



The Virus of Uncertainty

The COVID-19 crisis' impacts on water news

2020 has been marked by uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly shifted every part of our daily lives ... including the ways in which we do our work.

In the advocacy world, self-quarantines and “stay at home” orders have forced organizations that engage in traditional lobbying and field organizing to pivot toward using digital tools more heavily ... or even exclusively. And with the momentum created by the Movement for Black Lives, many organizations have also ceded space to Black voices, moved to center their work around Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, or taken time to reassess the ways in which their work has been influenced by white supremacist “norms.”

For most of the partners we work with, “business as usual” has been obliterated.

Everyone is scrambling to adapt ... and to be heard in an increasingly noisy digital world; a world in which many people (policymakers, constituents, advocates ... everyone) are feeling the distinct overwhelm from the “new normal” of video meeting fatigue, disrupted schedules, concerns about social unrest and public health, and the blurred boundaries between work and home life.

Impacts on media outreach

The pandemic has hit newsrooms especially hard. Not only have reporters and editors had to adapt to working from home, many are working at publications that have announced substantial layoffs, furloughed staff, or folded altogether.

There is still good journalism being done, but capacity and travel constraints are making reporting and media outreach more difficult.

Many reporters find themselves unable to follow the thread of a time-sensitive story because of furloughs. It's not unusual to pitch reporters and get a slew of out-of-office messages announcing they're off for the week on furlough.

Meanwhile, op-ed editors have been inundated. Some outlets have disclaimers in their websites explaining that they'll be slower to respond due to an exponential increase in submissions. The bottom line is that coverage of any kind — whether earned media coverage or op-ed placement — is far harder to secure in 2020 than it's been in the past.

Impacts on water journalism

The coronavirus dominated media coverage early in the year, with the surge starting to [slow by mid-April](#). We noticed a decline in the amount of water news in February, and expect it will remain suppressed for the foreseeable future, especially as election activity ramps up.

This decline is the result of furloughs and layoffs, as well as water reporters being reassigned to cover the pandemic, protests, and other breaking news.

While the COVID crisis crowded out many other stories this spring, virus news fatigue set in by mid-April and there was growing appetite among editors and audiences for coverage of different subjects. This shifted again in May and June due to marches and protests in support of the Movement for Black Lives (while social actions continue, coverage has waned), and seems to be shifting once again in July as COVID-19 cases pick back up across the country.

Newspapers reliant on advertising revenue have seen their news holes shrink, so it may be harder to get water stories published in those outlets. But a shortage of space isn't an issue for online publications and non-profit media that aren't dependent on advertising.

While the overall volume of water news dropped this spring, we saw an uptick in news around water affordability and access, bringing new light to long-standing challenges. The pandemic has highlighted the fragility of systems many people take for granted, like our drinking and wastewater infrastructure. At the same time, Black Lives Matter protests have brought increased attention to long-standing disparities caused by structural racism, which has left communities of color facing the [greatest risk of water shutoffs](#) and [drinking water safety violations](#), and the [highest likelihood of living in homes without running water](#).

Recent events have made it difficult to get journalists to focus on issues that lack an obvious nexus with public health, racial justice, or economic recovery. Fortunately, opportunities abound to connect those dots in water.

State of the news media

The New York Times [reported in April](#) that 36,000 workers at U.S. news companies had been laid off, furloughed, or had their pay reduced during the pandemic. Axios [reported](#) that 11,000 newsroom jobs had been cut by June. Ironically, this downsizing comes at a time of heightened demand for local news. In a [March 2020 poll](#) by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, 44% respondents said they were paying a “great deal of attention” to local news. That figure was 22% in December 2019.

Poynter has been [tracking media layoffs](#), furloughs, and closures. Here are some examples from around the West:

- Layoffs at Univision, KPBS, KTVU, the Durango Herald, Monterey County Weekly, Southern California Newspapers, Weekly Alibi, Los Angeles Times, and Bay Area News Group
- Furloughs at Arizona Republic, Denver Post, Aspen Daily News, Boulder Weekly, Desert Sun, and Sacramento Bee
- Closures of Sacramento News & Review, Chico News & Review, and Reno News & Review, Glendale News-Press, Burbank Leader, and La Cañada Valley Sun

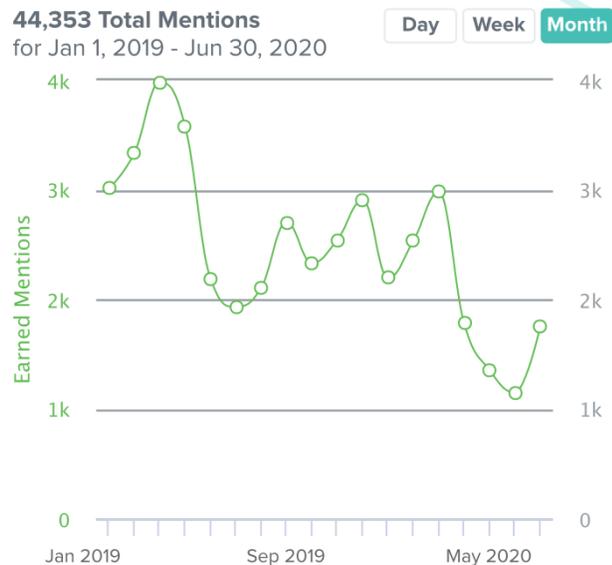
COVID-related cuts are accelerating a decades-long trend of shrinking newsrooms. [More than 2,100 U.S. cities and towns](#) have lost a newspaper in the past 15 years. Newspaper employment [dropped by half](#) from 2008 to 2019. Much of this decline is driven by [dwindling advertising revenue](#), which fell from \$37.8 billion in 2008 to \$14.3 billion in 2018.

In the following section, we look at how the pandemic and related capacity constraints have impacted the overall volume of water news, as well as the kinds of stories getting covered.

Media analysis: How the pandemic and protests are impacting water news

Western water supply

As this chart¹ shows, the amount of reporting on this topic has declined considerably since March 2020. Typically, we see 2-3,000 stories per month that include terms like “water supply,” “water demand,” “water use,” “water allocation,” and “drought” in Western news outlets.²



Last spring saw an unusual amount of coverage because of the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan negotiations, which generated headlines across the region. The volume peaked in March, and then stabilized that summer, remaining fairly consistent until the COVID crisis started impacting journalism capacity in March 2020.

We are seeing the volume start to rebound now, with more of the West falling into drought, and several reports released that include new projections around precipitation and water supply.

Weather is typically the biggest driver of water supply news, followed by policy decisions and report releases. While overall volume is down this spring and summer, we are still seeing regular reporting in both local and regional outlets on topics like [river flows](#), [snowpack](#), and [fishery health](#). Major water supply projects — like the [Lake Powell Pipeline](#) and [Gila River](#)

¹ The specific keywords we searched for included: (water supply, water shortage, water source, water use, water allocation, water demand, drought contingency plan, or drought plan) and (river, reservoir, aquifer, groundwater, lake, stream, flow, precipitation, rain, snowpack). We were looking exclusively at news in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, or Wyoming. The time period shown is January 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020.

² Note: these numbers are high because they include a lot of online syndication in local and trade blogs.

[Diversion](#) — continue to generate coverage. Lastly, our scan picked up some nice features on restoration efforts in the [Colorado Delta](#) and [Santa Cruz River](#).

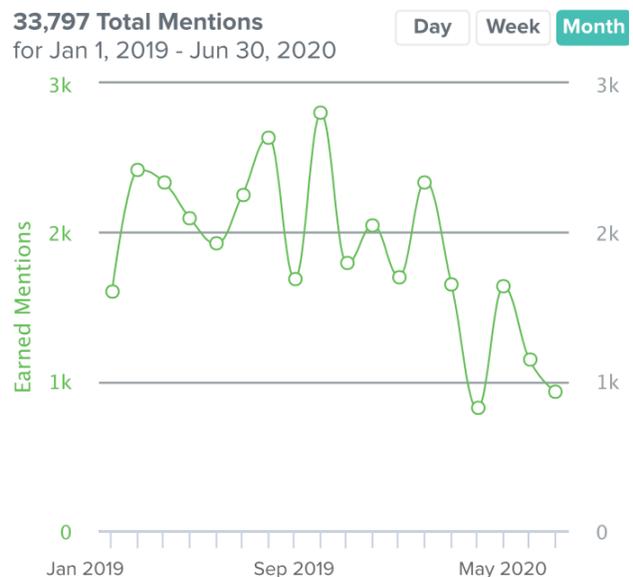
One trend we noticed in our scan of coverage during the pandemic is increased reliance on wire stories. We are also seeing more water reporting by journalists from other beats, who may be pitching in to cover furloughs or fill in other capacity gaps.

For example, while pitching reporters about a [new Columbia University report](#) confirming the Western United States is in the midst of a megadrought, we found that many regional outlets that would typically have done original reporting — like the Arizona Republic and Denver Post — instead ran the [AP wire story](#). Ian James at the Republic [covered the study](#) weeks later, after a furlough. At the LA Times, the study was [first covered](#) by a graphics/data journalist. Water reporter Bettina Boxall later wrote a [follow-up](#) digging into precipitation trends and water supply implications.

Western water safety

We see a similar decline in the overall volume of water quality news³ — stories that included keywords like “water safety,” “water pollution,” “contaminated water,” etc. — during the COVID crisis. Typically, there are between 2-3,000 stories per month, but that has dropped well below 2,000 stories per month since February 2020.

The outlets that are continuing to report on this issue during the pandemic are typically larger and better resourced, like the [LA](#)



³ We searched for stories that included these keywords: (river, reservoir, lake, drinking water, tap water, stream, creek, aquifer or groundwater) and (safe water, clean water, clean water rule, waters of the US, water safety, water contamination, contaminated water, water pollution, polluted water, or exceeds safe levels) in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, or Wyoming.

[Times](#), [Denver Post](#), and [Arizona Republic](#). We are seeing some reporting in local newspapers like the [Fresno Bee](#) and [Santa Fe New Mexican](#), but most of that is event-driven.

Big national issues, like the [EPA decision to stop regulating perchlorate](#) and [Trump's Clean Water Rule rollback](#) (as well as the ongoing opposition) have been widely covered. Environmental Working Group's [PFAS report](#) received broad attention, and PFAS generally has been [much in the news](#), even during the pandemic. With the temperatures rising, we are starting to see [local coverage](#) of harmful algal blooms.

The pandemic and protests have brought increased attention to long-standing environmental justice issues, creating an opening to get water safety stories into high-profile outlets that have often been tough to engage.

In particular, we are seeing more coverage of the way race and water intersect, like [this story](#) in the Washington Post and [this one](#) by NBC News.

Western water access and affordability

While the pandemic and protests have caused a decline in news coverage of some water issues, they have driven a spike in media around water access and affordability.⁴ Many news stories and [op-eds](#) have reflected on the importance of handwashing to prevent the spread of COVID, and the barriers some communities ([people experiencing homelessness](#) and [farmworkers](#), for instance) face in following health recommendations.



⁴ We searched for stories including the following keywords: water shutoff, water shut off, water service shutoff, water service shut off, water affordability, unaffordable water, water service turned off, or shut off moratorium in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, or Nevada.

Note: The February 2019 spike in the chart was driven by [this NPR story](#), which was syndicated hundreds of times.



The pandemic triggered a wave of news coverage around long-standing infrastructure gaps in [Navajo Nation](#) and [California's Central Valley](#), two areas that were [identified last year by US Water Alliance and DIGDEEP](#) as hotspots for water access issues.

Meanwhile, [state](#), [local](#), and [utility](#) decisions to pause water shut-offs in response to the pandemic and resulting recession have raised awareness about rising rates that have made water service unaffordable for many families. Coverage [has continued](#) as many of these moratoriums are ending and utility bills are coming due.

In addition to local and regional coverage, water access has gotten attention in top-tier national outlets like the [Washington Post](#), [New York Times](#), [USA Today](#), and [US News](#). Recognizing the timeliness of the topic, the Guardian launched a new [America's Water Crisis](#) series in June.

What do we do now?

Focus, focus, focus.

1. **Start with what's timely:** Focus your outreach on issues that are already top of mind for reporters and their audiences. This could include COVID relief and recovery priorities, programs that advance racial justice, or news that is seasonal, referencing fires, floods, drought, heatwaves, etc.
2. **Get personal:** Reporters are still working, but perhaps their hours have shifted due to childcare or other duties. Do the work to find out the new preferences in this virtual era — reporters that used to appreciate phone calls might be “email only” now. And remember, we're all human and dealing with very different sets of health, emotional, and home life considerations. Do be kind and friendly. But don't assume people want to tell you how they're *really* doing if that's not the kind of relationship you have.
3. **Get creative:** Think through how you can tell the stories while travel restrictions and “stay home” orders are still in place. Do you have staff or partners on the ground that can help capture photos and video? Can you repurpose existing images into a short video with voiceover or text overlay? Could you use aerial footage? Groups like [EcoFlight](#) and [LightHawk](#) are continuing to capture flyover footage using GoPro cameras.

- 
4. **Reach beyond newspapers:** While every sector of the press has been hit by the recession, digital-first outlets seem to be faring relatively well (they had more capacity to begin with). Consider pitching outlets like Vox, Quartz, or Ensia (which is working on a new drinking water series), or focus on water or government trade outlets.
 5. **DIY distribution:** In some cases, you may have to publish and promote stories yourself. Use direct outreach to get in front of decision-makers, ramp up activity on your social channels and blog to build your audience, and consider investing in targeted online advertising.
 6. **Think outside the op-ed box.** With opinion editors receiving more submissions than ever, op-eds are getting harder to place. Consider other ways you can make your case, such as a Medium post or video shared with key officials, and promoted on social channels.

Pitching news stories and op-eds

Be timely and relevant. Editors are looking for provocative content, something to get clicks and shares. Furthermore, they are looking for subject matter that has garnered front-page attention, which currently tends to be related to the Trump administration, alarming studies, protests, or the pandemic.

Be selective. Op-ed pitches to mainstream news outlets are extra tough. Interesting or informed takes are not enough; op-eds need to have news value for a chance at placement, and editors are looking for perspectives that have historically been underrepresented. For news pitching, target reporters you have relationships with and those tracking the issue, and be sure to send to local and specialty outlets.

Be fast. Op-eds on breaking news must be pitched in advance or same-day for consideration. In the past, one could be successful when pitching a day or two after new breaks, but it is unlikely to work in the current newscycle. The same holds true for news coverage.

Be authentic. Writing style and voice is more important than ever. Editors seem mostly to be accepting op-eds that read as if they have been written by the author themselves. They are

looking for storytellers and stories, not data points. Op-eds with a clear one-line message win the day.

Be open. Be creative with where you pitch. Options include less popular online news outlets, and trade, specialty, and regional publications.

We're here to help

If you'd like to strategize about ways to get water news out, or bring attention to long-standing issues, we'd love to help! You can reach Water Hub Managing Director Nicole Lampe at nicole@waterhub.org.