

Covering Coronavirus: Advice for video journalists

April 9, 2020 by [Edward Lawrence](#)

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Editor's Note: Edward Lawrence has been covering the coronavirus story on the ground in China since January, including a trip onto China's frontline: Hubei province on lockdown. Here, he has outlined some of his thoughts on the challenges of reporting amid the pandemic, and the precautions that he and his team have been taking.

I'm three months in. Our coverage has been non-stop. Despite the virus, we've been out on the road whenever we can be. We've been collecting vox when we think it's safe to do so, and we've been producing pieces as often as possible. We've had to think differently about how we do things – and in some instances, to find different ways to tell the story or even to conduct interviews.

It's important that we all, as either staff or freelance, talk openly about safety.

PRE-PRODUCTION

- Our policy in China has been to monitor our body temperatures every day. Temperature checks won't detect all coronavirus cases, but high temperatures may be an indication. We've decided that if someone's temperature is high or they feel unwell, they don't travel into work. Instead, they stay home to monitor their symptoms and that of those who they live with. They may also wish to think about where they've travelled to and who they've met. The last thing anyone wants to do is bring an infection into work.
- When using public transport in China, I've been wearing latex gloves, a facemask and most importantly washing my hands. I carry hand sanitiser and sometimes anti-bacterial wipes as well. Think about what you touch and droplet infection, and keep distance when you can. If you are able to use work vehicles, be cautious of putting bags or equipment on the floor when you get home,
- For people who typically work from large offices, you may want to head out to the field directly from home and limit social interactions.
- Even before you head out into the field, start planning for post-production. Do you need to edit on location or at the office? Many organisations are now finding ways to edit remotely using screensharing apps and video-calling apps so that camera operators can work with correspondents and reporters whilst social distancing. You may wish to consider this.

FILMING ON LOCATION

- First decide if you actually need to head out and interview a source. Can it be done via Facetime or Skype instead? Take the extra time with your team to consider who your source is, who they may have been in contact with, and the potential risks of meeting in person. Are you a risk to that person? Is he or she more susceptible to the virus?
- During a trip to China's frontline to interview a suspected coronavirus case at a hospital, speaking face to face was completely off limits. Instead, we stood outside the patient's hospital and filmed a FaceTime call. FaceTime interviews can look bad as stand-alone screen-records, but you can creatively shoot these things yourself. For us, standing outside with the reporter on the phone worked well to give a sense of location to the story.
- I have personally avoided using clip-mics on anyone other than colleagues. My correspondent uses a clip mic, but I know where he's been and I know he's taking the same precautions that I am. It's probably best to use a hand mic. I've used what is effectively a camera top mic with a wireless transmitter plugged into the bottom for interviews. At the end of the day, I take off the black sponge and wash it in hot water and anti-bacterial soap. You should also wipe the handle down with disinfectant. You may even want to use a boom pole for a metre of distance
- Carry latex gloves, masks, hand sanitiser and wipes to clean your kit and your hands. Pack spares in your kit bag. Latex gloves are the best I can find on location. My skin started to suffer using sanitiser; for me it's much easier to just glove up for an hour or two. There is some debate about the effectiveness of facemasks – but wearing one certainly reduces your chances of coughing out droplets, and also makes you more aware of not touching your face.
- Clean your kit. It's the thing you're touching the most. I clean my camera gear and keyboard regularly, most importantly at the start and end of the day. I carry anti-bacterial wipes to clean them in the field. Wipe everything down.
- Clean your devices and your credit cards. In China, we don't use cash and instead pay via phone. We're not touching any coins or cash ever.
- If you are using a vehicle, wipe it down. In Hubei province, I spent 20 or 30 minutes wiping down the seats, steering wheel, buttons and handles before anyone entered.
- It might be worth keeping a log of who's been driving each pool or company vehicle, where they went and when. If someone picks up the virus, you then know who may need to isolate.
- Think about what you're touching. This may sound dramatic, but it's a necessary precaution. Wipe down the bottle of water you've just bought from the shop. I have a personal rule that anything entering my apartment, edit suite or work vehicle must be wiped down. My correspondent Stephen bought me a drink from a shop the other day, but wiped it down right away before giving it to me. We've all gotten used to doing it.
- Voiceover & earpieces

- We didn't use a lip mic in Hubei and we haven't used it since. My correspondent provides the track via his Marantz or through his own clip-on mic. If you're dedicated to working with only one correspondent and it's only ever he or she who uses the lip mic, then it's up to you to decide whether you want to use it. We've ditched them altogether for the time being.
- Stop sharing earpieces. Your correspondent should use his or her own. If push comes to shove, he or she can use standard earphones of their own. My correspondent has his own earpieces. I don't touch them, and neither does anyone else.
- You may wish to consider vitamins. It goes without saying that we work long and unpredictable hours, and that can make us vulnerable. Some of my colleagues and I have been taking a number of vitamins to strengthen our immune systems. A good diet is essential as well.
- Be patient. Things will take longer and there will be more to do, but everyone benefits when we are careful.
- Keep distances from people and be careful where you cough. Cough into your elbow crease and try to remind contributors to do so as well. Don't shake hands. You can even offer your contributor some hand sanitiser before your interview.

HEADING INTO A COVID DANGER ZONE

- Do you have any underlying health conditions, or problems affecting your immune system? If you do, it may be sensible not to head to a coronavirus hot spot. You may also wish to skip a reporting trip if any of your immediate family have underlying conditions.
- Do your research. One thing we've learned so far is that things can change within hours: sudden lockdowns, travel bans, sudden spikes in cases, or entry and exit restrictions. Prepare contingency plans for sickness on location, and the prospect that you may be stuck somewhere for much longer than you originally planned.
- Wipe down everything in your hotel room, from light switches to toilet seats. You probably don't want to be eating in the hotel restaurant, drinking in the bar or having a leisurely coffee in the local Starbucks. For us, our vehicle was our safe space for drinking coffee and eating. It's not ideal but you get used to it. I also packed a small supply of sealed dried food and snacks inside the car in the event we got stuck somewhere, as all shops were locked down. You also probably don't want to be purchasing food from shops directly outside of an affected hospital or isolation facility.
- Wipe down anything before it enters your vehicle or hotel room, and that includes your shoes. You may even wish to cover your shoes on location.
- Wipe down any public transport. We have tried to avoid public transportation altogether, but on some occasions, we've had no choice.

- Protective equipment. Take the basics, including gloves, masks and wipes, but plan for the worst. What if you get stuck somewhere? What if you end up sick and need to go to a local health facility? Do you have full protective clothing and perhaps a full face covering?
- It may sound patronising, but if one member of the team doesn't want to do something, don't do it. We all volunteered to head into Hubei and had a strong team dynamic on the road. We planned thoroughly for a number of different scenarios, and made sure that everyone – including our local driver – was comfortable with the plan.
- Avoid placing equipment on the floor. I broke my own rule here a few times in Hubei, but wiped things down thoroughly before I put them back into our vehicle.
- If returning from a high-risk location, you will likely need to quarantine for 14 days. Plan for that and take the prospect seriously. I had food and supplies delivered to me, and couldn't leave for two weeks. I checked and noted down my temperature and how I was feeling twice a day to keep a record for any potential medical staff or authorities. Plan to be able to entertain yourself – I didn't do this and it was very difficult. Take the quarantine seriously and actually isolate. Don't go to get coffee, or to see your family. Think about the safety of everyone more vulnerable than you.
- Hot wash all of your clothes on return. You may even wish to soak, handwash or scrub some of your clothing. I even soaked my shoes in boiling hot water and anti-bacterial soap. If you feel something needs to be thrown out, just toss it.