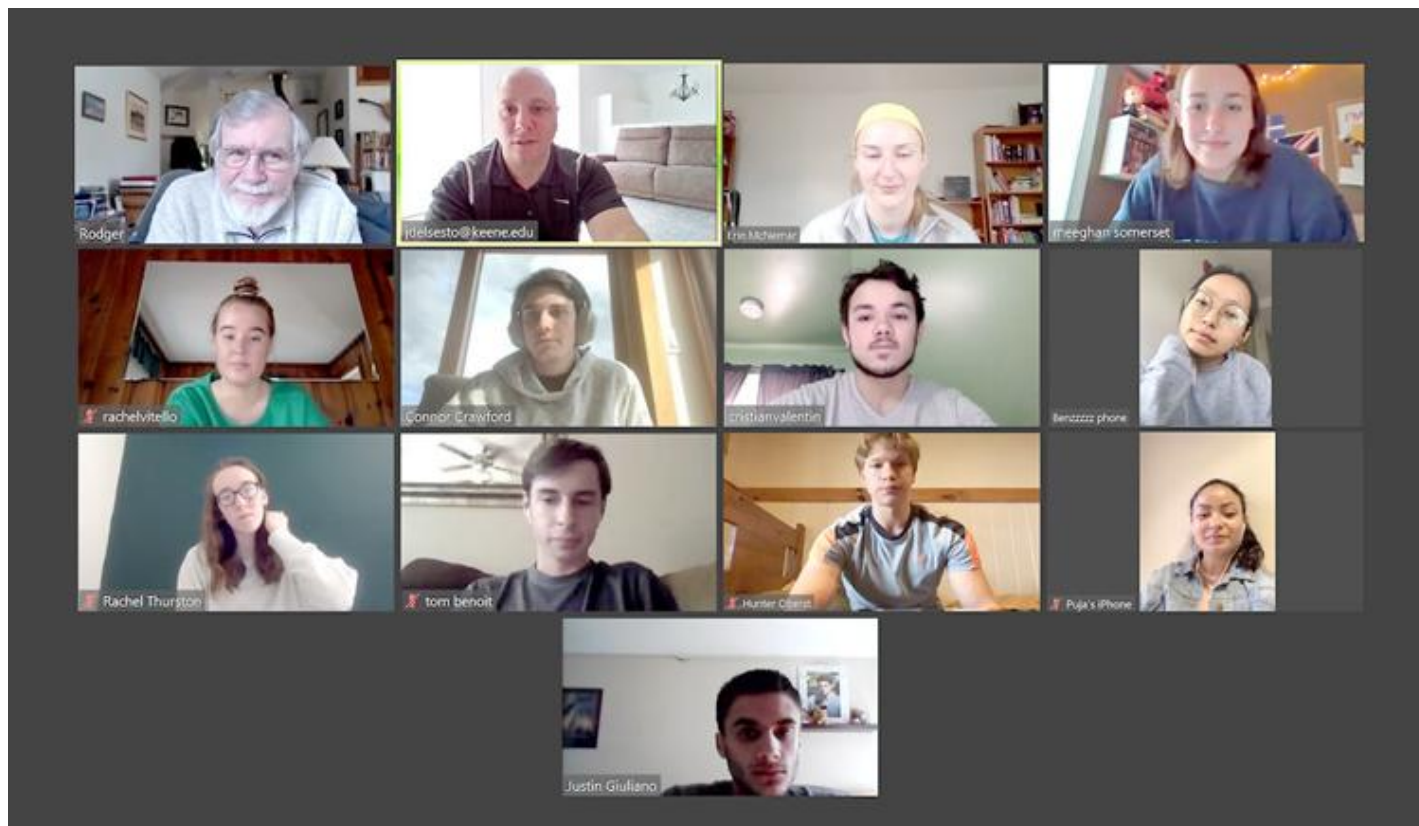




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College journalists writing the rulebook during pandemic

By Damien Fisher Granite State News Collaborative
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Staff and advisors of The Equinox, Keene State College's student newspaper, meet via Zoom. From left to right, starting top left: Rodger Martin, journalism faculty and co-advisor; Julio Del Sesto, advisor, journalism professor; Erin McNemar, managing executive editor; Meeghan Somerset, copy editor; Rachel Vitello, news editor; Connor Crawford, incoming managing editor; Cristian Valentin, opinions editor; Benajil Rai, multimedia director; Rachel Thurston, copy editor; Tom Benoit, arts and entertainment editor; Hunter Oberst, incoming news editor; Puja Thapa, administrative executive editor; Justin Giuliano, web master.

Courtesy of Julio Del Sesto

As schools around the state shut down and students were told not to come back after their spring breaks because of the COVID-19 pandemic, college journalists quickly figured out how to get back into their newsrooms, even if it was only virtually, to keep reporting the news.

“They are writing the rule book on this,” said Kenna Griffin, president of the College Media Association. “I never covered a pandemic as a professional journalist, and especially not as a student journalist.”

Erin McNemar, the managing executive editor at the Keene State College Equinox, said she and her staff were prepared before the campus shut down in March to keep reporting.



“It was kind of something we decided pretty early on,” McNemar said. “I think it was the second week of March, we said that if for some reason we don’t come back we made a contingency plan.”

The Equinox has been reporting on news around the campus and the Keene community and publishing nearly daily online.

“News never sleeps,” McNemar said. “We just wanted to keep going. Even though students weren’t on campus it’s important to keep students informed.”

Josh Morrill, editor of The New Hampshire at the University of New Hampshire, said the paper was already going through a changeover in early spring of senior leaders stepping down and underclassmen, like Morrill, taking charge. Then the campus shut down.

“This has been really hard, but it’s helped us in some ways to really transition with our news staff,” Morrill said.

Morrill and The New Hampshire staff worked through some difficulties early on and decided to use the disruption to position the paper as more of a digital product.

“Even before we got told we weren’t going to come back, we wanted to make the NH a more digital entity,” Morrill said.

The challenges were daunting right away at Keene State, and some students were ready to call it quits at The Equinox when the campus was shut down, McNemar said. But talking through what needed to be done changed minds on the staff.

Julio Del Sesto, a Keene State journalism professor and one of the advisors for The Equinox, said the paper’s staff has been serious about producing news during the campus closure, sensing their responsibility as journalists.

“I’m very impressed,” Del Sesto said. “There’s a sort of attitude that, ‘We can handle it. Whatever it is,’ ”

The Equinox covered stories on the first COVID-19 case among faculty, as well as on the rest of the semester going to remote learning, and the postponement of commencement. Griffin, of CMA, said these are the types of stories that need to get told, and are often overlooked.

“University newspapers are more important than ever,” Griffin said.

Student journalists face a range of challenges in getting the news, from tracking down sources remotely while dealing with personal issues like where they are going to live while off campus. Some of them have had to fight to be recognized as essential employees in some states, as well.

“I’ve been really impressed with the work the students have been able to do,” Griffin said.

McNemar said her staff at The Equinox has been able to pull together and produce a paper. Connecting online has been a challenge, but they have made it work.

“I don’t think we’ve had any late stories,” McNemar said.



For reporters at The New Hampshire, getting information from school officials has been at challenging, Morrill said. Additionally, reporting is no longer a personal interaction as the pandemic and social distancing has cut most news gathering down to phone calls, Zoom chats, and emails, Morrill said.

Not all student papers have been able to deal with the challenges the pandemic has brought, though. Justine Walsh is heading into her senior year at Plymouth State University where she'll be the incoming editor-in-chief for The Clock. That paper has moved online, though the publication has greatly slowed.

"We kind of decided to take a break," Walsh said.

Walsh said it's been difficult to coordinate online with all the staff, and The Clock has some positions still open for the coming year. With the campus closure, Walsh said a lot of the news events the paper typically covers have been canceled.

"The college isn't putting on events and there wasn't really much going on," Walsh said.

Walsh said the COVID-19 coverage was already saturating other media, and she didn't want to contribute to the constant barrage of news about the pandemic. That doesn't leave a lot for The Clock staff to do.

"It feels like the only thing there is to cover is the virus," Walsh said.

The staff at Southern New Hampshire University's Penman Press used the campus shutdown to focus on reimagining the future of the news organization. SNHU doesn't offer journalism as a major. So the paper's staff is entirely volunteer and made up of students from all backgrounds and majors.

“We have a very young staff that still needs some training,” said Jon Boroshok, a SNHU communications professor and the Penman Press adviser.

Boroshok said the paper had already decided to take a break from publishing for the spring semester before the COVID-19 shut down to deal with a transition from graduating seniors and incoming underclassmen. Nikki Fain, who served as the paper’s editor-in-chief, said many of the incoming staffers needed training, and the paper itself needs to sort out what kind of a publication it should be.

The Penman Press published a print edition once every two weeks, and while that’s an important feature for campus life and the print edition provides experience for students, like those in graphic design, Boroshok and Fain see a more digital future for the publication. Enhancing the website will allow the SNHU student-journalists to cover more breaking news.

Fain said the coming fall term will see a change in the way SNHU offered education by incorporating more online learning. That means the Penman press should change to keep up.

“I think there’s a lot of opportunity,” Fain said.

Walsh is trying to focus on the coming fall term, and hopes to be ready for a fresh start with The Clock. Walsh wants to get the paper back to printing on a regular basis, not just publishing online.

“As long as I have some sort of game-plan I think we’ll be OK,” Walsh said.

Morrill is looking toward the fall and thinking digital. He wants to see more content go up online, and he plans to introduce podcasts to the lineup. He’s also considering cutting back on the number of pages printed in the weekly paper, once that goes back to being printed.

“The printing of the newspaper restricts us from putting more time into the digital product,” Morrill said.

Del Sesto said The Equinox’s staff lead by McNemar jumped right into the COVID-19 coverage and are showing themselves to be top-notch journalists in the process.

“Right now they’re covering the most important stories of their careers,” Del Sesto said.

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