journalism is very viable if may outlets lang na ganun lahat [if only every paper had outlets online].”

Jane, meanwhile, said she still feels overwhelmed by the consequences and circumstances of the pandemic. She said:

“We were caught off guard, no one really expected that our world would change this abruptly, di ba? [isn't it] So hanggang ngayon overwhelmed pa rin [until now I feel overwhelmed] when it comes to the job—security wise. There is that fear that baka hanggang saan kaya kakayanin ng management to [there is that fear of how long can management] continue the operations of the paper? But then again sabi nga natin there are always opportunities. So overwhelmed pa rin because we still, for me, I still do not feel that we are in a normal world. A normal world for me would be going out and talking to people face to face, di ba? [isn't it?] Conduct interviews naman face to face. Covering events as they happen. Di ba being where the action is, that's as a journalist. That's what normal life is for me. Pero yun nga [But] because of the circumstances I'm still overwhelmed with the things that are happening. Especially nga that di ba we waited one year, we waited a year for the vaccine to arrive. We thought before that would be the cure of all the problems. Hindi pala! [But it's not!] It's because, malay ba natin, na magkaka-beta, alpha, delta, magkaka-gamma variants pa [It's because we didn't know that other variants would still emerge.] So ano, we are still facing an uncertain future.”

For Kimberlie feelings change over time as we learn to adapt to the circumstances brought about by Covid-19. She said happiness is dependent on the person:

“Pag na-break talaga yung ano mo, yung nakasanayan mo noh, hindi ka masaya kasi andami mong ia-adjust. Ang dami mong kailangan aralin papaano na nga ulit, di ba? So papaano na ia-approach yung ganitong bagong set-up? So madami kang ia-adjust nako-consume ka di ba? Pero kapag you get the hang of it na nagse-settle din naman yung mga konsumisyon. So may bago lang na dun talaga sa first few months. Tapos eh di naka-adjust ka na, noh, tas biglang mamaya aba hindi lang nag-umpisa sa ECQ, naging MECQ, tapos barbecue, andami ng Q so parang – Ano ba ang pagkakaiba ng lahat ng ito? – the same problem. Parang you choose to be happy kung ako ah. You find your own bearing and choose to be happy with whatever is around. Kasi ang hirap nung ganito na nga ang sitwasyon tapos aawayin mo pang lahat, di ba? So parang you find na lang simple joys and find ways to entertain yourself pag ganito nang pabago-bago ang kalagayan. Ganun naman talaga yata sa buhay, kailangan mo lang hanapin kung paano ka mag-adjust. [If your routine is disrupted you won't feel happy because you would have a lot of adjusting to do. You would have to learn doing things anew. You feel consumed just by the adjustment. But you get the hang of it and things finally settle down. You have finally adjusted and now you are faced with a series of changes and protocols like the ECQ, MECQ, et cetera. Am I looking at the same problem once again or is it the same one? For me, you just have to choose to be happy. You find your own bearing and choose

to be happy with whatever is around. This situation is already difficult, do not make it more difficult by complaining or fighting about everything else around you. Find simple joys and find ways to entertain yourself with the constant changes in our situation. I think life is like that anyway, you just have to find a way to adjust.]”

At the time of the interviews, we were still at the height of the pandemic. My interviews with the participants, even if we were joking and laughing at the hard situations, had a grim tone underlying it. Most of the participants had a lingering feeling of destitution, especially if the Covid-19 situation would not improve. Malen voiced her pessimism very clearly, she lost her job and she hated the situation. Aldwin was somber, he carried the heaviest weight as a leader of the Baguio media. Kimberlie, Rima, and Jane love media work but they worry about the future of the newspaper industry. Kimberlie at many points was angry and frustrated by her legal problems. Khim left the profession, even if he loved the work, he shifted to greener pastures. Only Karlston exuded a sense of optimism, perhaps because his career thrived under the pandemic unlike the others.

I cannot help but compare this aspect about feelings to my interviews with senior journalists Alfred Dizon and March Fianza of the Northern Philippine Times. They had a deferential tone as regards the pandemic. Manong Alfred said “this is nothing, this too will pass.” At a time when it felt like the end of the world, he added that this is just a phase and we will return to normal. Manong March likened it to their experience under the Baguio earthquake on July 16, 1990. As young journalists then, they too felt the hopelessness of the situation but everything improved as the years went on. “This is but a temporary setback,” Manong March said. I commented that they were very confident compared to my other interviewees and they answered

with a laugh. Looking back on their statements in 2024 and knowing how life has indeed improved even with Covid-19, indeed I could say with age comes wisdom.

### **Practice of Community Journalism Under the New Normal as Shaped by their Experiences Under the Covid-19 Pandemic**

After answering what were the experiences of community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic and how they have adapted to the new normal of practicing their profession, what is left to be answered now is: What is the new normal state of community journalism?

The new normal state of journalism calls for adaptation, continuous upgrading of skills, and fostering a nurturing community. But what adaptation should community journalists make, what upgrades in skills do they need, and how do they foster a nurturing community? We look at these three as they apply to basic news production processes in community newspapers.

#### **Newsworthy Topics: Outside the Box and Hyperlocal**

We begin with identifying what are the newsworthy stories under the new normal? Covid stories have been the content of the newspapers ever since the pandemic began. For over a year from the declaration of the pandemic, Covid was the only topic. This forced journalists to come up with different angles to write about the same topic. They re-learned how to write about health, numbers, and data. They had to think outside the box, especially the correspondents, if they wanted a chance to be published nationally or internationally. Since they are based in the Cordilleras, this means stories about indigenous communities and their practices.

There is a distinct local flavor to the news being written by community journalists. Hyperlocal news has become the trend, because these contain topics that could affect the community the most or could be used by the locals for decision making.

### **Data Gathering: Traditional and Technology-assisted**

The new normal in news coverage incorporates both traditional and technology-assisted means of data gathering, interviewing, and sourcing.

The traditional aspects of data gathering would ensure that sources who have no access to the internet and technology can still be interviewed. This means journalists will not forgo traveling to do face to face interviews. Photography and taking videos for multimedia outputs online also relies on field work.

If travel is involved in the data gathering process, it must be coordinated with the locality. Personal awareness of the journalist's health condition and the observance of minimum health protocols are still a must. Vigilance against contracting Covid-19 and its multiplying variants is still the norm. Basic health protocols should still be observed individually in the absence of strict government regulations.

Technology such as smartphones, laptops, and connection to the internet assists in some forms of data gathering such as in interviews. These allow journalists to conduct online interviews and attend press conferences and events with live feeds. There is also a growing reliance on social media as a source of information

since many government agencies and individual sources use their social media accounts to publish statements and other announcements. Hence, community journalists now monitor not just the TV, radio, and other newspapers for news but they have also become social media monitors.

The community journalist chooses whether to use the traditional or technology-assisted means of data gathering. Some journalists prefer the traditional methods because they can see non-verbal cues and they get to ask questions in person. The technology-assisted methods can save time and travel, allow flexible work setups, and provide a barrier between the journalist and the source in case any of them are sick.

### **News Writing: Considering Language and Context**

The process of news writing per se has not really changed under the new normal. These rules of writing have not really changed: Starting with a catchy lead, organizing ideas using the inverted pyramid, using an appropriate headline, citing sources, fact-checking, keeping your opinions out of the story, and following the journalism code of ethics.

Since the news articles are now being published online or on social media, the language of news should not be confined to its written form. It should also be adapted in oral or aural forms because digital platforms cater to multimedia content. Hence, news is not covered just by static text. It is often complemented by graphics as well as video clips and sound bites.

The language and context in writing should also be adjusted to cater to a

wider or international audience. Community papers have to learn how to adapt local news for an international context. This also means the use of language that can be understood even by non-Filipinos. Quotes in the vernacular have to be properly translated into English, the medium of choice for most community papers.

### **News Editing: Building Credibility**

The news editing process, which is the heart of the news production process, should still be given the most emphasis. News editing includes following the journalistic style guide, checking for grammatical and spelling errors, vetting the information for accuracy and truthfulness, and doing legal checks prior to publication. All these have to be done meticulously as these are what separates journalism from other forms of content found on the internet.

Skills to counter fake news; research skills such as data mining, people trail, and paper trail; and training to be social media managers if not website developers have to be upgraded in light of the disinfodemic.

Credibility can be built by strengthening the news editing process, vetting information, and telling the truth. Building credibility is one of the most important weapons a journalist can wield against disinformation. Credibility will establish you as a news source.

### **News Publication: Digital Platforms**

Lastly, the new normal now calls for a shift to publishing on the digital platform. There is a marked decrease in copies of printed newspapers brought about

by loss of advertisers and street sales. To make up for this, the newspaper's content should also be published online. Community journalism should take advantage of the digital platforms where new audiences are waiting.

There is value, however, in maintaining the hardcopy for portions of their community who do not have access to the internet. In addition, judicial notices and other government information that need to be published in community newspapers mean that hard copies will still need to be printed.

Publishing online may have become the norm, but a sustainable business model for digital publications is still elusive especially for community papers. They may be earning from online advertising but this revenue is not enough to run the entire business. Journalists must continue to find ways to help the publication gain revenue online. Story grants and other competitions can also help fund the publication.

Community journalism in the new normal remains the same journalism of service, commitment, and passion albeit with different, more technology-based tools.

On a final note, of the participants interviewed Kimberlie is in the best position to take advantage of the opportunities of the digital platform and to implement them as she is the EIC of their publication. Karlston has shown that freelance community journalists can thrive on story grants in online publications. Malen who has fully embraced what digital platforms have to offer had her newspaper shut down by its publishers. Aldwin, as a correspondent, cannot control the output of the newspaper

he works for. Rima and Jane remain at the mercy of the owners of the publication even if they have plans to improve their website and their social media presence.

Working in a supportive and caring media community such as that nurtured by the Baguio Correspondents and Broadcaster Club (BCBC) was one of the biggest keys to the survival of community journalists. It can act as a support group for journalists and help them organize their ranks because disastrous events like the pandemic are easier to face when together. This should also be the new normal in all media communities, not only in this locality.

## **Chapter V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Journalists have plenty of personal stories to share. Given the chance to be heard they will hold you captive with their anecdotes, their experiences, and the story of their lives and other people's lives. They are chroniclers of history, writing behind the scenes. They are keepers of knowledge, even tidbits ethically unfit to be published in the news. They are our watch dogs, informing us of what to put up our guards against and what to welcome with caution.

This interpretative phenomenological study on the lived experience of Community Journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic is a story about how ordinary people like you and me, individually and collectively, tried their best to survive not just the threat of a worldwide infection but the dire state of their profession. This manuscript is not enough to contain all their narratives or their versions of reality but it tries to embody the wisdom shared by the participants.

#### **Summary**

Answering the question of how the experiences of community journalists under the Covid-19 pandemic shaped their practice of doing community journalism under a new normal cannot be complete without summarizing the following findings of the study:

The Covid-19 pandemic has indeed highlighted and amplified the many crises that threaten community journalists. To cope with the difficulties of living under the

threat of Covid-19, community journalists have adjusted their data gathering, news writing, and publication methods.

The challenges faced by community journalists range from threats to their physical safety, legal safety, psychological or mental health, financial or economic status, and digital safety. The biggest challenge is disinformation.

To overcome the challenges they face, community journalists resorted to the following adjustments:

*Adjustments to Physical Safety Challenges:* Self and family preservation come first for the journalist as no story is worth dying over. This means choosing stories or limiting coverage, working from home, finding alternative means of coverage, and doing armchair journalism. This also means accepting the risks to physical health even while following basic health protocols.

*Adjustments to Legal Safety Challenges:* The chilling effects of red tagging and cyber libel has caused a lot of harm to journalists. Some threats remain as just that, a threat with no case filed against the journalist. However, online and other actual attacks should always be documented and reported to the authorities. Journalists should also consult with a lawyer to help come up with solutions.

Knowing the risks involved in the topics and people you are writing about also helps you prepare for the dangers attached. While journalists should always widen their networks, not everyone is a friend, your sources might turn on you anytime.

Banding together as one media, or not bearing it alone also helps. This could be done by working in pairs or having a buddy system. When traveling, it is a must to always have backup identification to establish yourself as a journalist. It also pays to be courteous to people in authority and to act amicably to not worsen heated situations. Remember that they are just doing their jobs.

*Adjustments for Psychological/Mental Health Challenges:* Simple socialization eases out the feelings of isolation and desolation brought by the pandemic. Processing collectively as a media team or club helps others become aware of our mental health status and vice versa so we can address any issues. Join mental health support groups. Cleansing and healing rituals under the media club is a unique adaptation among the local community journalists.

To counter anxiety over work stability, looking for other income opportunities or alternative work can also be an adaptation. Equip yourself with training being offered to boost your career and make you more saleable.

*Adjustments to Economic/Financial Challenges:* Shifting to online platforms lessens the cost of printing. There are plenty of opportunities to maximize use and earning opportunities in social media and other digital platforms. In case a paper still needs or wants to produce hard copies, they can limit the circulation or even forgo special issues in the meantime.

The closure of the newspaper is a reality. Finding alternative sources of income like applying for story grants, teaching, photo coverage, or documentation

jobs are a must. Some correspondents opt out of the game or give way to other colleagues to have a shot at publication and payment publication opportunities.

*Adjustments to Digital Challenges:* While embracing digital platforms is the new norm, we have to contend with the reality of poor internet or no internet connection. This means not letting go of the hard copy.

Digital media's challenges range from contending with trolls and bashers as well as hackers. The norm is to ignore bashers and trolls, do not engage them. Trolls and bashers can also be seen in a positive light as they increase traffic to news articles and posts. You can use legitimate comments and grievances as letters to the editor or a point for improvement.

Going digital means breaking stories on social media while saving the details of the in-depth report for hard copy or website publication.

For personal safety, journalists use two-step verification processes, limit their personal details on social media, and restrict some online activities in order to secure their online accounts. Community journalists should also network with experts on digital security, protection, and training to counter Denial of Service (DoS) attacks and other forms of hacking on their digital platforms.

*Adjustments to the Challenges of Disinformation:* Countering disinformation is a major challenge to all journalists. In order to effectively counter fake news, the journalists must establish their credibility as individuals and as a news publication.

This will help them counter and compete with other social media users and content creators. Credibility comes from truth telling and accuracy. Paying attention to news editing, vetting, and researching a story well are weapons to combat fake news and disinformation.

Even under the pandemic, community journalists encountered a lot of opportunities for growth. These are the following:

*First, social media is an opportunity not a threat.* Community newspapers and journalists have to learn to adapt using social media and other digital platforms in order to survive. The pandemic has given journalists more time to explore online or digital media. They can use it for linkaging and finding new audiences. However, journalists must learn how to adjust their writing style, language, the use of different aural and visual media, and context to connect with a wider audience. It also pays to have foresight in using new technologies, knowing when to embrace and adapt them.

*Second, story grants were overflowing for community journalists under the pandemic.* They only need to apply and find time to do the work. Researching and writing well helps journalists build a name for themselves. Accepting requests for stories, lectures, and speaking engagements also add credibility to a journalist.

*Third, seminars and training have been offered online.* Journalists now have more time to attend these career-enriching activities in the comfort of their homes or

offices. These activities also provide opportunities for self-growth, linkages, work, and more story grants.

*Fourth, the pandemic was an opportunity to test the mettle of the media as a group.* The media club rose to the aid of journalists, addressing their needs by connecting with the community they serve and by borrowing from indigenous and local traditions.

*Lastly, the pandemic was also a time for personal growth* whether it came as learning more tools for your trade, widening your network, or improving your health.

## **Conclusion**

We began this thesis with a quote on the fundamental role of a free press in an uncertain world, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. We conclude this study still emphasizing the fundamental role of a free press in an uncertain world for the profession of journalism beyond the pandemic. Our responsibilities as journalists and publishers of news will remain as important as ever. While undoubtedly the pandemic was the challenge of the century, more challenges will beset journalists as they try to navigate a changing media landscape. The desire to continue a brand of journalism that can adapt to digital multimedia form, cultivate new audiences, while serving their need to be aurally and visually informed—even entertained, remains our goal. But we keep our moral compass locked in the principles of ethical journalism and service to our communities.

The experiences that community journalists had to undergo because of the Covid-19 pandemic paved the way for their personal and professional

transformation. While our title says “The Community Press Remains Alive,” the reality is that they did more than stay alive, personally and professionally.

Their experiences under the pandemic actually fueled their transformation. They have now become journalists who are more conscious about their health, that of their family members, and the communities they cover. They have embraced digital news as the new norm and made use of opportunities to upskill themselves to conform to the needs of online publication platforms. They have enhanced their presence in the digital sphere, particularly in social media, while maintaining their credibility as sources of news and information to combat the disinfodemic. They have learned to develop a more entrepreneurial mindset, applying for story grants and other publication opportunities in order to gain a livable income. They have become more resilient, weathering not just the health implications of Covid-19 but also red tagging, harassment, cyber libel, and attacks on their lives. They have developed a heightened attitude of care and concern for their colleagues and peers who are in the same boat. All of this while maintaining their passion and commitment to journalism.

The community journalists’ experiences under Covid-19 shaped for us a new form of community journalism. One that knows its audience—the community it serves, understands their circumstances, and tries to reach them whether they are aging hard copy readers or new audiences found in digital platforms. A kind of journalism that combines traditional methods of data gathering with technology-assisted data gathering tools. It is a kind of journalism that contains traditional news values packaged in a form and language that is appropriate for various digital platforms. It is a kind of journalism that continues to wage a fight against

disinformation by adhering to the age-old journalistic principles of truth, service, and ethics. It is a kind of journalism that may work with different tools but carries with it the same heart, the same passion, and the same commitment for community journalism.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Given the above description of a new form of community journalism shaped by the lived experiences of community journalists under the pandemic, what then are its practical implications?

I want to begin discussing these implications with a personal note. Immediately before the pandemic was declared, I was sourced out for a regional position in a national broadsheet. I definitely wanted to go back to working in the media full time while teaching journalism in the university part time. We were to officially sign my contract in the head office in Manila. It was scheduled in the same week the lockdowns were declared. In short, the pandemic cost me that job.

In the four years since I was offered that job, I have never heard from the broadsheet again. It has not posted a need for the position I was offered. Perhaps just like the other broadsheets, it no longer needs the additional manpower for its regional pages. This experience pushed me to do this study on community journalists or those in the margins, to listen and learn from their experiences, because no one else might.

Most of the participants in this study were people I met and worked with as colleagues when I was still editing and writing for the Baguio Midland Courier. We became friends bonding over shared experiences covering the field or working in the news desk. Almost all of them are my agetates, in our late 30s to mid-40s. We shared almost the same cares and concerns regarding our personal and professional lives. When I left the media and focused on my studies and on teaching in 2011, I kept in touch with them constantly. As I was interviewing them, I cannot help but feel the same feelings and sentiments they had. The feelings of destitution, helplessness, and anxiety about what was happening. The sentiment that there seems to be no end in sight for Covid-19. The feelings of resignation to the fact that Covid-19 and all the difficulties it brought were happening.

I look back time and again and reflect on what could have been if I were in the media and the pandemic came about—I would have been one of them. But would I have survived like them? Would I have done the same things that they did? Would I have weathered the same transforming experience? These questions prove how important it is to have documented their lived experiences.

This study showed us how community journalists lived and coped with the pandemic, a phenomenon that everyone hopes we will never have to face again. However, if, unfortunately, another pandemic or similar event of such magnitude and impact does happen, we can pick up lessons from what we have documented here. And if the participants embody almost the same age bracket and characteristics as other community journalists all over the country, then perhaps the findings of this

study reflect the same experiences that they had and the same lessons learned would apply to them too.

This study suggests that while community journalists have indeed survived, with some even flourishing, under the Covid-19 pandemic, they will continue to face many challenges in the future. The shifting of news readership from print to online, the aging population of loyal readers of hard copy, and the decrease in advertisers all point towards a steep decline in the local newspaper industry. All these could eventually lead to the closure of a newspaper. Community journalists should accept these facts and find ways to address them along with their publishers.

Sometime in February 2024, we received notice that the Baguio Midland Courier, after experiencing declining sales and advertising, was selling its assets for P75 million. The plan to sell remains unclear even to most of its employees. My heart ached along with former colleagues in the paper. All of us were worried about what would happen if the sale pushes through. If we had the money, would we be able to save the paper? Worse, what would happen if no one buys the paper? What would happen to the employees? What would happen to the archives and the treasure of knowledge and history that they contain from documenting Baguio and the Cordillera community over the past 77 years?

Adaptability or transformation should be practiced not only by individual community journalists but the community paper as a whole. Owners, publishers, or those managing community newspapers should work with their journalists and create

and implement a resiliency plan together, not leave them blindsided by decisions of closure.

While the pandemic may have hastened the death of many print community newspapers, it has, on the other hand, become the impetus for many community papers and even individual community journalists, who lost their jobs, to engage in online publication. Malen Catajan and some of her colleagues in Sunstar put up the North Luzon Monitor. Frank Cimatú after being eased out of the Baguio Chronicle put up his own paper: Mountain Beacon. This is just another form of transformation which highlights the need for community journalists to upgrade their skills and adapt the use of newer technologies in publication, including running their own publication.

Going digital looks promising and may provide a new lease in life for many cash-strapped print based papers and journalists who lose their jobs due to closures. However, the caveat is that digital publications may not be able to provide a sustainable source of income for the paper until they have garnered enough followers and advertisers.

Opening up to the borderless online community means community journalists can gain new communities and audiences and meet new opportunities for growth, story grants, and digital allies. However, journalists must keep in mind that it also opens the doors to trolls, bashers, and disinformation. To address the negative side of digital publication, the community press must strive to maintain its ethics and credibility as a news and information source.

Lastly, perhaps this study can shed a better light on the question of whether the journalistic profession is still something one can make a career out of, or raise a family on, or even simply just live on.

### **For the Academe**

The study points out what we can teach future journalists. We should equip our students with more skills on data journalism, science communication, and health journalism. These skills all came handy in the Covid-19 coverage.

We should also teach the use of effective online news gathering; the intricacies of language in oral, aural, and written forms; writing and producing stories for online multimedia platforms; as well as understanding and catering to digital communities as audiences.

Since any of our students can put up their own online publications, we should also teach them how to effectively market and manage these.

Following Quebral's suggestion of finding values to instill coming from the lessons of the pandemic, we should teach the following values:

1. Adaptation as a form of resilience;
2. Perseverance to continue despite the odds and personal difficulties such as physical health, walking distances, balancing domestic life, isolation, mental health;
3. Journalism is a profession of service to the community;
4. Camaraderie among media by developing our local media communities;

5. Linkaging and networking with people to helps solve problems beyond our expertise; and
6. Lifelong learning by grabbing opportunities for further training and story grants.

### **For Policy Makers**

The dying state of the print newspaper industry was aggravated by the pandemic lockdowns. Threats of red-tagging and cyber libel were all the more highlighted. More cyber libel cases are expected in the future as more publications shift or open in online platforms. Adjustments to policy particularly in the decriminalization of libel and red-tagging should be reconsidered.

The problem of disinformation has been revisited time and again by Congress yet even with reports and studies backing up the existence of disinformation and troll farms, there is still no policy effectively addressing such.

Local policies regulating trade and affecting the street sales and advertisement of community papers, like the order not to renew the business permits of street vendors in Baguio which effectively closed them down, should be reviewed and recalled. Even in the guise of the exercise of police power, such policies should always be weighed with constitutional rights such as job security and the freedom of the press, particularly the freedom to circulate.

## **For Further Research**

Indeed, the future looks grim especially for journalists who fail to adapt to online based news production. But how do we unify this to keep community journalism alive in areas that do not have internet connection? Does the absence of print journalism strengthen the radio as a news source? What if the loss of a news source means total loss with no substitution? Further study to document shifting use and sourcing of news in areas not reached by community papers can be done.

What we understand from the lived experiences of community journalists under the pandemic is that they need assistance. At present they benefit from funding by philanthropists and international agencies through story grants. If advertising cannot pay for community journalism, then who must subsidize news? Who must pay to guarantee that the world remains informed? What impact does news subsidy have on press freedom? We need more studies on successful and sustainable business model of journalism in the digital age.

Community journalists are part of the bigger picture of the communication process. A study on the communication ecology of community journalists in the new normal can give us a clearer picture of what journalism is.

With the changing model of community journalism, one which covers on the field or online about the locality or hyperlocal community but broadcasts to an international audience, we can ask what now is the community in community journalism? More studies can also be done on hyperlocal journalism and its contributions to the new normal. This could include the adaptation of community

journalism news and hyper local news for the new audiences of in the digital platform.

Last but not the least, a follow up study to catch up on the state of journalism 5 or 10 years after the pandemic can also be done. Senior journalists who can give a different perspective especially with their longer years of lived experiences should also be tapped for these studies.

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## ANNEX A

### Sample Research Instrument

Prompt	Questions
Experiences	<p>How did you experience being a community journalist before and after the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>How would you describe what happened in your work place upon the declaration of the pandemic and the initial ECQ?</p> <p>Where were you when the initial ECQ was implemented?</p> <p>Can you describe your life and work set up in the new normal? How did you adjust to life under Covid-19 as a journalist?</p> <p>What knowledge – your own or others (for example academic literature) helped you in your situation?</p> <p>What was the effect of the pandemic on you as a journalist?</p> <p>What was good and bad about your experience?</p>
Feelings/Identity	<p>How do you feel about yourself as a community journalist before and after the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>What did you feel at the beginning of the pandemic?</p> <p>What are your feelings now?</p> <p>What were you thinking during the beginning of the pandemic?</p> <p>What do you think about the situation now?</p>
Challenges	<p>What were your biggest challenges as a community journalist practicing under the pandemic?</p>

	<p>How did you cope/how are you coping with these challenges?</p> <p>Would you say things are going well for you? What didn't go so well?</p>
Opportunities	<p>What opportunities did you experience being a community journalist under Covid-19?</p> <p>What skills did you need to develop for you to adjust to the new normal?</p> <p>What else could you have done?</p> <p>Why did things go well? OR Why didn't it go well?</p>
Changes/Directions	<p>What changes and directions do you see for the community journalists/ community press from the experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>What did you learn from being a journalist over the past year of being under the pandemic?</p>

## ANNEX B

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a study entitled “The Community Press Remains Alive Under Covid-19: Lived Experience of Community Journalists,” conducted by Leia Fidelis Gisela F. Castro-Margate, a graduate student of the Master of Development Communication program of the University of the Philippines Open University.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my personal and professional experiences as a community journalist under the Covid-19 pandemic.

I understand that the questions may pertain to domestic as well as professional aspects of my experiences.

I understand that the researcher will record the interview from start to finish. A transcript of the recording will then be used for the analysis of this research.

I understand that there are no physical risks involved in this research, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

I agree that any information the researcher obtained from this study may be used for educational purposes.

I agree to the use of my name and identification in the study.

I understand that I will be provided a copy of the results of this research and be given the opportunity to validate the use of the information I divulged in the interviews.

I have read and understood all the statements above and I freely sign this consent form.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_