“The Show Must Go On”: Faculty and Student International Media Research During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:
The facilitation of international research during the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges for project leaders. This project outlines the methods associated with facilitating international media research with students and safety protocols implemented for working with a vulnerable population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized audio-visual recordings to preserve the history of Dominican centenarians, the Caribbean island documented for having the most centenarians per capita in the world. Faculty and students discuss the preparation and execution of an international media project following COVID-19 protocols in order to preserve the health of all involved, especially the participants. The discussion will include the preparation and execution of the project including IRB protocols, university policies, safety protocols during travel and data collection, the challenges experienced throughout the process, and alternative practices for future research.

Introduction
The global health and safety protocols implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic notably impacted international faculty/student research. This project focused on the investigation and digital preservation of the unique features attributing to the longevity and quality of life of centenarians in Dominica, a Caribbean island documented as having the highest number of centenarians per capita globally (Ellis, 2009; Regan, 2010). The goals of this article are to explore the research processes and challenges experienced while conducting international media research involving vulnerable participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it will also explore alternative collaborative research practices.

Literature Review
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the academic and research community due to health and safety protocols, access to technology, and travel restrictions. One of the biggest impacts on research associated with the pandemic is the requirement for personal protective equipment in the field (Mourad, Bouleleman, Wapner, & Gyamfi-Bannerman, 2020). Facial coverings can be restrictive and cumbersome, especially for those with respiratory issues. Furthermore, face coverings can be an impediment in communities and cultures where facial expressions are viewed as a sign of trust and respect. According to Padala, Jendro, and Padala (2020), another impact of the pandemic on research involving human subjects

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was the increased stress experienced by family members and caretakers associated with the possible transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

With the increased use of technology during the pandemic, Elrich, McKenney, and Elkbuli (2021) suggest offering participants a virtual interview option. However, remote areas may present technological issues such as limited availability, network issues, inaccessibility, and a lack of digital skills (Onyema, Eucheria, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma, & Alsayed, 2020). These issues can be further compounded when working with non-digital natives such as older populations, who may lack the required operational knowledge. Additional factors impacting research and fieldwork include the increased financial cost of travel and lodging (Sah, Singh, & Sah, 2020). Furthermore, Elrich, McKenney, & Elkbuli, (2021) list other pandemic-related costs such as vaccines, testing, and quarantine that may present additional financial considerations for researchers engaging students in fieldwork.

Methodology
The research was funded through a state, higher education grant, and department funding obtained after the university lifted international travel restrictions. Data was collected during a 10-day trip to Dominica utilizing narrative storytelling (Reissman, 2008). Twelve audio-visual, semi-structured interviews were conducted involving centenarians, caretakers, and stakeholders. The interviews included fifteen open-ended questions, developed to elicit information in a dialogic format. The researchers followed all university Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards and policies. Interviews were scheduled and led by the principal investigator (PI) after obtaining consent from participants and their caretakers. Student researchers assisted in capturing audio-visual data.

The data was analyzed using evaluation coding to identify themes and subthemes related to the centenarians' longevity and quality of life. The audio-visual footage was edited by the student researchers under the supervision of the PI, during the following academic year. The edited version was shared with each participant’s caretaker in order to conduct member checking to verify the accuracy of the content (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Stake, 1995). The final interviews were consolidated into a documentary-style docuseries, consisting of short video episodes, highlighting each centenarian's story.

Analysis
Including student researchers as part of the project was significant when connecting the theoretical aspects from their production courses and applying acquired knowledge to real-world applications. Students were immersed in an international environment where they were assigned and challenged with different tasks that made them adapt rapidly to their surroundings. The students were able to apply media production skills in the field and during the final editing phase of the project. Throughout the project, students experienced various media production issues that challenged them both physically and mentally.

1. Planning and Preparation
The vulnerability of the population and fluctuating health and safety protocols presented challenges addressed throughout the research planning process. The faculty researchers began the travel planning process by reviewing the health, safety, and travel guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Additionally, counsel was sought from a community liaison to address cultural and community nuances that may impact the project. During the research team meetings, the PI presented a travel and equipment transport structure for all parties, especially students traveling internationally for the first time. The outcomes of these meetings included: confirmation of travel dates and times, review of packing lists, equipment transport, and the review of local health guidelines.

2. Timelines and Travel Funding
The project timeline was impacted by the university’s international travel policies and access to grant funding. The grant was awarded in mid-May and travel dates initially scheduled for June had to be adjusted, as university protocols require 45 days to approve international travel. Additionally, grant and department-sponsored funding were not readily available for time-sensitive purchases such as airline tickets. The delay in reimbursement of travel funds put a financial strain on the researchers, as personal resources were used for project-related purchases.

3. Health and Safety Protocols
A significant concern throughout this research was adhering to the WHO’s COVID-19 protocols to ensure the safety of participants, whose ages ranged
From 100-106. While airlines no longer required masks, the team wore them throughout travel to minimize exposure to the virus. Upon entry into Dominica, all researchers were screened at the airport for COVID-19. They also limited their exposure to the virus by avoiding crowded spaces and residing in one of the island’s official quarantine locations.

Additional safety protocols were implemented during interviews where researchers doubled their face masks, recorded in open-air settings whenever possible, and sanitized hands and equipment. Throughout data collection, several centenarians objected to the research team wearing face masks because they could not see the researchers’ faces. Although these cultural nuances were presented, students resisted removing their masks due to safety requirements discussed prior to the commencement of the research. Post-interview safety protocols included a follow-up phone call to participants and caretakers to ensure each person remained in the same health condition prior to the interviews.

4. Language Barrier
A language barrier presented a challenge to researchers during the project. While Dominica’s official language is English, French Creole Patois is spoken by many residents. During the data collection, two participants communicated in the Patois, requiring interpretation by their caretakers. The translation process caused a disruption in the natural flow of the interviews, as several responses needed to be repeated for clarity.

Additionally, some participants exhibited age-related issues such as hearing loss, understanding, and coherently responding to questions. To verify the validity of responses, researchers debriefed caretakers after all interviews. Throughout the data analysis, the students encountered several instances where the participants’ pronounced accents made it difficult to understand some responses. The language barrier further exacerbated the editing phase as student researchers were unable to accurately identify various local and cultural items mentioned by the centenarians that are unique to Dominica.

5. Stakeholder Collaborations
When conducting international research, collaboration and buy-in from local stakeholders are essential to the success of the project. Recruitment efforts included contact with representatives from the Dominica Council on Aging (DCOA), whose organization works extensively with centenarians and their caretakers. Although meetings and discussions were held between the researchers and DCOA’s senior staff members, the organization chose to refrain from supporting the project due to the vulnerability of the participants. Without the support of the organization, family members were concerned about participating in the research. While these issues were taken seriously, the researchers realized this project was time-sensitive, as recent data from the DCOA chronicled the death of four centenarians, two of which were from COVID-related complications (Dominicanewsonline, 2021). The most successful recruitment efforts were facilitated by the PI, a native of the country who has relationships with several local stakeholders. By networking and collaborating with these individuals, the PI was able to secure a contact list, call participants and their caretakers, obtain consent, and organize interviews.

Addressing Future Research
Conducting international research with students was challenging before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Working collaboratively and achieving successful results was vital when facilitating research with a vulnerable population. The age, accents, and dialects of the project participants created an unavoidable challenge throughout the process. In future collaborations, it is recommended that both faculty and student researchers familiarize themselves with the people and culture prior to beginning. The challenge of obtaining buy-in from stakeholders can be addressed by identifying and working with a gatekeeper to help develop trust and build relationships. With a clearer understanding of university grants and travel policies, project timelines can be addressed accordingly, preventing faculty from using personal resources to fund expenses.

The collection and documentation of narratives associated with Dominican centenarians, during the current pandemic, was a vital project to undertake. The challenges encountered and lessons learned gave both the faculty and students insight into the demands of international media research. There are research projects that must be conducted even under less than satisfactory conditions, and the challenges encountered in this faculty/student study can inform future international research in a post-pandemic society.
References


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