JOURNALISM & THE PANDEMIC
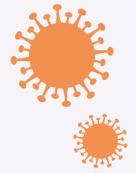
14 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir and Emily Bell

ICFJ

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This policy development tool is designed to aid donors, civil society, states and intergovernmental organizations as they try to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on journalism, support independent public interest media, and strengthen news media viability around the world.

It was developed in response to the first research findings from the Journalism and the Pandemic Project – a collaboration between the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, with support from Luminate.

The research conducted so far consists of a survey of over 2,000 international journalists fielded in seven languages in 2020, and roundtable discussions with state and civil society donors staged in 2021. It has delivered 14 preliminary recommendations for action which are elaborated below. Each recommendation is presented with practice-based examples and guidance notes for implementation.

The Journalism and the Pandemic Project is now conducting a second survey to map the longer term impacts and needs of journalists around the world in the context of an ongoing pandemic, while also seeking to assess the myriad creative ways in which journalists have responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by a period of historic upheaval and transformation.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Prioritize projects/outlets that are doing critical work in high-priority areas such as strengthening press freedom as a pillar of democracy and combating viral disinformation.

There is a vital role to play for state, philanthropic, and corporate donors seeking to model democratic responses to disinformation and press freedom violations associated with the pandemic. Countering disinformation while respecting freedom of expression is a balancing act. **Supporting robust, independent, critical journalism as a bulwark against disinformation is one effective response.**

According to the findings of UNESCO's 2021-2022 World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development report, COVID-19 measures were used to justify significant press freedom violations in every region of the world. But a July 2021 report from the Gothenburg-based V-Dem Institute, which tracked violations of democratic standards in relation to COVID-19 responses in 144 countries, found that some violations "tended to occur earlier in the pandemic response and have declined over time."

Meanwhile, disinformation peddled from the top down and facilitated by U.S.-based tech giants during the pandemic has delivered lessons that could be used to inform global responses to problems like:

• Disinformation campaigns designed to undercut press freedom and discredit critical journalists/journalism.

• The introduction of 'fake news' laws being used to curtail critical reporting of the pandemic itself.

• The arrest and imprisonment of journalists for breaching rules and regulations designed to curtail public interest reporting on COVID-19 responses (e.g., freelance video journalist Zhang Zhan is serving four years "for her critical coverage of China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic" and "picking quarrels and stirring up trouble").

• Rendering governmental communications more opaque when access to information is even more critical.

According to our original Journalism and the Pandemic Project survey, the top need for journalists covering COVID-19 was funding to enable them to continue doing accountability reporting and publishing verified information. 68% of all survey respondents identified training in new technologies, skills development in science and medical health reporting, and advanced verification and fact-checking training as other major needs. **But investment in multifaceted projects that seek to advance knowledge and skills, and innovate beyond fact-checking and digital verification should be prioritized.**

Collaborations that embed high-level expertise (e.g., specialist academics) to deepen investigative reporting into disinformation networks, agents and effects, and emphasize engaging formats present a valuable focus for investment.

Examples to guide implementation:

• The National Geographic Society launched an emergency fund for journalists all over the world "who seek writers, photographers, videographers, audio journalists, cartographers, filmmakers, and data visualization experts to apply for this funding. Journalists should seek placement of this work within their local media ecosystems."

• In 2020 the Freelance Audio Fund provided emergency relief to the

professional audio community impacted by COVID-19, and acknowledged it "received more applications" than it was "able to fund."

• In the U.S., the National Science Foundation's Convergence Accelerator, aimed at studying the most effective methods of combating misinformation online, issued a Rapid Research Response (RAPID) grant titled "Tackling the Psychological Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis."

• Frontier Myanmar worked with focus groups of businesspeople and journalists to foster "tight-knit, focused communities and personalised news" through "multiple newsletters and member-only offline events."

RECOMMENDATION 2

Grants should be made conditional on funding recipients meeting critical journalism safety requirements - physical, digital and psychological.

Many pandemic-era risks escalated as the pandemic dragged on. Tying grant funding to the integration of informed responses to these risks (e.g., digital security training, threat assessments, online violence defense support, research to improve practice) could help effect change. **The viability of independent journalism is not just a question of economics; it's also a question of safety and security, and freedom to practice.**

30% of our initial survey respondents said that their employers were sending journalists into the field during COVID-19's first wave without a single piece of PPE, leaving them terribly exposed to risk. While there has been substantial awareness-raising on this issue since the pandemic began, extreme financial hardship could exacerbate this problem.

Our research also revealed **alarming levels of poor digital security practice, especially regarding confidential source protection, private VPN accounts, and exposure to doxxing**. These issues were exacerbated by reliance on insecure and unsuitable platforms and apps for source communications and audience engagement in the context of socially distanced reporting. Similarly, many journalists have been forced to rely on their personal devices during the pandemic, increasing the risk of their personal details (e.g., location information and phone numbers) being exposed.

There is also a related concern about the implications of digital inequality - the cost burden of doing digital journalism has been shifted to the reporters working from home in many contexts (e.g., phone-based data costs, which are very high in many countries internationally). Some governments recognized this in 2020 with a "joint statement on safety of journalists and access to information during the COVID-19 crisis."

Examples to guide implementation:

- *Organizations can create and commit to a digital and physical security "code of ethics," as Hong Kong Free Press has committed to doing during the pandemic.*

- *Media literacy resources from tech companies - for example, Microsoft's hybrid threat training curriculum customized for journalists. And in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, news outlets are working closely with cybersecurity experts to review related developments, such as the official Ukrainian COVID-19 information app which has now become a sort of "war updates account,"[1] to help sieve disinformation.*

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[1] Created by Ukrainian technology agency, the Institute of Cognitive Modeling, it was adopted officially by the government

RECOMMENDATION 3

There is a critical need to address the mental health and well-being of journalists.

The psychological impacts of reporting on COVID-19 were identified by nearly 70% of our original survey respondents as the greatest difficulty they faced during the first wave of the pandemic; 63% identified multiple negative psychological or emotional impacts (from burnout and sleeplessness, to the onset of exacerbation of depression and anxiety); and 15% said they had sought professional psychological help as a result. Meanwhile, 64% of respondents said their top need for assistance in the context of covering COVID-19 was support for mental health and well-being. Similar results can also be found in a survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the University of Toronto which asked a smaller sample (73 respondents) of reporters about their work and mental health in June 2020.

These impacts have only deepened during the pandemic's third and fourth waves and they are likely to be further exacerbated in the context of subsequent crises. The long-term implications of journalism's pandemic will likely include ongoing effects in the context of continuing social isolation associated with distributed newsrooms, and the likely spike in freelancers due to layoffs and newsroom closures. The gender-based disadvantages should also be noted here: Balancing home-based work and childcare falls disproportionately to women journalists, and the impacts on them will likely be worse.

We should exercise caution in discussions about the need for 'resilience' among journalists as an antidote to this crisis because many are suffering burnout, and the causes need to be understood in isolation from individual capacity to bear up in the face of a mental health crisis.

Examples to guide implementation:

• A month-long *stress-reduction course, created by the ICFJ Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum and "The Self-Investigation," equipped journalists with tools to better manage stress and digital overload via free webinars, individual coaching and weekly meetups.*

• *The Women Photograph Emergency Fund[2] provided a small amount of one-time support to independent women and non-binary photographers who needed assistance, with "no restrictions on what the funding could cover… healthcare, childcare, rent, or professional expenses." The Fund says that with more fundraising, they'd consider a new round of support.*

• *From late 2021 Headlines Network has been offering free mental health workshops to UK journalists. "Allies" of the Network include Reach PLC, the European Journalism Centre, the Freelance Journalism Assembly, the Society of Editors, Journalism.co.uk and the Journalists' Charity.*

• *In 2021 Rory Peck Trust launched an online events program with sessions on how to protect mental health and wellbeing as well as advice from experienced journalists on getting commissions. After one year of Rory Peck Trust's (RPT) COVID-19 Hardship Fund, set up to "focus exclusively on emergency financial assistance to get freelancers through the pandemic," there were 350 applications and 130 journalists supported. In 2022 RPT launched a "Trauma Therapy Fund," in partnership with Facebook/Meta "to support freelancers struggling with the impacts of trauma and work stress on mental health," with workshops delivered by Dart Centre Europe.*

• *Society of Freelance Journalists, a global community for freelance journalists founded in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly uses*

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[2] A nonprofit that launched in 2017 to elevate the voices of women and nonbinary visual journalists. The private database includes more than 1,000 independent documentary photographers based in 100+ countries

Slack with its almost 1,800 members and is a registered Community Interest Company (CIC). It offers advice, moral support, learning and job opportunities for journalists whose main source of income is self-employment.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Ensure that responses include gender-sensitive training and support to deal with online violence exacerbated by the pandemic.

Online violence (threats, abuse, harassment and digital security-based attacks) against journalists is an escalating problem with severe impacts (that disproportionately affect women) ranging from self-censorship to psychological injury and offline attacks. **20% of our initial respondents said online attacks, harassment and abuse were "much worse" during the survey period, but 97% said they weren't getting any help from their employers to deal with this crisis.** There are strong links between exposure to online violence and mental ill health identified through our research.

These findings are underscored by research from the ongoing UNESCO-ICFJ Online Violence Against Women Journalists Project. That study, which surveyed approximately 900 journalists in 125 countries, interviewed over 180 people and analyzed 2.5 million social media posts, found that:

- 73% of women survey participants had experienced online violence in the course of their work, with impacts ranging from mental ill health (including PTSD) to doxxing and other digital security threats.

- COVID-19 was escalating exposure to online violence and deepening the impacts.

• Facebook was perceived to be the least safe of the platforms for women journalists by the research participants.

• 20% of survey respondents said they had been attacked, abused or harassed offline in connection with episodes of online violence.

• 37% of survey respondents identify political actors as significant instigators and amplifiers of targeted online violence against women journalists.

• 41% of women survey respondents said they had been exposed to online violence in the context of orchestrated disinformation campaigns.

• The interviewees spoke of increased exposure to risk and attack by disinformation purveyors in the context of increasing political polarization and digital conspiracies associated with the pandemic. This reflects the 'shadow pandemic' of domestic violence identified by UN Women in connection with COVID-19.

Implementation guidance:

This recommendation suggests that grants responding to the COVID-19 crisis require the recipients to provide holistic online-violence defense training and support as part of the program. This should include integrated digital, physical, psycho-social, legal and editorial measures designed to help defend journalists under attack and foster more effective responses.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Consider investing in networked journalism initiatives that can support independent journalists and smaller news outlets as they seek viability.

Collaboration is a critical element of effective journalistic responses to democracy erosion and viral disinformation because journalism's capacity at the newsroom and individual levels is so weakened due to COVID-19-induced funding cuts and other impacts. **There is likely to be a surge of freelancers and small-scale ventures seeking support in the context of widespread layoffs and closures**. They face significant sustainability hurdles, and a mechanism that helps sustain them would be valuable. Training, knowledge sharing, business and audience development, legal support, defensive campaigns when journalists are targeted, and the possibility of embedding experts within projects would be particularly helpful.

Examples to guide implementation:

• The *ICFJ Pamela Howard Forum on Global Crisis Reporting* *equips journalists with the expertise to provide meaningful coverage of critical global issues of local importance, in four languages, through a curated programme of webinars with world experts.*

• *Velocidad, the accelerator program for Latin American digital news outlets run by ICFJ and SembraMedia, and funded by Luminate.*

• The *Internews Information Saves Lives Rapid Response Fund* *(now closed) supported small, local news organizations and individuals reporting on COVID-19 for under-served communities around the world.*

• The Society of Freelance Journalists asked UK lawmakers to urgently consider issues with regards to freelancers (see co-founder [John Crowley's 'Journalism in the time of Covid' survey](#)), including addressing legal recourse for late payment; legal support for freelancers regarding contracts; the use of freelancers for staff roles; a need for professional development funds and schemes for freelance journalists with a focus on accessibility, representation and industry diversity; a need for grant schemes for freelance journalists to support struggling industry sectors, including local media outlets and underreported communities/topics; and more collaboration with industry unions.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Attention must also be given now to the prospect of the long-term impacts of journalism's pandemic.

How will we work collaboratively to alleviate the lingering impacts of economic devastation, media freedom incursions, the '[disinfodemic](#),' and potentially long-term effects of burnout and psychological injury? **Short-term emergency interventions need to be matched with more strategic, longer-term investment, designed to ensure public interest journalism can be at least partially inoculated.**

Example to guide implementation:

• [The Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support](#) by the Brussels-based Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)[3] advised donors to establish an emergency fund to "help public-interest media survive during this

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2 An international network of journalism support and media development organizations

time of crisis as well as lay the foundations for future crisis response." One way was recognizing that financial support could look like "VAT exemptions, tax relief, simplified public procurement processes, reliable social security schemes for freelance journalists and media workers, issuing nonprofit tax status to public-interest journalism and media organizations," etc.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Independent news media that survive the pandemic will need tailored financial support

Our first survey revealed that respondents with knowledge of their outlets' financial situation had seen a decline of more than 75% in revenues, and 27% registered a 50-75% decline. There is the possibility for renewal in the field, but not for advertising. **The risk is that the severe economic impacts could further erode such capacity across the board, but not all news organizations require the same approach to investment**. We don't yet know what size news organization will best weather the pandemic, nor do we know what the implications will be for 'distributed newsrooms' (i.e., newsrooms that are dispersed and blend home-/office-based work). But we do know that **midsize news organizations built on diversified business models, with deep connections to audience and community and a clear mission, are more resilient**. And large news organizations can benefit from specific investment in practice-based learning through reporting projects, e.g., investigations focused on critical issues, which may not otherwise be budgeted for.

Examples to guide implementation:

> • *Launched in April 2020 at Columbia and Stanford's Brown Institute for Media Innovation - thanks to the latter's inaugural "Impact Grant" - the Documenting COVID-19 project hired part-time journalists and computer science students*

to work with partnering newsrooms on obtaining public records. Newsrooms, researchers and community organizations were invited to join.

• The Netherlands-based European Journalism Centre and Facebook's Euro 3 million grant for the European Journalism COVID-19 Support Fund (now closed) made the case for continued 'core funding' (as opposed to project-specific grants) for newsrooms, even after the pandemic. They completed two "waves" of this fund (called 'emergency' and 'endurance'). In their annual report they said providing "unrestricted core funding at a crucial time of need" was a popular choice with grantees; 82% said it "helped them/their organizations solve their own problems… to focus on fulfilling their mission, without being distracted by project-specific requirements, and…they felt trusted to spend the money wisely." This was a grant which recipients described as having "helped them either 'fully' or 'mostly' find solutions to the challenges posed by COVID-19." (See recommendation 11 below)

• International Media Support (IMS) had established an emergency support mechanism (COVID-19 Rapid Response Mechanism) aimed at helping public interest media in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. These funds are now depleted.

• Funders thinking about support need to take into account the sense of the "programmatic." For example, the Global Forum for Media Development in their "Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support" said it could "inadvertently shape editorial agendas." And in another example the European Journalism Centre-Facebook's feedback report recognized that a too short funding period did not take into account holiday periods "where taking time off slowed down some activities and expenditure." Giving funding also matters in terms of spending due to unforeseen "sickness, technical issues or equipment delivery problems." Facebook/EJC pledged to ensure future funding periods were "the same across the different waves of funding

(i.e five to six months in the case of this Fund), to maximize the potential for organizations to develop their initiatives." (See recommendation 11 below)

RECOMMENDATION 8

Invest in programs that support innovation in crisis management within news organizations.

Innovation in leadership, staff development and organizational culture is needed to support crisis management during the pandemic and its aftermath. Investment in programs that support innovation in crisis management within news organizations are therefore recommended. **We need journalism managers who are reflexive, engaged in knowledge-sharing and thought leadership, emotionally intelligent, respectful of diversity and excellent communicators. Innovation has been too focused on technology-led change at the expense of 'people' and the need to respond to external threats**. (See the bottom left quadrant of the Journalism Innovation Wheel).

Example to guide implementation:

> • *The UK's biggest commercial news publisher Reach PLC advertised for an Online Safety Editor in June 2021 as the online violence experienced by its women journalists escalated in the context of the pandemic. Six months into her new role, Rebecca Whittington described how she is creating an abuse database to help get ahead of prevalent types of abuse; ensuring protocols and procedures are appropriate; looking to update abuse reporting and newsroom awareness systems; and taking the audience's safety into account, too. This is an example of an innovative and proactive approach to crisis management.*

RECOMMENDATION 9

Bake research into projects/programs you fund to enhance and broaden knowledge development and transfer.

This means including a funding component for 'action research' alongside the program/project that can help inform their design and yield insights to enhance them by studying them while they are in motion. **Impact assessment and evaluation can be part of these processes, but learning from such investments needs to be externalized and globalized.** Such an approach could also help to grow and diversify thought leadership in this space.

Examples to guide implementation:

- *See organizations such as Bellingcat, an independent international collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists using open source and social media investigation. For example, it is collaborating with Mnemonic, an NGO dedicated to archiving evidence collected from social media and mobile phones.*

- *Other reports that demonstrate the value of academically-engaged research in media development projects include: Anya Schiffrin's Saving Journalism, the Thomson Reuters Foundation's The Impact of COVID-19 on Journalism in Emerging Economies and the Global South, and the Forum on Information and Democracy's 'New Deal for Journalism'.*

RECOMMENDATION 10

Explore hybrid journalism-civil society/social action models where the need exists.

Are there appropriate collaborations with civil society organizations that could strengthen independent journalism and its accountability mechanisms without compromising journalistic independence? Do 'movement journalism' and 'advocacy journalism' have a place when journalists are under fire and democracy is at stake?

Examples to guide implementation:

• *Forbidden Stories, a Paris-based media non-profit composed of a network of journalists, and Amnesty International worked together on a large-scale investigation of corruption and software surveillance, indicating governments have been behind the hacking of devices belonging to activists, journalists and academics during the pandemic. The NGOs became part of a global consortium known as the Pegasus Project. And the Toronto-based privacy watchdog Citizen Lab, which also previously worked on this investigation, shared examples of their "mixed methods" approach to investigation, data gathering and analysis. One finding from this work is that the cybersecurity industry is better able to analyze and share their findings, which means independent journalists making these kind of attacks public is more important than ever, according to experts in this briefing from the Brookings Institute.*

• *The Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF)⁴ shared examples of how partnerships with other organizations could expand the reach for a shared audience: "for example, a health organization with key information on the*

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⁴ An organization "operating at the intersection of philanthropy, investing and media development" and which invests in independent media around the world

crisis, or a data firm tracking cases worldwide."

• *[Coronavirus News Collaboration Challenge](#) at the non-profit Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting accepted proposals "that develop innovative approaches to reporting on the novel coronavirus crisis using collaboration among journalists and newsrooms across state lines or national borders." It was open to all newsrooms and independent journalists in the United States and abroad.*

RECOMMENDATION 11

Support networked initiatives that seek to foster new journalism investors with the assurance of independence and transparency.

Non-platform anchored philanthropy is critical to ensuring this, and the sort of accountability research and reporting that we need on the corroded information ecosystem. We need new (and more) funders for public interest journalism, while ensuring the 'social distancing' of the platforms and their corporate objectives from journalism output. This includes the need to emphasize ways in which journalism can effectively 'decouple' from the social media platforms where online toxicity is at its worst. This involves putting barriers between platform funders and funding recipients within journalism to avoid corporate interference, and it also means helping news organizations to develop methods of content distribution and audience engagement that make them less dependent on the platforms.

Example to guide implementation:

• *Luminate's [International Fund for Public Interest Media](#) invites "international donors and policymakers to recognize the urgency of this challenge and to provide funding on a scale sufficient to protect and strengthen tens of*

thousands of media organizations and journalists around the world." It now has an advisory board including Nobel Peace Laureate Maria Ressa, who pointed out that "globally, only 0.3% of development funds go to media, and independent news groups will need help to survive the next few years of our information dystopia."

RECOMMENDATION 12

Investment in trust is critical.

Investment in journalism projects designed to enhance trust in critical independent journalism is essential. **We need more humane, accurate, reliable, relatable and fair reporting**. But we also need more media and information literacy within broader society to counter viral disinformation and digital conspiracies. The pandemic provides an opportunity for growth in trust. For example, **40% of our first Journalism and the Pandemic Project survey respondents identified increased audience trust in content during the first wave of the virus. But this needs to avoid 'platform capture'** (see recommendation 11 above), which our research tells us is linked to erosion of trust in journalism.

Specific investment in local journalism, which has been devastated during the pandemic, is also a valuable response to the problem of eroding trust in journalism because **strong ties between communities and local news providers are critical.** The defunding of local journalism has also been associated with the emergence of 'news deserts,' which allow disinformation to flourish as it fills the void left by reliable, verified journalism.

Example to guide implementation:

- *The Journalism Crisis Project:* *The Tow Center for Digital Journalism and*

Columbia Journalism Review partnered to provide an accurate assessment of the losses in local journalism in the US during the pandemic, supplemented with reporting on individual outlets approaches to rebuilding trust. The project convened policy discussions between newsrooms, policymakers, funders and academics to assess approaches.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Invest in projects and outlets which emphasize diversity - in terms of entry jobs and staffing, thematic reporting, pay gaps, publishing key data, and audience development.

The pandemic amplified how people of different ethnic backgrounds, genders, and those in the Global South, were more likely to suffer from the ravages of COVID-19 than others. There was an awareness at the World Health Organization (WHO) level of the ratio of women medical health experts and frontline workers in comparison to the numbers of male medical experts being quoted in the media. And the tragic murder of George Floyd in the U.S., and subsequent transatlantic and pan-African protests of the Black Lives Matters movement, was amplified. **The pandemic helped focus attention inwards in newsrooms, emphasizing the urgent need to promote and retain an editorial staff which reflected the communities they were reporting on**. In 2021 some larger news organizations started to appoint senior "diversity" roles (including the BBC, Reuters, The Guardian, Financial Times).

Examples to guide implementation:

• *The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University offers curated training programs on how to best serve marginalized communities.*

• *The Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) is doing concerted work as part of a collective of news organizations to better be committed to solving diversity problems.*

• *The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Changing Newsrooms 2021: hybrid working and improving diversity remain twin challenges for publishers concluded that the pandemic had put a "renewed focus" on diversity, alongside retention and recruitment. The survey of 132 individuals from 42 countries in September 2021 found that newsrooms needed to improve their ethnic diversity, diversity from less advantaged backgrounds, and political diversity - especially at a senior level. To be noted: Inclusion does not only mean gender, background or ideologies, but also disability.*

RECOMMENDATION 14

Convene journalists physically once it is safe to do so, while embedding digital participation where possible.

The sense of physical and social isolation, and the related, escalating mental health crisis within journalism point to the need for physical contact and peer support. Digital communications and technological innovation have been crucial to journalism practice and dissemination during the pandemic, and there are many benefits to networking communities of journalists internationally by digital means. However, **there is now a clear need and desire for journalists to meet, support each other, share knowledge and develop new skills in the context of physical meetings.** This will be particularly important for those suffering mental health impacts caused or exacerbated by covering the pandemic. Transnational convenings will be particularly important for fostering collaborative journalism responses to the pandemic and its impacts in the medium-term.

Examples to guide implementation:

• *An example of the "democratization of access" through digital event innovations came from collaborative journalism streaming events such as Splice Media's "Splice Low-Res Festival" and the Membership Puzzle Project Summit global project sunset (housed at Media Development Investment Fund), both in collaboration with Poland's nonprofit newsroom Outriders. These events both prioritized community over technology in their approach. The former, held in Singapore, plans to return to an in-person format in 2022.*

• *The globally significant International Journalism Festival, staged annually in Perugia, Italy, will return in 2022 after a two year pandemic-induced hiatus. This will be the first major international gathering of journalists since the pandemic began. The Festival will also be live-streamed to support remote participation.*