

Student-Run Newspapers Scoop Other Media, Report COVID-19

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(JAC 310 Assignment for Prof. Waltz)

Leaving coverage of campus life, football games, and town-halls behind, student-run newspapers at colleges and universities around the country have been scooping professional news organizations when it comes to covering COVID-19 on campus.

"We have a group of writers and editors specifically tasked with covering breaking news updates related to COVID-19," said Stuart Carson, a senior editor for the University of Southern California student paper, The Daily Trojan.

Carson, the Deputy Director of Diversity and Inclusion of The Daily Trojan, said the paper has had to adjust since the start of COVID-19.

"Quite a lot has changed," Carson said. "The challenges of the pandemic, more specifically, the challenges of having to work together across varying time zones, cities, and continents, has presented its slew of obstacles."

USC transitioned to remote learning in April, sending students packing and leaving on-site reporters with little to cover.

A remaining big story was the status of USC football.

"For many Americans, especially college students, sports are central to daily, monthly, and yearly rituals. We mark our calendars for football, basketball, and baseball games and make days out of the events. A lot of Americans derive a sense of identity and pride in their college or hometown teams," Carson said.

In August, Carson wrote a story entitled Game Days like no other, quoting the USC Athletic Director, season-ticket holders, and student football fanatics about the status of college football before the postponement of the PAC-12 sports that fall.

The Trojans recently got back on the field after sitting out the off-season last semester due to COVID-19 leaving PAC-12 sports uncleared to play.

In addition to sports, USC's student paper also usually covers city news, campus life, arts and entertainment, and op-eds.

The Daily Trojan established in 1912, is the only student-run paper at USC - widely known and recognized for continuously "providing a forum of free and responsible discussion and intellectual exploration of USC," according to HuffPost.

With football off the table, reporters turned their attention to COVID-related stories like mandated flu shots for the spring semester, an employee testing

positive, hybrid instruction plans, and COVID-19 financial assistance.

Marlize Duncan, a sophomore columnist for the arts and entertainment section, said the paper has a high following across social media platforms with over 41.3k followers.

"USC students, staff, and people of the surrounding community in Los Angeles look to us for news updates," Duncan said. "Our paper holds itself accountable for covering COVID-19 related updates, specifically when it pertains to USC students and the surrounding LA area."

Since USC started reporting COVID-related news, they have become well-recognized nationwide being featured in major news publications like Poynter, The Washington Post, HuffPost, and more.

The Washington Post referred to The Daily Trojan writers as 'the journalism heroes for the current pandemic,' for "publishing scathing editorials about controversial reopening plans and breaking news of campus outbreaks."

Recently, The Daily Trojan published a story on how COVID-19 cases are expected to spiral on campus after Halloween, including news that five USC students tested positive for COVID this past weekend.

COVID is also a popular topic at other student-run newspapers around the country.

At George Washington University in Washington D.C, Zach Schonfeld, a staff writer for The GW Hatchet, did a story in May about how GW coordinated its pandemic response, reporting from inside the decision room at a faculty senate meeting earlier that month.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Julie Coleman, staff writer for The Daily Pennsylvanian, covered a story on how campus housing rejections left UPenn students with nowhere to go after Penn announced a mandatory move-out date for students in response to COVID-19.

According to The New York Times, there have been more than 214,000 cases, and at least 75 deaths across American colleges and universities since the pandemic began. Many institutions have continued with remote instruction for the current fall semester, while some universities remain open with strict COVID-19 guidelines and adjustments.

The status of the spring semester remains in the air around college campuses, but there remains little doubt that college journalists writing for their campus papers will have it covered.