

## Covering Health Care News in 2020 with Modern Healthcare Editor Aurora Aguilar – Hospitals In Focus Transcript

Speaker 1 ([00:05](#)):

Welcome to Hospitals in Focus, from the Federation of American Hospitals. Here's your host, Chip Kahn.

Chip Kahn ([00:14](#)):

Reporters are our eyes on the broader world and the first historians. Despite the current frantic and helter-skelter, 24/7 news cycle and the fake news mythology, their reporting is more critical than ever. We depend on the media to inform us as we cope both personally and as a nation with the triple whammy of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic recession and racial inequality and civil strife. For many of us, key to keeping informed about the health care sector is the magazine Modern Healthcare. It's the industry's leading source of business and policy news, research and information. This is why I am so thrilled to have the Modern Healthcare editor in chief, Aurora Aguilar, joining us to discuss reporting on health care in the year of COVID-19. Aurora, thanks so much for sharing your time with us today.

Aurora Aguilar ([01:10](#)):

Of course. Glad to be here, Chip, and thanks for the very generous introduction.

Chip Kahn ([01:14](#)):

Well, much deserved. Aurora, to get started, will you tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to be editor in chief at Modern Healthcare?

Aurora Aguilar ([01:23](#)):

Sure. So, I have been a journalist my entire adult life. I decided that I wanted to be a reporter when I was 16 years old and was very lucky to get my first job in a newsroom in the Chicago area at the age of 18. I've spent a lot of time in a couple of different newsrooms throughout the city of Chicago and landed for the largest portion of my career at the National Public Radio affiliate here in Chicago. And so, I led their morning news show and their newsroom and then also special projects. And during that period when I was covering special projects, I got a chance to really sort of choose whatever it was that I wanted to do as far as topics to cover, and I became very, very interested in health care.

As I was learning, trying to learn more and more about policy, which you know is often so complex and has a history that sort of changes administration to administration, I became familiar with Modern Healthcare and became a huge fan and started subscribing to it. So, I had my eye on it and as soon as I saw an opportunity for me to be able to join Modern Healthcare's newsroom, I took it and was very generously welcomed by that staff and the publisher, Fawn Lopez, who became my mentor. And I think probably... I've been with Modern Healthcare for five years and I became the editor four years ago. So, very quick, very exciting, and the opportunity of a lifetime. This is the greatest job I've ever had and the best team that I've ever worked with, so I'm very lucky to be where I am.

Chip Kahn ([03:01](#)):

Well, Aurora, we're glad you're there.

Aurora Aguilar ([03:03](#)):

Thank you.

Chip Kahn ([03:04](#)):

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Can you give us some background, because there may be some of our in our audience that are unfamiliar with Modern Healthcare. Can you talk a bit about the mission and the main audiences of Modern Healthcare?

Aurora Aguilar ([03:16](#)):

Of course. We have a long history. Next year, we are going to be celebrating our 45th anniversary and for the entirety of the history of the publication, we have been laser focused on executives in the largest healthcare organizations in the country. So, 80 percent of our audience is provider, payer and medical groups, and about 50 percent of that audience is CEOs and senior leaders within those organizations. It is written in our mission that it is our job to help improve healthcare by empowering executives to do their best work through really balanced and accurate information.

So, we see our role as being stewards of making sure that as much information is disseminated and actually assessed in ways that really help executives manage their every day. So, we understand that these are some of the busiest people in the country, as you well know, and have very little time to be able to binge reading or listening, and so it is our job to make sure that we are picking, curating the news that is of most important to the operations and the finances of organizations in healthcare in the country.

So, because we've got this laser focus, we have been very, very, very lucky to have reporters that keep going back to the same topics and the same people and the same sources over and over again to develop stories as they are moving through the news cycle. So, this has enabled all of our reporting staff to really become subject matter experts and people that are turned to for their own expertise in the industry that when... Hopefully it is shown in our publication and in all our events and the multimedia that we're now embarking on is very thorough and nuanced coverage that goes beyond the headlines, goes beyond what some of our mainstream competitors do and enables us to be able to ask tough questions that are accurate, balanced and really show the independence that we've been able to have over the past 45 years.

So, hopefully we really consider ourselves as a tool for this very specific audience of healthcare executives to be able to understand what's happening in the world, understand what's happening in policy and news and really understand how to be able to do their jobs better and optimize their workforce.

Chip Kahn ([05:41](#)):

You know, all of us do so appreciate what you do, and I guess I've been doing this long enough, I sort of hate to say it, that I've seen Modern Healthcare evolve from a magazine in the conventional sense all the way to a digitized medium, and it's been so impressive. So, Aurora, let's drill down a little bit now. And can you talk a little bit about how you and your team have approached reporting during this period of COVID-19 and what's different about it?

Aurora Aguilar ([06:17](#)):

We are a rather small newsroom that has to be very smart about the way that we use our resources. I mean, we're a national publication. For example, I mean, just kind of comparing, when I was leading a team at the radio station that was covering the entire city of Chicago, but somehow I felt like that was less coverage than we do in the healthcare industry. There was 32 reporters. We're working with nine. So, to cover the entire country with more than 6,000 hospitals, tons of systems, lots of other... I mean, I think the most recent number is 800,000 for healthcare organizations in the country. That's a lot of

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things to constantly be looking at and trying to figure out what exactly are the events and the news and the trends that are happening within that industry that are most important to, again, our very targeted audience.

So, the things that we have changed during the pandemic is always making sure that we are on top of the news that really affects the operations and the finances. And what that's meant for us is pivoting a little bit in the way that we structured our newsroom. So, we, in the past, had been really known for doing more in-depth, very long form journalism that was very comprehensive and explained a whole lot, and we really felt the need to be able to pivot to much more urgent, very time-relevant news. And so, in order to do that, we had to create a couple of new channels of distribution. One of the ones that has been most successful during the pandemic has been the addition of a live blog. So, this is a part of our digital presence that allows our reporters and a constantly changing rotation of some of our staff to be able to cover some of the smaller pieces of news that happen throughout the day. Eight o'clock in the morning on the East... Well, actually seven o'clock Eastern to approximately 10 o'clock Central. And so, it's got constant updates. They're much smaller items, but things that have been really resonating with our audience from what we've seen as far as traffic.

So, all throughout the country, journalists have been dealing with much smaller newsrooms as a result of just the landscape that has really decreased ad revenue and meant that resources are much more limited and the people that are covering the news, holding public officials accountable, is happening on a much smaller scale and that's the same with us as well. And so, it's just been important that we make really smart decisions, that we're constantly checking in with each other to make sure that we're covering the right things. Our reporters and our editors are working very, very closely together to make sure that they're choosing the right stories, that they're keeping track of the news that's happening in other outlets and that they're keeping really close tabs on their sources in order to be able to make sure that they know what's going on.

The other thing that's been really sort of challenging and has caused us to think differently about the way that we cover news is that we are very closely tied to the scientific community and the medical community as a result of being in healthcare, and even though we are targeting executives, it's important because of all of these developments are happening during the pandemic that are very important to the way that hospitals, healthcare organizations, vendors, all of our different audiences have to react and identify opportunities within their businesses.

And so, what that's meant is that when a paper comes up, which more increasingly has happened in pre-prints for some of the researchers that are working on different innovations, whether it's therapies or whether it's new technologies to be able to identify who is being the... Who is sort of the super spreaders in the communities, all those things. Those are things that we have to address and report on with a much more skeptical and sort of addressing the news the way that it is, that it's coming to us. So, saying, "This is what we know now. It could change and we will keep you updated on this until we know for sure that there is something that's verifiable, confirmed and can be used within your organizations."

And that's something that's really kind of different for us because we have, in the past, tended to really cover just the scientific papers that are more peer-reviewed, that have already been vetted. So, in that effort to make sure that we are not part of the fake news chatter, we have to be really, really careful about the decisions that we make as far as what we're covering and who we're covering.

Chip Kahn ([11:06](#)):

In this period of crisis, Aurora, are there any experiences from your long career that's helped you in your leadership as an editor?

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Aurora Aguilar ([11:17](#)):

Yeah. So, I sent an email to the staff once we started seeing how the pandemic was affecting the country in early March that sort of recalled my time reporting during 9-11. And that was early in my career. It was about three years into reporting and I was police reporter and I just remembered the ways in which the newsroom that I was working at at the time, The Daily Herald, just completely shifted gears and began sort of thinking about including more diversity in the people that were being interviewed and really sort of being much more careful about the language that was being used, so not to be as sensational and really being mindful of the voice and the responsibility that journalists have in times of crisis.

And so, we talked quite a bit about it as a group in our newsroom, and the editors that I work with, that are fantastic, really took that to heart and made sure that we were constantly in check with the reporters for the types of language that we use, the types of headlines that were used. Everything is much more scrutinized during a period like this because you understand that you can either bring fire or shed light, and the best opportunities that journalists have is to be able to shed light and not necessarily just add to noise that's happening.

I think we have done a pretty good job in that. We, as always, as I'm sure is happening in... I know it's happening in newsroom across the country that are dealing with issues with their editorials and the commentaries and stuff. I mean, we've gotten our fair share of letters about being politically leaning, but it's happened on both the right and the left side, so I think that when you as a journalist have dealt with what a country is going through, like September 11th, and at the time I had no idea that this was going to be going on as long as it has been. You really sort of understand the responsibility of journalism, and it's been inspirational to this newsroom. It's brought a lot more collaboration. It's brought a little bit different way of reporting because it's not being able to happen in a face to face situation, so we've also had to be really, really respectful about busy executives that are responsible for their staffs and for the welfare of the patients that they're seeing in their organizations.

And it's also given us opportunities to kind of work around what's been a problem for years now for media, which is that... And this is going way past before the Trump administration, but public information officials have not necessarily been treating their responsibilities to get information to journalists the way that they previously had and I think that that has led to a lot of stonewalling. And this is a lot of the sources that we normally go to in situations like this, like a national crisis. And so, finding sort of workarounds and being able to get sources and understanding what it means to quote an anonymous source and feeling like you have the credibility as an organization to be able to say that, that you've gotten from an anonymous source that can very easily be interpreted by an audience member as fake news are all things that you have to be really careful about, especially in a situation where there's a lot of fear. There's a lot of chaos and there's a lot of things that could be misinterpreted.

So, the experience of 9-11 I think really helped me kind of make sure that all of our journalism was much more careful and hopefully much more insightful, I think. I hope.

Chip Kahn ([15:14](#)):

So, it sounds like combating distractions and misinformation in this era of fake news is really difficult. How do you think all of this has affected your reporters, both personally in terms of, I guess, burnout because of the stress of it all and just making sure they get their jobs right in the kind of environment you're describing?

Aurora Aguilar ([15:39](#)):

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Yeah. It's been rather tough. We've got a very young newsroom and three of them had weddings that were planned during this period, so I'm sure you've seen all the stories about just how disruptive that's been for people that had planned for years for something very special in their lives, a milestone in their lives, and had that disrupted. So, there was a lot of personal strife that was happening during this period early on and I mentioned the restructuring of our newsroom, which has really meant that people have put in a lot of additional extra hours.

So, we cover, as an organization, burnout quite a bit for the industry and we've taken some of those lessons that we learned through reporting to make sure that we are using those same opportunities to check in constantly, to make sure that all of our reporters are getting the resources that they need to be able to speak to professionals about any kind of additional stresses that they might have. We've also... Because we're part of a parent company and we are the only healthcare organization, we've also been tapped often to be sort of the advisors on what the industry and the industry professionals are saying about returning to work and making sure that there's a safe environment for when people start to think about what their new workplaces are going to look like, including our own. And all of that proximity, I think, adds to the stress.

So, hearing that over and over again from your sources and understanding the pressures that the industry, the workers, are going through... Very often interviewing people that are sort of at their breaking point because they have dealt with dozens or maybe to this point even hundreds of deaths when they are used to a much lower fatality rate... I mean, it's taxing and so our reporters have, I think, a newfound mission that they have within themselves, and so it's really exciting to sort of see how this pandemic has brought new life and new sort of responsibility to these people.

I'm very, very proud to say that our reporters make a difference. We have been recognized for helping drive change on a policy level, both in Congress and then also at the agency level, and so they understand that their work matters and that their work is speaking directly to the people that have the most influence over patient care in the country, and so they take that job really seriously and in a global pandemic like this with as much of the troubles that we've seen that have affected patients, they really want to be able to be that conduit between the consumer and the leadership because even though we're not necessarily consumer-facing, we understand, again, that the busiest executive is going to want the news relayed to them in a manner that matters most to them in a very quick fashion, and that might mean bypassing some of the consumer-facing mainstream media and coming to us instead.

And so, we still need to be able to get that message across of what's happening on the patient level and at the workforce level, and I feel like we do that in a really good way with a brand new mission from our reporters that's really just very dedicated and passionate. So, I'm very proud of them.

Chip Kahn ([19:09](#)):

Particularly thinking in terms of your audience and the kind of mission and sense that you described with your reporters, one of the things that COVID-19 has exposed is the unfortunate long-running inequalities in healthcare and our industry. How is the magazine covering healthcare inequity today and what's your purpose in that coverage?

Aurora Aguilar ([19:35](#)):

Thank you for that because that's actually something that we have felt for some time has been very important. So, we have tried to bring it up in as delicate of a manner as possible because we understand that it's... Up until now, it had been a little bit far removed. I mean, you think about sort of the adoption of population health and strategies within healthcare systems and that it's really ramped up in recent

years, but it's something that's been ongoing for decades. And so, we understood that there were issues that might be very broad and very difficult for the average healthcare system to take on, and so we sort of stepped into this in small ways throughout the time that I've been editor and as a result of the inequities that the pandemic has revealed and also because of the Black Lives Matters movement, it's really sort of expanded.

So, we've fully embraced that role that we had in a small way and I feel like we've had some really important conversations that are... And hopefully we're facilitating conversations that drive change. We are going back to a lot of the organizations that we are reporting on to make sure that we're checking in for results and we are also making sure that this doesn't become old news, because it's very easy in a newsroom, especially for a smaller newsroom with not a lot of resources, to turn their back on something like this because it's already been reported on. But it's up to us and it has been our challenge and it has been one that we have taken on very seriously to make sure that we continue to find new angles and new stories to be able to report that, again, are really relevant to our executive audience so that they are able to understand what's happening in the communities that they serve.

Chip Kahn ([21:28](#)):

So, Aurora, based on your reporting, this work that we've just been discussing, how do you see 2020 from COVID to increasing awareness on social determinants of health to the presidential election? How do you see it changing the healthcare system sort of moving forward, looking maybe beyond the year that seems like it'll never end?

Aurora Aguilar ([21:51](#)):

I think one of your previous guests sort of said it best. Even looking back at September 11th, we went through all of the airline changes and the TSA changes and things that we might not necessarily have seen on a day to day basis affect us so profoundly and so personally. But we're going on six months of most of us being completely changed in the way that we live. So, if things don't change now, I mean, what... I don't understand where we would be able to say in the next time that we, unfortunately, probably will very likely deal with another crisis like this, that we haven't learned enough to be able to change the way that we do some things.

And so, John Barry pretty much said that it was going to take some rebuilding for us to get to a point past where we have been, but that it was very important that we do so. And so, for us as society, I can see that... There's very obvious, this movement that is demanding that things change as far as equity and as far as a lot of the things that previously healthcare organizations might not have had to deal with. But we've also seen a huge change in businesses. So, this industry that for years has been going through a transformation very slowly and at different paces depending on where you were and how progressive you were and what market you were in and what payment incentives you might have had... We saw the industry have to change itself in order to be able to remain viable.

So, I think the biggest lesson that we have from 2020 is that you... You have to change yourself or others are going to change you, right? So, innovation has been a key phrase and a tagline for years, but it wasn't until the people that needed to find new ways to live, to serve their customers and to be able to go on with their daily lives, actually made these changes. And so, I almost feel like I... I find a lot of optimism and a lot of forward thinking happening from the people that we've been talking to in the industry and it's very exciting and it's really... It's encouraging because I feel like there's a lot of discussion about accountability, there's a lot of discussion about cooperation, collaboration, lack of competitiveness in order to be able to really help the community better. And I think what that in the

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end will mean is that there's a lot more empathy and that the industry is just more agile and I think the rest of us have to follow along with that.

Chip Kahn (24:35):

Sort of to close out our time together, and along the lines of what you just described, how do you see the long-lasting changes here in terms of Modern Healthcare itself and reporting?

Aurora Aguilar (24:47):

Sadly, this summer I saw a study that is done on an annual basis, but this year had some pretty sad findings, which is the... It's the Gallup Knight Poll that's done annually and it showed that Americans perceived inaccurate news to be intentional, either because the reporter is misrepresenting the facts or making them up entirely. Fifty-four percent of the respondents said that the reporter would be misrepresenting the facts and 28 percent said that they would be making them up entirely. So, it's... As a lifelong journalist, it's really sad to see that kind of perception of a profession that I love and live by.

And so, we've got a lot of trust and credibility, I think, to be rebuilding as an industry for journalism. And you're speaking specifically about journalism, right? In your question?

Chip Kahn (25:42):

Yeah. Yes, and [inaudible 00:25:43] Modern Healthcare specifically. But, yes, the field broadly.

Aurora Aguilar (25:46):

Modern [inaudible 00:25:47]. So, I mean, yeah. The field more broadly, I think that there's just a lot of reaching out to our audience and making sure that they're feeling heard and I think, honestly, there's sort of a... It's a tipping point where people have to... People that run news organizations and perhaps not as closely tied to the industry like we are, but some of the mainstream organizations have to really rethink whether or not they're going to continue to be perceived as being balanced, because from what everything that we've seen from the audiences in America that are consuming news right now, it does seem as if people are kind of going after whatever it is that they prefer to hear about.

So, whatever... Whether you're right, whether you're left, whether you're in the middle, whether you're completely unaffiliated, that's where you're going to... The organizations that more closely tie to your viewpoints are the ones that you're going to go to to consume over and over and over again. And so, on a mainstream media level, I would expect that more organizations would be willing to embrace what their political leanings are from their founders. For us, that is not necessarily as much of a concern because I think that given that target audience that we have and our responsibility to just present facts, I think we would still be able to maintain somewhat of a bipartisan viewpoint on most things, and so I don't foresee that really changing in the way that we report on the news.

What I do see in our future is opportunities to really kind of rethink where our resources are placed and what kind of material it is that resonates most closely. So, we use analytics quite a bit in our newsroom. We're constantly checking how people are consuming us online. We've got less opportunities to be able to do that in the print form because, as you know... I'm sure you've heard this, that people collect [inaudible 00:27:50] magazines and read them on the plane and that kind of thing. So, we're not sort of seeing as much of an immediate reaction to our stories, but digitally, we're able to see that quite a bit and so I think we're tweaking, we're constantly looking, we're constantly assessing to make sure that everything that we spend our time and our money on is making an impact and bringing in loyalty and dedication from our readers.

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And so, I would encourage... I know your audience is a great part of who it is that we're targeting and so, my door is always open, my email is always available and I'm always willing to listen to people that have especially constructive criticism about how we can do our jobs better. And I think that this pandemic, if it's shown us anything, is that we're all in this together and all we want as journalists at Modern Healthcare is to be able to serve this audience really well, and sometimes we need a little bit of feedback on how to do that. So, you've been in the room with me, Chip, when I've asked, "What can we do better?" And that's always what I'm asking and I would very much encourage that, both in the way that we've covered the COVID pandemic and then also just the way that we are best serving our audience to be able to do their jobs better.

Chip Kahn ([29:07](#)):

Aurora, I've always really appreciated Modern Healthcare's openness and the dialogue that I've had with you and your predecessors in leadership there. This has just been a great conversation this afternoon. I hope our audience appreciates it. The news is changing every day, but the one constant is the important role that Modern Healthcare and other outlets like yours play, and I just want to say thank you.

Aurora Aguilar ([29:38](#)):

Thank you so much for all you do, too.

Speaker 1 ([29:45](#)):

Thanks for listening to Hospitals in Focus from the Federation of American Hospitals. Learn more at [fah.org](http://fah.org). Follow the Federation on social media at [FAHHospitals](#) and follow Chip at [Chip Kahn](#). Please rate, review and subscribe to Hospitals in Focus. Join us next time for more in-depth conversations with healthcare leaders.