

CIT Report – Context Building Session – Reporting the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

Session details

Date: 12th October

Time: 10 AM

Programme for: MA MC Journalism batch of 2022

Maximum Participants: 30

Objective of the session:

It was a context-building session aimed to make students understand what reporting on traumatic events entail, for them to better understand the Trauma Literacy and Resilience Building workshop scheduled on the 19th and 25th of October.

Brief of the guest:

Mr. Shiva Shanker, has extensively covered the pandemic in Hyderabad for The Hindu. Mr. Shanker started working as a reporter at The New Indian Express Telangana bureau. As a rookie reporter, he was assigned events from all beats, with focus on crime reporting. Since the crime beat involves collecting facts about gory and tragic incidents, it helped him understand how to approach these kinds of topics. Inputs from veteran reporters further sensitized him.

After a few years of crime reporting, Mr. Shanker was assigned the health beat, like before, filled with multiple tragedies, helpless citizens trying to get medical services from government and private hospitals. The experience of crime reporting taught him the nuances of building sources which he employed while working for the health beat. When COVID broke out, the sensitization, source building, people centric reporting, helped him to work on stories which people wanted.

Report:

Prior to the workshop being organized on the 19th and the 25th on Trauma Literacy and Resilience Building, CIT Journalism conducted a “context building” session to make students aware of what reporting on traumatic events entails. The session was aimed at giving students an idea of the various challenges that a reporter has to go through while reporting on stressful events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the session, CIT had invited Mr. Shiva Shanker, who extensively covered the second wave of the pandemic in Hyderabad for The Hindu. With years of experience in crime reporting and

health reporting, Shiva Shanker shared his insights from both the beats with a special emphasis on covering the second wave of the pandemic.

Shanker started with his experience of reporting the first wave. He said that during an uncertain time like COVID, the job of a reporter as an informer becomes crucial. He added that reporters must strive to report the truth, and act as a bridge between the officials, scientists, and the common citizens.

During the second wave, Shanker's biggest takeaway was how the virus had become so personal to everyone. There was fear and anxiety in the minds of the people, and everyone was trying to protect themselves and their families in time of dire crisis. He said it was challenging to speak to family members who had lost their loved ones. He also added that volunteers on the ground were his best sources as they were giving him less-known information and ground reality.

Shanker says information was the key during both waves of the pandemic. He, as a reporter, had to strive to get the right information from the officials, and deliver it to the public. Moreover, reporters had to anticipate what was coming, since every day looked different, and mark their calendars. It was challenging, but the lesson to learn here, Shanker says, is that it is important to always look for follow-up stories. Doing so will ensure that reporters have enough stories for their next pitch meetings.

He also highlighted the importance of asking any and all questions during press conferences. This is especially true while covering an event like the pandemic where common people seldom have all the information. He added that reporters must not be hesitant of constantly calling the officials and getting answers from them, since it will only help the public.

Most of the times, officials don't give the details directly. Because the stakes are high, they only give you hints. As a reporter, he had to read between the lines, pick what was relevant, and write it in the newspaper. Shanker says that the intent of the reporter matters, and a reporter must build a sense of confidence with his sources. Only then will the sources open up.

Shanker reiterated the idea that sources are a journalist's best friends. He says sources and volunteers led him to cover stories which few people knew, and also helped him cross-check facts which he thought were not correct.

Coming to how the reportage affected his mental health, Shanker admitted. Initially it used to have a detrimental effect on his mental health. However, he says, one must find coping mechanisms to deal with stress, something one can master as the years pass. He says he resorted to OTT platforms, exercise and cycling to take his mind off from the traumatic stories he covered.

In the Q&A session, one of the questions that came up was how does a rookie reporter get in touch with prominent people. Shanker answered that getting in touch with prominent personalities is not very difficult. He encouraged students to start building a network, attend press conferences and then exchange contact details with the organizers. He also stressed on the importance of field work.

Team CIT Journalism