



March 2020

Re: Student Media is Essential Service During COVID-19 Outbreak

To All Relevant Parties:

We are writing to affirm that student journalists, like their professional counterparts, perform an essential function in times of crisis and should be supported fully in their efforts to gather and report news on issues of concern in the community.

While it has become necessary to limit commercial activity in some forms as a result of the expanding coronavirus pandemic, commercial news media have largely been exempted from these limitations. Similarly, school administrators should exempt student journalists from any restrictions on student activities.

The federal government's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA) stated in no uncertain terms that essential infrastructure workers include those who "support radio, television, and media service, including, but not limited to front line news reporters, studio, and technicians for newsgathering and reporting." This definition does not distinguish between student and commercial news media, but rather recognizes the important role that all journalists play in disseminating news, precisely in times of crisis and exigent circumstances when such information is needed the most.

Student journalists have worked with university administration and others to inform the community about school closures, remote learning and other emergency measures during the current disruptions. While the CISA definition is advisory, a wide variety of states including California, Texas, New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other local authorities have adopted similar exemptions for news media that allow them to continue operating.

It is important to note that supporting the continuing operation of student media is not a public safety issue as the majority of student journalists are working from home and observing appropriate social distancing protocols and required shelter-in-place orders. They are able to gather information and news by phone and email, check sources online, and work with their editors, advisers and fellow staff members through videoconference technology.

In recent weeks, student journalists across the country have not only written about the COVID-19 cases in their communities, but they have also provided students essential information about postponed classes or school closures, how and when students need to vacate their dorm rooms, remote learning details, campus resources that can still be accessed, and much more. In addition, they have had a front row seat to reporting on the experiences that students across the country have had as their schools have shut down and students have been forced to learn from home.

As of March 23, 2020, 46 states have ordered schools to close, affecting more than 54.8 million students across the country. Reporting on and amplifying their voices and experiences at this critical time provides an important civic function, helps to create a historical record and fundamentally demonstrates the vital role that student journalists play. Moreover, young journalists provide a unique and essential perspective at this time. They understand and can identify issues that older journalists might miss. They speak their readers' language and provide a trusted forum for young voices to share their concerns and have their questions answered.

Since 1974, the Student Press Law Center has worked to promote and protect the First Amendment rights of student journalists at the high school and college level. We are an independent, nonpartisan national nonprofit organization. We see the important work of student journalists every day.

The student media affiliated with your school are carrying out a constitutionally protected duty to our society by delivering vital information to the public. We hope you will stand with us as we support student journalists in their mission, which is now more critical than ever in the face of such challenging times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hadar Harris', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Hadar Harris, Executive Director**  
Student Press Law Center