



Coronavirus – Follow The Money

This series about the Coronavirus is specifically for journalists who cover various aspects of the pandemic and people who want news coverage of the pandemic to be honest, accurate and fair.

So far we've looked at [Reporting on a Pandemic](#) and [Follow the Science](#). Now we move to another important aspect of covering the pandemic – how much it's costing us.

Follow The Money

Do you know how much COVID-19 is costing your family? Your community? Your state? Your country? The world? How would you find out if you did want to know?

That's where journalists comes in. We used to call it *Follow The Money*. If you know where money comes from, where it goes and who benefits from it, you have something important to report. The more money involved, the more governments will try to hide that information from journalists and the public.

One of the things that peaked my interest as an investigative reporter was when I asked questions about money and heard one these responses –

- We don't have that information
- You can't have that information

Journalists should seriously doubt that someone in a government office does not have access to information about how they are spending taxpayer dollars. Governments work off of budgets, so they know to the penny how much they have to spend on every aspect of their department's work. If someone tells you they don't have the information you need, ask them who does. If the government employee or official is being honest with you, they will help you find someone who can answer your questions. If they aren't being honest, they will often try to stall

hoping you will give up looking and move on to something else. Don't let them do that. Tell them you believe someone in their department or agency knows the answers to your questions and insist they get you to that person. Keep in mind that you have that right as a journalist. Members of the public also have the same right.

If someone tells a journalist they can't have the information, warning bells should sound loudly and the reporter should quickly go into overdrive. Reporters are representatives of the public and the public has a right to know how governments spending taxpayer money. Therefore, reporters have a right to know. What can you do if a government employee says you can't have the information? Ask them why not, then let them know you will be including their answer, along with their name and position, as part of your story. That opened many doors for me as a reporter. Government employees are often doing the bidding of their supervisors and don't want to take the fall for not giving the public what they have a right to know. Many public officials and governmental supervisors will throw their employees under the bus in these situations and that doesn't settle well with government employees.

Freedom of Information

One of my favorite tools as a journalist was *The Freedom of Information Act*. It went into effect while I was still in college, so it was available for me to use when I started working full-time in broadcasting. Because it was a new law, reporters and government employees learned how it worked at the same time. There were some bumpy places at the beginning, but we smoothed out the process through mutual respect and cooperation.

Reporters make FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests of documents and other information under government control. The law requires the full or partial disclosure of the previously unreleased information depending on certain exemptions allowed for specific purposes. I recommend all journalists [learn how to make an FOIA request](#), especially to get information about how government agencies spend taxpayer money.

Another tool reporters should use is *Government in the Sunshine* laws. The state of Florida passed its initial Sunshine law in 1967. That meant it was available, along with FOIA, when I started reporting in January 1968. The *Florida Government in the Sunshine Law* required that all government meetings be open to the public. I tested it many times when government bodies wanted to hold secret meetings and the Sunshine Law held up well. There were times when the people holding secret meetings would end the meeting and leave a building because I pointed to a copy of the Sunshine Law, but that's okay. They were not able to

hold secret meetings if journalists learned about them, attended and demanded they open the meetings to the public. That state law has progressed through the years to also include Open Records. The Federal *Government in the Sunshine Law* was passed in 1976 with the intent of creating greater transparency in government. All 50 U.S. states now have freedom of information laws, so you have a great tool to use no matter where you cover news.

However, the fact that these laws exist does not mean government employees and elected officials follow them. That's the job of journalists and concerned citizens to force the government to be open for inspection when government employees and officials want to keep the public in the dark. Money is often one of those things government officials and employees don't want us to follow closely. That's because money often means *power*. People in power usually want to keep their power and often expand their power. That means journalists and interested members of the public have to be vigilant in holding government officials and employees responsible for how they spend taxpayer money.

Another tool journalists have is the *Internet*. Some of the information you may want to see about how governments spend money is already available on local, state and federal websites. Be sure to check the date of when site information was updated to make sure it's current. You should also contact someone at the government department or agency to confirm that the information on the website is correct. Website information sometimes lags behind official action.

Sacred Trust

Journalists are paid to find out how much things cost and let the public know how government agencies are spending their money. I view that as a sacred trust given to us by the founding fathers of our country. They amended the Constitution to specifically mention members of the press –

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION, 1789

Thomas Jefferson, one of our founding fathers, second Vice-President and third President of the United States, wrote extensively about the importance of a free press –

“Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it.”

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO JOHN JAY, 1786

“No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press.”

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO JOHN TYLER, 1804. ME 11:33

“The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure.”

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO LAFAYETTE, 1823. ME 15:491

It has been said that journalists have four primary roles to play in society

—

1. normative
2. cognitive
3. practiced
4. narrated

Those correspond to what journalists –

- ought to do
- want to do
- really do
- think they do

If you are a journalist or hope to be one in the future, think about these roles carefully. It's important as a journalist to understand each one and be sure that you identify with your proper role every day as you earn a paycheck as a working journalist. Understand that the role you play in society is specifically tied to the success or failure of the nation you serve. Our country is at a turning point in many ways and the careful eye of an honest press (media) is needed to force government to be honest in doing the work of the people.

Economic Realities

Economics is a huge part of our lives. It affects how much we are paid for doing a job. It impacts how much we pay for food, clothing, housing, transportation, entertainment and other things we want and need. What do you do when the cost of something you need is too high? You probably shop around until you find the cost that fits your budget. What do you do when your wages are not enough to pay your bills? You find a way to earn more money or a way to spend less money. That's what most of us do. Even state and local governments do the same thing. They raise fees and taxes or cut budgets. What does the federal

government do? They can raise taxes and fees and can cut budgets (though they rarely do that), but the federal government can also borrow and print money.

That's where journalists come in .. or at least they should. Journalists should be *watchdogs* for how governments spend taxpayer money. It's not hard to do, though it does take time and effort. Governments work off budgets that elected officials (e.g. city councilors, county commissioners, state legislators, members of congress) approve each fiscal year.

Departments and agencies of government are required to account for how they spend taxpayer money that elected officials allocate to them. Notice the words *elected officials*. They are supposed to work for the people, not themselves. Elected officials are responsible for how taxpayer money is spent to run the government. Voters are supposed to have the last word on how governments are run by voting elected officials in or out of office.

So, what part do journalists play? Journalists are paid by private companies to keep a trained and skeptical eye on what elected and unelected officials do with taxpayer money and to communicate their findings to the taxpayers. Pretty simple system and it works well if ..

1. Journalists carefully watch how government departments and agencies request and receive taxpayer money
2. Journalists carefully watch how government departments and agencies spend taxpayer money

3. Journalists hold government departments and agencies responsible and accountable for how they spend taxpayer money
4. Journalists report their findings accurately and objectively to the public
5. Members of the public pay careful attention to what honest journalists report about how government departments and agencies spend taxpayer money
6. Members of the public contact their governments and elected officials about any spending matters that concern them
7. Governments respond favorably to public concerns and make necessary changes to meet legal requirements concerning budgetary allocations and spending

Most professional journalists begin their career working for small radio or television stations or small publications (including online news outlets). That's where they learn the *craft* of journalism. An important part of the craft is economics. If you are studying to be a journalist and haven't chosen a minor yet, consider economics. Economics will be part of almost everything you do in a career as a working journalist.

Many young journalists today work as general reporters, meaning a news manager/editor assigns them one or more stories to cover each day and the reporter covers those stories. General reporting usually does not allow a journalist to learn the ins and outs of covering the budgetary process of government bodies because they're running from one story to another to another, then back to the station or publication to write their stories. Time to do the hard work of digging into stories,

especially the economics of those stories, is not built into their daily schedule. If they have the desire to do that, it may have to be done during their personal time. General reporting also does not give journalists the training and experience needed to know what to dig for, how to hold government officials and employees responsible for taxpayer-funded programs, and how to report their findings clearly to the public.

That's where *beat reporting* can be a big help to young journalists. Beat reporting is where reporters are responsible for covering one or more parts of local, state or federal governments. Some examples are the police beat, crime beat, court beat, education beat, city hall beat, business beat, military beat, legislative beat, congressional beat, governor beat, White House beat, etc. Part of a beat reporter's responsibility is to know everything going on in their beat, including how the government departments or agencies they cover spend taxpayer money. Thus, the phrase, *follow the money*.

Beat reporters are involved with the economics of the government departments they cover from the beginning of the budget process to the spending of allocated monies. They know details about every aspect of budgets and expenditures, which means they can give context to their stories about how taxpayer money is spent.

Part of covering a news beat effectively includes developing good relationships with trustworthy government employees and officials. The people who work in government are members of the public and often care deeply about how government spends taxpayer dollars. Even as a journalist looks for trustworthy sources and contacts, many government employees are looking for trustworthy journalists. It's a good partnership when done properly.

You may find [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov) helpful in tracking how federal government departments and agencies spend taxpayer dollars.

Money and the Pandemic

The economic cost of the Coronavirus Pandemic is difficult to estimate, but it is enormous. Tens of millions of people are out of work after many weeks of lockdowns by state and local governments. Thousands of business owners may not be able to reopen their businesses because of lost revenues. That means many unemployed people will not have jobs to return to as governors, county commissioners and mayors finally reopen states and communities for business and commerce. The toll on business owners, employees and their families is often beyond economic measurement. The human toll is tremendous.

As unbelievable as it may sound, Congress has appropriated TRILLIONS of dollars for COVID-19 response in just the past few months and has considered appropriating TRILLIONS more.

How might the Coronavirus affect the U.S. economy during the next five to ten years? Here's the latest information I found from the Congressional Budget Office in response to a senator's request –

“CBO projects that over the 2020–2030 period, cumulative nominal output will be \$15.7 trillion less than what the agency projected in January.”

CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE, JUNE 1, 2020

Let that sink in for a minute. Trillions of dollars to fight a virus and trillions more in negative impact to the economy of the United States. Not millions, not billions, but TRILLIONS of dollars.

Does a virus response really cost governments TRILLIONS of dollars? Especially when it never has before? If so, show us why. If not, show us why not. That's one of the important jobs of a journalist during a pandemic.

Follow the money and it will usually lead you to the truth of why government officials want money. The reasons may be good, but may also be bad. How will the public know for sure unless journalists tell them the truth?

Let's put the spending of TRILLIONS of dollars on fighting a virus in just a few months in some context:

- The cost of U.S. involvement in World War II (1941-1945) was about four-trillion dollars in today's money.
- The cost of U.S. involvement in the Korean War (1950-1953) was about 276-billion dollars in today's money.
- The cost of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (1965-1975) was about one-trillion dollars in today's money.
- The cost of U.S. involvement in the Iraq War (2003-2011) was a little more than two-trillion dollars in today's money.

How much have [past pandemics](#) cost the American taxpayer? Millions or billions, but NOT trillions of dollars. Something is vastly different about the cost of the current Coronavirus Pandemic response. *Why* is a vital question that honest and unbiased journalists need to ask and get answered for the taxpaying public.

Journalists should be busy day and night watching, asking, checking, double-checking, reporting on every taxpayer dollar allocated for the pandemic response. How many stories have you seen where journalists are digging into federal, state and local Coronavirus budgets along with the economic fallout of the pandemic response? I've seen very few that could be called in-depth. Not enough for sure. Journalists may mention that trillions of dollars are being allocated, but that's not the end of the story. The story is about the specifics of those numbers – the 'nuts and

bolts' of the economic response to the pandemic – how government employees are spending that money.

It's one thing to know how much was allocated for a response. It's another to know how much was spent for a response. Did the expenditure follow the specific allocations or were they diverted to another purpose? Where are the receipts for expenditures? Keep your eyes open for diverted and disappearing monies. It happens more often than you may think.

Journalists should stay on top of the government's response to the Coronavirus for several reasons.

1. The current economic fallout is important in knowing how the pandemic is affecting governments, financial institutions, businesses, schools, organizations, non-profits, families and individuals
2. The current economic fallout is important in knowing how to forecast the future effect of the pandemic on governments, financial institutions, businesses, schools, organizations, non-profits, families and individuals
3. The current economic fallout is important in knowing whether governments, financial institutions, businesses, schools, organizations, non-profits, families and individuals are responding properly to the pandemic

4. The current economic fallout is fertile ground for corruption at all levels of government, finance, industry, organizations and non-profits

Corruption and mishandling of large sums of public money are big issues for journalists to be on the lookout for as they cover the pandemic response by local, state and national governments. The larger the amount of money allocated to spend, the easier it is to hide corrupt practices and for governments to siphon millions or even billions of dollars off to their pet projects secretly and without accountability. Some of those pet projects may not even be related to the pandemic. The public needs to know if taxpayer money for the Coronavirus response is earmarked for non-virus purposes.

Unless journalists do their jobs honestly, accurately and fairly, governments can get away with tremendous deception and waste of taxpayer money.

How do journalists do that work? It's simple, but not easy.

Twelve Points for Economic Coverage

Here are twelve points to consider as you cover the financial allocation of funds approved by Congress and signed into law by the President for the Coronavirus response.

1. Find out how much money is allocated for the story you're researching. Is that amount available to read? If so, where? If not, why not? Do you know who to contact in a department or agency of government to find out? If you do, contact them. If you don't, find out who to contact and contact them. Get everything in printed form along with the names of the government employees who gave you the information,
2. Which department/agency will allocate the money? Federal? State? Local? Do you have a copy of their allocation? If not, get one. You can start with the text of bills from the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate and follow the bill through the process of joint body approval. Once the President signs the bill into law, you can get copies from the office of your local congress person or senator. You can also get copies of private and public laws from [Gov.info](https://www.govinfo.gov/). You can stay in touch with proposed legislation at [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov/). There are more allocation bills being proposed and considered, so keep your eyes out for what's coming.
3. Who will receive the allocations? Other government agencies? Businesses? Organizations? Non-profits? Individuals? Are any of the scheduled recipients relatives, associates or favored groups of government employees or elected officials? Can you identify bias

preference in the allocation process? If so, ask questions and find out why that's being allowed and what people in power are going to do about it.

4. What, if any, requirements do recipients have to meet to receive allocations? If so, are those requirements available to read? If so, where? If not, why not? Get printed copies and the names of government employees who gave you the information.
5. What happens if recipients do not meet allocation requirements? Do they have to return money received? All of it? Part of it? What's left? How will the public know if money is returned? Who is responsible for determining whether a recipient meets requirements? Do you have their contact information? Do they respond when you contact them? If not, how can you hold them responsible?
6. How often will allocations be made? Once? Weekly? Monthly? Annually? Who is responsible for determining whether allocations are made in a timely manner? Do you have their contact information? Do they respond when you contact them? If not, how can you hold them responsible?
7. When do the allocations begin? Immediately? Within days, weeks, months? A specific date?
8. When do the allocations end? When the money runs out? By a certain date or period of time? What happens if all the money is not spent by the deadline?
9. Who in government is responsible for allocating the money? Do you have their contact information? Do they respond when you contact them? If not, how can you hold them responsible?

10. Who in government is responsible for reporting the allocation of money? Will the reports be made public? If so, how and where? If not, why not? Do you have their contact information? Do they respond when you contact them? If not, how can you hold them responsible?
11. Who in government is responsible for overseeing the spending of money in individual allocations? Do you have their contact information? Do they respond when you contact them? If not, how can you hold them responsible?
12. Do the math carefully and hold each department/agency of government responsible for how they spend taxpayer money.

Once you have completed your research and confirmed information with government employees, elected officials and private experts, write and broadcast/publish your story.

Follow Up

Economic stories have an extremely long life, especially when the dollar amounts are in the millions, billions, and (gulp) trillions. It's important that journalists follow up on their initial stories until there's nothing more to report.

- Follow up to make sure the government department/agency you're covering is spending the money the way they said they would. Be sure to get a government representative on the record (e.g. video interview, quotes for article, etc) about their plans to spend taxpayer money. Politely, but firmly, hold them accountable for every dollar.
- Follow up to see if government officials/employees have diverted money for the pandemic response when they think the media/public is looking at something else or no longer paying attention. The diversions may be illegal, so it's important to catch corrupt government officials/employees in the act. Having them on the record saying they will faithfully follow the law in spending taxpayer money goes a long way to demonstrating their bad intent if they divert money to other expenses. Journalists are advocates for the public and must be vigilant in making sure government employees do what they said they would do. Journalists hold people in power responsible and accountable for their actions.
- Follow up to see if the government department/agency you're covering is asking for more money. A good story for journalists to do is an in-depth look at how a government department/agency

spent their first allocation. How they used taxpayer money in the past is one indication of how they would use taxpayer money in the future. The taxpaying public needs to know when government officials/employees have a history of misspending their money.

- Follow up with Government Accounting Agency (GAO) audits concerning [Coronavirus Oversight](#). Look for anything the GAO reports about the [department/agency you're covering](#). Remember that government agencies reporting on government agencies is a tool. Journalists need to be skeptical until they've confirmed information to be true.
- Follow up with your state and local government auditors (e.g. comptrollers) to look at their most recent reports and ask them questions to understand what they're seeing with spending.
- Follow up with the health and medical experts you've used for your stories to see if they have new information that might impact the economic aspects of what you've reported. Ask them if they've changed their minds about the costs of the pandemic response.
- Follow up with the economic experts you've used for your stories to see if they have new information that might impact the stories you've reported. Ask them if they've changed their minds about the costs of the pandemic response. Experts often change their minds as new data becomes available, so be sure to check in with them regularly.
- Follow up means not letting the stories you do slip away from you. Even as you are assigned new stories, stay in touch with your sources to make sure you don't overlook an important aspect of a previous story that will impact your viewers/listeners/readers.

Conclusion

Journalists, the public is depending on you. Do your job and do it well. Be curious, skeptical, objective and accurate. Be honest in every aspect of your coverage. Put aside personal or political biases. You can do it.