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## **Meeting public information needs in a crisis: How MU Journalism students responded to COVID-19**

Regan Mertz and Kathy Kiely

From May to August 2020, Missouri Information Corps, a MU School of Journalism pop-up newsroom, reported on the coronavirus pandemic. I am presenting on behalf of Mo Info Corps and am citing my teammates' work, as well as my own. We did traditional public service journalism and experimented with delivering crucial public health information in social media groups. We did this because many of us had lost jobs and internships because of the pandemic. We also wanted to put our training to use by informing the public in our region and reinforcing newsrooms that were under severe economic stress due to COVID-19 shutting down many advertisers. We worked as an autonomous newsroom with two graduate student editors and two faculty advisors. Our stories ranged from the disturbing – the impact of COVID-19 in prisons, Missouri's failure, as of early July, to support contact tracing at the local level and Missouri counties' slow disbursement of federal coronavirus relief funding – to the uplifting, including pieces on how some Missouri farms pivoted to selling food locally and a class that encouraged Latino gardening which drew Spanish-speakers around the world. To make our news and information widely accessible at a time of great public need, we offered it to news organizations for free. Mo Info Corps also established a presence in local Facebook groups, engaging with people through comments and occasionally doing additional reporting to answer questions. Our work has been published in more than 30 outlets, including USA TODAY, and we received many messages of gratitude from readers and editors. By the end of the summer, we learned to (1) engage with communities on social media, (2) explain why information is changing and (3) keep it quick, clear and useful.