Module 2 Video Class 3: Interview with Kai Kupferschmidt

Hi. Welcome back to the latest set of video segments for this course, Journalism in a pandemic: Covering COVID-19 now and in the future. This segment is with Kai Kupferschmidt, who is contributing correspondent for the journal Science based in Berlin. Thanks for coming to this course, Kai.

It's a pleasure Maryn.

I'm really curious to know. What's the earliest story you wrote about this pandemic? And is there a point where you realized this would be your only story for a while?

You know, it's always hard in retrospect to really pin it down, but I wrote the first story about this on the 9th of January together with two colleagues at Science magazine, and that was the day that basically the Chinese had announced that it was a novel coronavirus. The sequence wasn't yet out. It was just about to come out.

And at that point, you know, we still had this discussion about is this human to human transmission? So basically at the time, it was said that there was no evidence of human to human transmission.

But already the scientists I was talking to were quite skeptical. And I guess it took a little bit. I mean, it took a little bit. I was actually on holiday. That's the other thing. I was in Brazil at the time. And I remember thinking like, OK, this could go either way. And, and kind of hoping it would go away quietly. And of course, it didn't.

And when I look back now, I think really like the big change for me happened kind of like end of January and then towards February, like slowly, just a lot of evidence came up that this was, you know, spreading really well, human to human. You had the first cases outside of China.

And I think I think I wrote a thread about this at the time on Twitter. But like towards the middle of February 21st or 22nd, I think when Iran announced they had a number of deaths. I think that several things came together. And that's when I really realized also it was just detecting the shift in the people I was talking to. So the scientists were just, you know, clearly kind of shifting gears and saying, OK, this you know, this is a pandemic. I wrote a story a little bit before that where we kind of we're looking at will China be able to contain this virus or is it going to become a pandemic? And already at that point, at the beginning of February, I think end of January, it was kind of clear that most scientists were already skeptical that it could be contained.

So you have been in this, as a result, really from the start. The very first, I think notice to the world outside of China was very, very late on the day before New Year's Eve when the list pro-med ran a note saying hearing a couple of things here, something from a health department within China. So so looking back over that entire four months, are there particular stories you've done or particular events or trends that really stand out to you?

Well, I think, so, you know, when you look back, sometimes it looks a little bit like everything was, you know, was so clear from the start. Of course it wasn't. And one moment in particular that I remember so fairly early on, there was a joint mission from the WHO with scientists from around the world who went to China. And actually, I remember I was I was going to Brazil that day and I landed at the airport in Sao Paulo. And I got the email from the WHO that the report was out.

And I started reading it in the car on the way to Sao Paulo. And that really like in retrospect, that was a big moment, that report, because it really at that time, everybody was unclear what exactly was happening in China. And that report really said, OK, china has managed to control this and here's how they did it. And that kind of set the course for the next few months. You know, for everything that we're seeing now in terms of, you know, shutdowns, lockdowns, social distancing, whatever you want to call it, that that was not preordained. I mean, I spoke to several of the authors of that report and they all told me when they went to China, they thought, no way is China controlling a respiratory disease by, you know, locking down society. That just, you know, it doesn't work. And when they were there, they realized it had worked.

So that whole thing, which has become kind of almost the the main story of this particular pandemic. Right. That that really originated to my mind with that report. And it was interesting, because when the report came out, I was talking to my editor and my colleagues and I was saying this report is going to be, you know, the big news story for the next week. This is going to inform all the debates. And it didn't really. It kind of trickled into the debates more than it, you know, not that many people covered it. I mean, Bruce Aylward, who headed the joint commission, later gave a lot of interviews and those kind of slowly. There was an interview in The New York Times. There was one with VOX. Then those slowly kind of, you know, changed people's perceptions, I think. But but certainly that was a key moment for me and how this pandemic evolved.

And then, of course, there's there's other ones. Right. I mean, if you look at the U.S., I think the whole story about the cases in Seattle, when it became apparent that there were a few cases, that well the first two cases when we had the genomes, they looked like they were linked, even though they weren't, you know, even though they were separated by a month. I think in time. And then it kind of became clear that, OK, there's already spread going on in the US. That changed for me, that changed the whole debate about what was going on in the US, and that's I think you can identify several of those moments. And, you know, we might be living through some of those moments right now. It's kind of hard sometimes when you're in the middle of it to know that.

It's really fascinating to me the degree to which just in these four months things that we thought we knew have been so completely overturned. And from my perspective, it's one of the hardest things about being a journalist in this epidemic is having to say to people, this is what the scientists think now and then having to explain not very long afterward. Oh, well, but there's new evidence that the that the evidence is changing. It's hard for journalists to keep up with. I think it's hard for the audience to.

But I think that the speed of it is just astonishing. Right. I mean, both both for us, the science shows. I mean, I'm used to sometimes writing a story that says, listen, what we thought two years ago about this virus, you know, it turns out it isn't right. But now you're writing that story after a week because.

Exactly what we said a week ago. Yes. So. So to move us from the timescale of a couple of weeks or a couple of months to a couple of years, you also covered the 2014 Ebola pandemic. And I'm really curious from this from the vantage point of now that. What do you think about that pandemic? And can you compare or contrast the emerging? Are there any lessons you learned in covering that, that inform what you're doing now?

So, I mean, I think that particular experience. Ebola in Liberia, for me was was one of the most kind of life changing always sounds so, you know, over the top. But but it changed how I think about a lot of things. And it still affects me a lot. And when I talk about it.

So, I mean, the first thing for me was, so I have a science background. Right. And I kind of come at things looking kind of at the virus at the molecular level. That's that's just in terms of the frame, framework that I have in my mind. So I remember very vividly when when the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was spiraling out of control. And I was talking to all these scientists and, you know, I was thinking, so is there a mutation? Has the virus changed? You know, what's going on? You know, it's fascinating. And it really took a while for me to realize that the virus hadn't changed. You know, society had changed or it was affecting a society that was working differently from the societies it had affected before. You know, this was a highly mobile society. You know, lots of interactions, very distrustful of the government because of its experience with civil wars. You know, two consecutive civil wars.

And and not just for me, but for a lot of scientists that I talked to at the time, it was really kind of an experience that that kind of ingrained this idea that we all know that infectious disease is something that happens when a pathogen and a society kind of, you know, meet. It's what happened that happens at the interface. But but this really drove home to me, you know, how much of a difference it makes. And over the years, this has been you know, I've kind of seen this again and again now, and it's really changed how I look at infectious diseases. So that was one of the first things. And of course, with the pandemic now what we're seeing is we're seeing it play

out. You know, the same virus basically could play out in lots of different places, lots of different societies, people dealing differently with it. And so that framework really, really helps inform me in looking at what is happening in different places in the world at the moment. I think that's that's one thing. The other thing and I wrote this fairly on it fairly early on in the pandemic on Twitter, I think is one of the ironies of a pandemic is that once the virus is everywhere. So in the beginning, everybody was looking at China. The idea was to contain the virus in China. You how do you do that? Will it be possible? And then it spread to other places. So you looked at can it be contained in those places? Of course, once the virus is everywhere, you know, once it goes global, the story becomes much more local. Because then it's really not about, you know, closing borders or keeping the virus from going somewhere. It's really about how your community kind of responds to it. And that's something that, again, I saw in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak that, you know, also because there wasn't a very strong government and there was this much distrust in the end, what kind of defeated the virus was. Local communities, you know, adopting certain measures, like realizing that this was real.

And that's maybe the third thing. Maybe the last thing that I really take from this is I came back to to Europe during the Ebola outbreak. And, you know, a lot of what people were telling me was kind of this almost, you know, annoyance at at people in West Africa saying, you know. Jesus, can they change their behavior? You know what's wrong with them? You know, there's all this all this talk of this virus isn't real and so on. You know, and and. People didn't realize how hard it was to change behavior. And you know, how easily misinformation spreads and all of these things. And now it's kind of ironic to me. You know, one of the big debating points in Ebola in Liberia was the funeral practices because these funerals really were spreading the virus. And people were telling me, like, you know, why can't they, you know, have different funerals? Why can't they just, you know, have crematoria? And, you know, why do they have to have these big funerals where they kiss goodbye to the loved ones, which is, you know, a very longstanding kind of practice there. And it's a custom. It's a tradition that's very important to people. And then, you know, a few years later, we're in Germany and the government is basically saying, you know, you shouldn't go out drinking with your buddies for a while because of this virus. And people find it hard to even, you know, not do that. So that's really kind of holds up a mirror. I think also to the kind of preconceptions that we bring into it when we when we as journalists also report on infectious diseases in some places.

So is that. That's perfect, because that's exactly what I wanted to ask you next, because you said and it's such an evocative phrase that disease is what happens when a pathogen meets a society. And here we have across the globe examples of societies responding to the novel coronavirus so differently. You live in Berlin. Germany has done an amazing job of controlling the curve of this epidemic. I'm in the United States. Our response has been a little different. And not just different, but shocking, I think, to a lot of people, including me, who expected the U.S. would provide more leadership, the CDC would be more prominent, and all of that is absent. So, from the position of someone living in Germany with Steinmeier and Merkel who have been such leaders. Do you have any thoughts about the ways that that Western industrialized societies are responding to this?

Yeah, I mean, for me, you know, I grew up partly in London. So I also often kind of look at the UK situation and I'm fairly keyed into into the politics there. And then, of course, because I work for science, you know, I do follow the US situation a lot. And certainly those two countries have been, you know, disappointing to see. I mean, it's I mean, just in terms of the scientific knowledge that's there, the kind of I mean, a lot of what we know about corona viruses, a lot of what we know about modeling and epidemiology, you know, that the people who've done that work are concentrated in those two countries. A lot of them. So you have some of the best minds in the world living in two countries that really haven't done well.

And I think, like, you know, I'm not an expert on on the exact politics of populism. But but certainly something that I've taken away from years of reporting is that, you know, trust is so important, like trust the government especially, you know, don't forget, we have a virus that we don't have a vaccine for. We don't have medicine for. All we have are what the scientists called non-pharmaceutical interventions NPI's and those NPI's rely on, you know, someone telling the population to change their behavior and the population, you know, trusting that advice, adhering to it, because they think that it's, you know, that the people who are giving that advice know what they're doing. So I think the way partly the way that also the role the media has played, both in

the US and the UK at times, the way that populism has kind of thrived on on this idea that you can't really trust those in power. And those things have really eroded. You know, that this is this basic thing that you need in public health, which is trust. That's a reservoir, you know. And when that's gone, you if you don't have pharmaceutical interventions, you don't have a lot to go on. So that's been you know, that's been really sad to see. And then and then on top of that, of course, you have this kind of distrust of elites. I mean, it's kind of interesting that, you know, we're getting into this pandemic at a time when, you know, a lot of people have argued that, you know, like you shouldn't trust experts.

You know, there's all of these quotes from from the Brexit debate in the UK about, you know, the public has had enough of experts and so on. And then and now that I think those chickens are coming home to roost to a certain extent, it's it's just very hard to for experts to kind of get through with their advice, even to the politicians. And that's been a huge problem, I think. So in Germany, of course, we are in a very particular situation. We have a former scientists as as chancellor. She's done a very good job, I think of. I mean, she just understands how science basically works. I think, for instance, she can deal with the fact that, like we said earlier, you know, that the scientific situation, the assessment of what the virus is doing and how it's acting can change from one week to the next based on new research. And it's very easy if you're a populist to kind of, you know, use that as a foil and kind of say, see that saying one thing one day and another thing the other day. But if you're you know, if you're communicating responsibly, you know, you can you can make the population understand that. And you can you can still have people, you know, follow the best current advice. I mean, that's all we have. I mean, we've only known this virus for a few months.

Or a century, it feels like a century industrial.

So I want to I want to follow up on this question as communicating, because the thing that struck me when I was getting ready for us to talk is how much work you're doing. I mean, not only are you writing stories for science regularly, but you you are very active on Twitter and often you even live tweet the WHO press conferences. And that is a lot of work on several different channels. But I'm curious. So I'm curious if you could talk about how you balance that and also what role Twitter is playing in your journalism.

Oh, yeah. Let me start with with that, maybe because Twitter is really interesting for me that that I didn't really use Twitter until a few years ago and I was on a reporting trip and a colleague kind of suggested to me and she she really liked Twitter and she explained to me how she was using it. And I was super skeptical, but I started using it. And over the years, it's just grown in importance. There's just a lot of scientists on there.

Like it's it's, you know, in the beginning, you know, maybe there were one or two stories a year that I kind of where I saw someone tweet some new research and that got me interested in the story came out of that. In this pandemic, Twitter has really become, you know, the platform, I think where we're scientists to a certain extent. Also, policymakers and journalists are interacting because we have so much research now that's being published as a pre-print.

So also than the normal, you know, I mean, a lot of science really still work with, you know, you get an email from Science or Nature or a different journal telling you what's going to be published next week. With the pre-prints you don't have that. So how do you even realize that there's a new preprint online that's interesting? For me very often that's because the author, you know, is tweeting, hey, we have a we have our new paper up and then other people will already chime in and either, you know, take it apart or say what they find interesting about it. So you're already getting a kind of live peer review a little bit while it's happening. And that already like it both points your attention to stuff that might be interesting and already gives you a few interesting points that you need to look at in the paper and people you might you might ask to comment on it. So that's been incredibly helpful.

So I spent too much time on Twitter, I think, at this point. But but but it was in this spirit that I was just spending a lot of time on it and I felt like I should also contribute in a way. And and then, of course, we have this situation where there's so much bad information out there. So I felt if I'm going to listen to the WHO press conferences anyway and I kind of have to write it down, I might

as well try to make, you know, to do it in like little bite sizes that worked for me. I mean, it's almost my own record. Like sometimes I go back in my in my Twitter history to find certain things because I remember someone said it at one of the press conferences. So I used that for myself. And at the same time, I just kind of put it out there as this is a source, you know, I mean, there's stuff you can debate about the WHO, but this is a trusted source and what they say is important.

So so that's kind of how it started. And then yeah. And then it does take a lot of time. But I mean, at the moment, since since COVID-19 is everything that I'm doing, it kind of works for me. I mean, it's basically my reporting. I have to listen to these press conferences anyway. So I do I do this these Twitter threads at the same time. And then when I've done the reporting for a story and the story appears, it's what's a very good way to, you know, again, kind of post your story, but then also give some background information and sometimes just give a little. It's just also like, you know, going away a little bit from this kind of idea of, you know, the journalists. It's also just a nice way of communicating. It's just different, the stuff that I can do in a thread on Twitter. In terms of commenting a little bit, but also in terms of just using certain, you know, comparisons or just telling a story in a slightly different way, it's just a really interesting medium to use. So in the beginning, when I had a little bit more time, like I really liked having a finished story that was appearing online and then writing a nice Twitter thread with it, then that might get people, you know, people who might not even read the whole story, but they would be able to have that thread at least. So I would when I teach journalism, I encourage everyone to the science forums to really, really, you know, get on Twitter and try to to understand a little bit how they can make it useful for themselves.

I mean, might not work for everyone, but certainly for me, it's been hugely helpful resource.

I think that's great advice on the idea of using it as online note-taking taking for yourself that you're simultaneously sharing with other people as a gift as it's a really great way of framing that. So last question, as you just said, you know, COVID-19 is the story and we don't know how long it's going to be the story for all of us, for yourself. What do you what do you think the next stories are the most important stories from this point forward? We're kind of moving from the end of the big. So at the end of the beginning of the emergency into kind of the new normal of living with this for an undefined period of time, what do you think you'll be covering or what are you watching for?

So I think there's several ways of answering that. Right. I mean, something that I'm sure you've also seen in your work always is once a story is big enough and I mean, doesn't get much bigger than COVID-19.

You know, you have all of these other angles and other journalists jumping in to cover part of it. So obviously, you know, we will be talking a lot about, you know, the economic fallout in the future and the geopolitics of this. I think, you know, certainly what we've seen with the US government that, you know, isn't able or willing to to protect its own citizens from something like this. You know, you have to kind of wonder what that means in terms of the understanding of the world. And so there's a lot of people who are, you know, have a better background than me in thinking about this. And I'm really curious to to read their thoughts on some of these things. And for me as a science journalist, I think it's going to the story in some ways is going to narrow a little bit in the sense that I think that the actual science is going to become, people are going to become less interested maybe in sometimes in parts of the science.

But of course, a lot of the really fascinating work only starts now. So there'll be, you know, look back. I mean, we're going to we're still talking about the origin of this. That's going to be really important. And we have to look at, you know, what have we learned from all of these measures that were adopted like kind of haphazardly because nobody had any better ideas, like which ones were an overreaction? What worked? In what context? I think there's also still a big question about some of the countries that seem to have done quite well without sometimes a good explanation for why.

So I think we'll have to wait a few weeks to see whether the virus will end up spreading in those places as well, or whether, you know, there are factors that we don't quite understand yet that that that help us. Seasonality will be a huge issue. You know, will it go down? And then, of course,

we will be reading a lot about the whole idea of is there going to be a second wave? What kind of you know, what what shape would it look like? How should we prepare for that?

And then, of course. So so there's the look back in some ways, and then there's the look to the future. And then there's all of these new stories that are going to come up that we can't really predict. Right. There's all of these drug trials going on. You know, some of that might work, some of that, you know, that that would be a big story. We don't know whether the vaccines I mean, there's so many vaccine candidates in the race now. You know? There might be problems with the vaccine. I think one of the big topics, if it works, will be equitable distribution, both of medicine and vaccines. I mean, you know, especially in this kind of global atmosphere where there's a lot of nationalism, that's that's a big worry for me. How do we make sure that if we have something that it gets distributed equitably across the globe? So so these kinds of debates are for sure going to go on. And then there's other things like, you know, the virus might mutate. We just don't know. We might find out that it has certain long term effects. I mean, we know that for a lot of viruses. Right.

That's that's a super interesting story to me, but one that will only be able to answer when we once we've actually had people who've had the virus, you know, a year ago or two years ago.

So so things like that. I think one of the things that fascinates me about science, the reason I'm a science journalist, is that you you can't really say usually what story you're going to be working on in a year. I mean, there's a lot of other areas of journalism where basically the debates are, you know. Kind of similar all the time, like I feel like most of the stuff I write about today didn't exist five years ago or ten years ago, you know, and so things might come up. Things might happen that that we just haven't got on our radar right now. So that's the other thing. It kind of teaches you as a science journalist to always keep an open mind because you you can't really exclude a lot. You kind of have to see what comes up and what is interesting.

And then I think the other big thread is going to be misinformation. I think maybe, you know, a lot of us science journalists, when we have a little bit more time to kind of focus on the meta topics, that that's one, you know, we really need to look at. Like the way that science communication has changed in this pandemic, how some people have exploited that and how that will change science going forward. I I honestly think that science not just, you know, virology or outbreak science. I think science as a whole is going to look different after this pandemic. And that's that's a huge story for science journalist.

So I'm really struck by you're saying that as science journalists, we often don't know what the next thing is that we're going to be covering. And one of the strangest things about this new normal is that we know we're going to be writing about COVID-19 for the foreseeable future for all of us, whatever it was we did beforehand. This is our beat. So thank you. Thank you for those comments. And thank you so much for joining our course.

Thanks for having me, Maryn.