



7 LESSONS FROM CONFLICT JOURNALISM TO HELP YOU DURING THE PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN

In 2011, I spent time in Libya, covering the country's Arab Spring as a staff photographer for the Associated Press. I stayed as a 'guest' at the Rixos Al Nasr hotel in Gaddafi-controlled Tripoli, where I was invited to cover the government's side of the conflict. For most of my time there, I was only allowed to leave the hotel when our minders deemed there was something fit to show us. The other foreign journalists and I felt safe (enough), but we had our guard up. We knew that things could very quickly go south. And we were right. The hotel became a terrifying place for the foreign press not too long after I left the country. The Rixos was a lesson in how to deal with insane conditions, and I thought that would be the last time I would be part of such a surreal lockdown.

And yet, the longer I am home during the corona pandemic, the more I have come to realize the current situation is not too dissimilar to my stint at the Rixos. There's the lack of control, helplessness, and the knowledge that things can change at any moment. I even have a new minder that follows me everywhere -- my one-year-old son Orion. :-)

So, here are seven lessons from conflict journalism that helped me during the Libyan revolution -- which I've noticed also pertain to my experiences in lockdown. I hope that they will make sheltering in place a bit more bearable for you.

Tara Todras-Whitehill



Long dull days in beautiful surroundings -- Rixos hotel, Tripoli.

I. Flexibility Must Be Maintained

Like any good journalist, when on an assignment I always prepare for the unexpected. However, projects can drastically change, and all that planning gets thrown out the window. I accept it as part of the job description.

Many times our minders at the Rixos would tell us we were going out to see one thing, like a pro-Gaddafi rally, and we would end up at something entirely different. Who doesn't like a boring press conference, anyway? This was probably in part to keep us in the dark and also because of their complete disorganization. Either way it was incredibly frustrating as we had no control over our movements. But I made the most of it and always tried to get a good photo no matter how mundane the circumstance.

Don't get me wrong, when everything goes pear-shaped, I can get upset. But I don't freak out. Instead, I take a deep breath and figure out the new way forward.

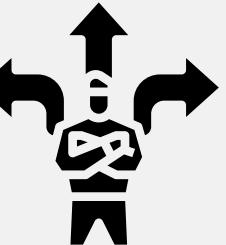
Without an even temperament, we tend to feel painted into a corner. The more we fight those feelings of helplessness, the harder it is to find a solution. Keeping a flexible mindset from the get go can help us adapt to sudden and unexpected changes. And that makes it easier to switch directions and figure out what to do next.

2. Learn First Aid

First aid was part of my training as a conflict photographer. It's been important for my job and for my life in general. In Libya, especially on the rebel side, there wasn't access to good hospitals or medical supplies. Knowing that I could help myself or my colleagues in a medical emergency was empowering and gave me a sense of control.

So, if you haven't taken an in-person workshop, there are resources online. If you're like me, and already have some training, it's highly recommended that you top off your skills.

[First Aid For Free](#) is a great place to start if you're looking for a course. And the [American Red Cross](#) also has a plethora of online resources.



3. Constantly Challenge Yourself

For longer assignments, like my Rixos stint, I have to continually push myself to think creatively. The place was full of crazy characters, and something strange happened there almost every day. I started taking notes about all the different personalities in the hotel with the idea of turning it into a book at some point. Having that project kept my eyes fresh, so I could continue to see new ways of telling the story.

Staying at home for weeks on end can throw anyone into a stir-crazy rut. Not to mention the continuous stream of grim news that is (slowly? quickly?) driving us batty.

I've started a personal project called LIGHT THERAPY. It's a visual diary that helps me break up the monotony of what seems like the same day over and over again. If you're interested in starting your own visual diary, you can check out [my blog post](#) for a little inspiration.

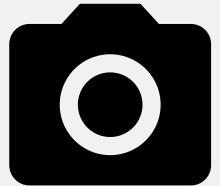


4. Telling Your Personal Story Is Key

We are in the midst of a (hopefully) once in a lifetime global event. As a mother, this is downright frightening. But as a journalist, it's humbling to be a part of this moment in history. And I felt the same way at the Rixos. I was scared, but I was compelled to keep documenting that unique moment in time because I knew I would never seen anything like it again.

Now I find myself in another crazy world event and like everyone else in this pandemic, I don't know how we will end up. But as a storyteller, I do know it is vital to document what is happening around us.

So lately, I've been thinking a lot about how we can help each other feel connected during the pandemic. This is an emotional time, and it's important that everyone: private individuals, corporate executives, NGO staff, and government workers share what they are going through. Telling our stories can help us bridge the isolation to feel more collectively supported and less alone.



If you're not sure how to do that with your communications, for your team or for yourself, please reach out for a [free consultation](#). We all have the same goal -- to connect to each other on an authentic level and share our stories.

If you aren't ready for a meeting, but still want to improve your storytelling game, join my [Master Visual Storytelling](#) Facebook group. We workshop ideas, share insights, and keep each other up to date on the latest in the industry.

5. Twitter Is A Powerful Resource

I rely on Twitter when I'm on assignment. At the Rixos I knew that all the information that was being given to us was through a very skewed lens. It was helpful to hear updates from trusted journalists in other areas of the country, and Twitter was the quickest way to get that news.



Now, I've created a [Twitter list](#) for the coronavirus pandemic. It acts as my own personal feed that helps me keep up to date with breaking news from people and places I trust. You can create your own list, but be aware of false information, and triple-check your sources.

My friend, and information security consultant, Amil Khan has put together [some videos](#) on how to spot fake news during the coronavirus pandemic -- I highly recommend checking them out.

6. Five Minutes of Personal Time Is Transformative

When I was confined to the Rixos in Tripoli, I dragged myself to the hotel gym nearly every day. Sometimes it was a massive struggle, but I would feel drastically better after getting some aggression out on the treadmill.

While in self-isolation during the coronavirus pandemic, I try to meditate for five minutes in the morning about what I am grateful for. Sometimes it doesn't happen (why is it so hard to carve out five damn minutes for myself??), and inevitably my brain feels cluttered for the rest of the day.

Designating just a little time for self-reflection can be essential to feeling saner in these trying times.

If you don't like meditating, take those five minutes in the morning and read something uplifting.



Studies have shown that people who start their days with positive affirmations maintain better moods than those who begin their mornings consuming unpleasant news.

This newsletter I wrote on optimistic news is a good place to start.

7. A Helper's High Is the Best Kind Of High

Before I traveled to Tripoli, I reached out to the journalists already at the Rixos. Many were craving small personal items, and I was happy to bring as many as I could carry. Then, when I was cooped up in the hotel for a few weeks, colleagues offered to do the same for me. And I jumped at the opportunity to get some sorely missed items from home.

As Tara Parker-Pope points out in her article The Science Of Helping Out; during times of crisis, our emotional health improves when we help others. I try to remember this advice every day. My goal is to help people document their stories during this historical time.



Through my newsletters, white papers, free workshops, and lives, my aim is to reach as many people as possible so we can make a real impact with our visual voices.

We all have an important story to tell right now, and I want to help in whatever way I can.

Connect with me on Instagram or through my Master Visual Storytelling community on Facebook. We are working hard to change the global narrative for the better - join us!

