

Catalyst or Destabiliser?

COVID-19 and Its Impact
on the Media Landscape Worldwide

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At a Glance

- › This publication aims to disentangle the implications that the coronavirus has had on media around the world. The overarching question is whether the pandemic presents a turning point for the media landscape, or rather, if it reinforces pre-existing trends. Recent developments are assessed along four parameters: quality of media coverage, the economic situation of media outlets, digitization, and freedom of the media. These are presented in eleven different case studies.
- › In terms of quality of media coverage, there are various outcomes: In Asia, for example, small and independent outlets, able to provide reliable information, gained momentum, whereas citizens in the MENA-region turned to social media in search of trustworthy facts on the coronavirus. In South-Eastern Europe, pseudo-journalism and fake news spread mainly via the Internet, while in sub-Saharan Africa innovative formats emerged, which also enhanced the quality of reporting. In many regions and countries, not least in Germany, demand for fact-based, reliable reporting increased, offering an opportunity for quality-oriented media to regain audiences' trust.
- › The economic situation is difficult for almost all media outlets worldwide, although there are some differences. In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, pro-government media continued to benefit from state-sponsored advertising, while other media suffered even more acute drops in revenue. In many regions, media outlets expanded their online presence to partly compensate these losses by introducing additional paywalls, as was the case in the US, for example. In Latin America, many news outlets had to reduce their staff shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19 due to a shortfall in revenues. Small, independent outlets in Asia and Central Eastern Europe could raise their income through an increase in memberships or subscriptions. In Central Eastern Europe, especially younger generations acknowledged that



quality journalism requires financing, while in Southeast Europe, it is still uncommon to pay for online media consumption, which is a setback for independent online journalism.

- › In Asia and Central Europe, digital media outlets gained momentum and were accessed far more widely than prior to the pandemic. In Germany, there was also a rise in the use of media outlets' online platforms with paywalls, which remained stable even after the first wave of the coronavirus had subsided. In the US, some newspapers started to offer their customers alternative, digital products along with free access to the necessary electronic equipment. Southern Europe also saw an increase in the use of online products. The pandemic has increased the demand for reliable reporting, and, as a result, the number of digital subscriptions has skyrocketed. In Latin America, digitization of the media, although on the rise, still lags behind compared to other regions, mainly because Internet access is not as common in the region. In general, experts from nearly all the regions covered agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitization of the media landscape, bringing it to a point of no return.
- › In terms of press freedom, particularly Asia, and most surprisingly China, experienced a short period in which the media were able to cover the emerging health crisis relatively freely. This led to an improvement of the quality of reporting, which, nevertheless and at least in the case of China, was not to last. In the MENA-region, no significant changes could be observed regarding freedom of the press. In most of the region's countries, freedom of the media is just as absent now as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. In various regions, governments, usually those which had already displayed authoritarian tendencies before the pandemic, resorted to direct or indirect censorship measures, in some cases only poorly disguised as public health measures. This phenomenon could be observed, among others, in sub-Saharan Africa (e. g. in Tanzania) or Latin America, where journalists have been arbitrarily detained in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

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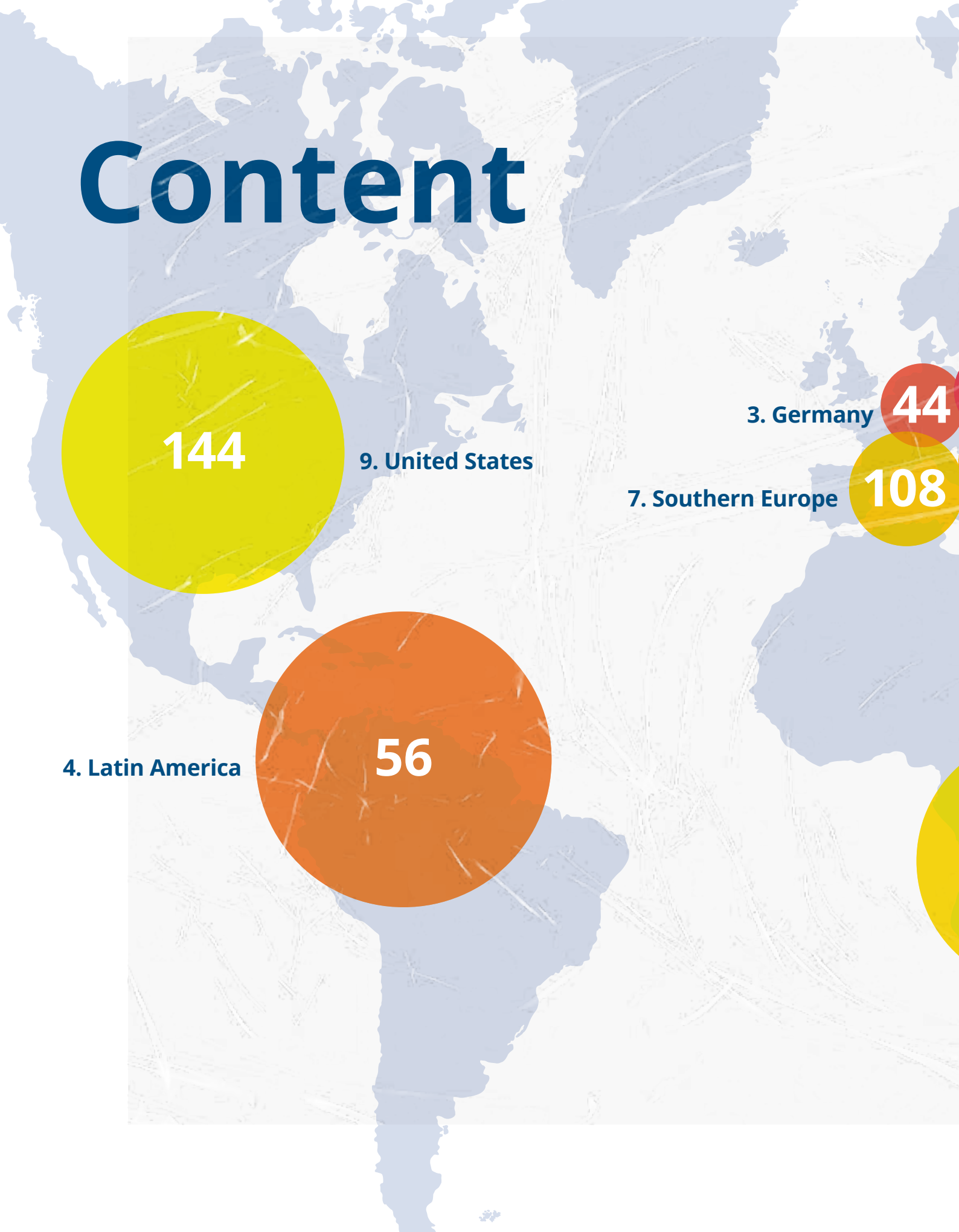
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By Sören Soika

Introduction

“COVID-19 and the Media”: As with so many “COVID-19 and ...” topics, this is a correlation that works both ways. It is obvious that the quality of the media coverage that people consume during the pandemic can have an influence on how they behave and thus accelerate or slow down the spread of the virus. At the same time, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the conditions under which media outlets and journalists work in many ways. The plastic covers over reporters’ microphones, which have become commonplace, are only the most superficial expression of this. This publication aims to investigate the diverse consequences the virus has on the media landscape in different regions of the world.

“COVID-19 and ...” topics often evoke negative associations. This is understandable given the economic, social and – most importantly – human damage caused by the virus. And, needless to say, the pandemic has also posed enormous challenges for the media and journalists worldwide. It has cost many their jobs, some even more. Nevertheless, this publication would explicitly like to highlight the opportunities the pandemic could have for this industry. When if not now – many of our authors ask – would be the time to convince people of the value (including the monetary value) of facts-based, independent journalism?

The eleven regional or country-specific contributions we have compiled, are deliberately as diverse in style as the situation in these countries and regions. For example, while for some countries the pandemic has been *the* crisis of recent years, if not decades, for many people in the Arab world, the pandemic is just one event in a series of already existing problems and hardships, Reem Maghribi explains. The fact that reporting during the pandemic has once again shifted increasingly to the digital realm – in particular to social networks – is not necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary: Apart from the rather dubious information people found there, they also unearthed exactly those well-founded and critical reports they were unable to find in public media – which in this region often equals state media. Karolina Zbytniewska observes something similar in her contribution on (Central) Eastern Europe, particularly regarding countries like Russia and Belarus: in countries where there is practically no freedom of the press, the Internet was the last bastion – even in times of the coronavirus – where citizens could obtain independent information about the pandemic.

It goes without saying that governments around the world have also used the virus for censorship and bullying purposes in the guise of alleged protection against the pandemic. Generally the “usual suspects” were at work. Nicolás Guzmán, for example, in his overview of developments in Latin America, describes how what would be considered independent reporting on the course of the pandemic elsewhere is framed as an “incitement to hatred” in Venezuela, leading to the imprisonment of journalists.

In times of COVID-19, independent, reliable information has been and still is in greater demand than ever before. In Germany, it was traditional media, not least public broadcasting, for whom this new awareness has brought a real chance for a turnaround after years of discussion about a credibility crisis, Daphne Wolter explains in her contribution.

The authors agree that COVID-19 represents a boost in digitization for the media landscape that will outlast the pandemic. In his text on Southern Europe, Nikos S. Panagiotou emphasises that the question of new, digital media, on the one hand, and traditional media on the other, is not necessarily an 'either/or' proposition, but rather can be answered with 'both ... and'. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, people resorted to very different sources and media at the same time, depending on their specific information needs.

In economic terms, COVID-19 initially meant a massive slump in advertising revenues for many media outlets. In some cases, massive restrictions on economic activity forced many outlets to drastically reduce their advertising budgets. Mila Serafimova describes how some newspapers in Southeast Europe faced a dilemma: if they wanted to paint a realistic picture of the very serious situation, they would evoke restrictions that might cause lasting damage to their own advertising business.

Falling advertising revenues, economic imbalances and, as a result, "ghost newspapers" and "news deserts", which one can find from the Mexican border all the way to Canada. According to Sabine Murphy, this has been a reality in the USA not only since COVID-19, but at least since the turn of the millennium. Nevertheless, the pandemic also offers opportunities for new digital models due to the increased demand for quality journalism: a local newspaper in Arkansas, for example, offers readers the necessary devices free of charge. With a view to the media landscape in Asia, Shen Lu uses three examples to show how independence, integrity and creativity translate into – at times spectacular – increases in reader, subscriber and member numbers.

So does COVID-19 simply separate the wheat from the chaff, just as Christoph Plate thinks it might? Together with Asha Mwilu and Joel Konopo he takes a look at the situation in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the contributions as a whole give the impression that with regard to the global media landscape, the pandemic is both a destabiliser upsetting the traditional, as well as a catalyst accelerating necessary renewal processes that had already been underway. We do not know when exactly this pandemic will be over. But if a post-COVID-19 media landscape is indeed – to put it in the words of Mila Serafimova – determined by those actors who are not afraid of change and who are brave and creative enough to survive with the help of the truth, then – for all other misfortunes – this crisis would at least have *one* positive side effect.



1. Asia



By Shen Lu

When the Pandemic Hits, Subscription to Independent Asian Media Surges

Throughout January and February 2020, when the often deadly COVID-19 virus was spreading across Wuhan, I was glued to Chinese-language media and social media. I was riveted by brave reporting out of Wuhan by journalists working at commercial and independent media: They uncovered the government's delayed response to the then epidemic and the inability of the local Red Cross chapter to distribute donated products. After epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan confirmed human-to-human transmission on January 20th, 2020 and before pervasive censorship began in early February, there was a brief period of relative press freedom in China.

During that window, I, a fellow Chinese journalist based in the United States, marveled at the depth and breadth of the coverage of my colleagues in China. Hard-hitting investigations revealed the extent of the crisis, and human-interest stories captured the range of emotions.

Pervasive media censorship eventually kicked in, thwarting commercial media's COVID-19 coverage.

Almost all media in China are state-owned. Commercial media, such as *Caixin*, *Sanlian* and *Renwu*, are less controlled than state media but still monitored closely. The early days of commercial media's crucial coverage allowed not just Chinese people, but the world to understand the extent of the crisis wreaking havoc in China. It was one of those times when I would turn to the Chinese-language media, instead of the international press, for information about the crisis in China.

Many reporters flocked to Wuhan – the city with 11 million residents – before it went into lockdown in late January 2020, setting up makeshift news operations in hotels. Sharing protective suits and goggles amongst themselves, they ventured into hospital wards, gaining incredible access to patients, healthcare workers and whistleblowers. At the time, readers' calls for subscribing to *Caixin*, a well-respected financial magazine known for its hard-hitting exposés of government wrongdoings, were widespread on social media. One special issue of *Caixin*, which comprised a series of four investigations into the lockdown in Wuhan,¹ the origin of the virus and the plight of patients, was sold out within hours after it hit newsstands.

Pervasive media censorship eventually kicked in, thwarting commercial media's COVID-19 coverage. When their stories started disappearing from the Internet, *Initium*, a Hong Kong-based Chinese-language digital magazine that provides in-depth news and opinions to Chinese-speaking readers across the world, became my go-to source. Wu Jing, its editor-in-chief, told me in September 2020 that the small publication's number of new subscribers spiked in the spring of tragedies and resistance.

A Window Opens up for Independent Media

Wu's revelation and my observation of the Chinese media's coverage of the coronavirus outbreak made me wonder how independent publications in other parts of Asia have fared during the pandemic, whether they have experienced censorship, and if their

subscriptions have increased. The coronavirus crisis that broke out in central China eventually became a global pandemic that is still ongoing at the time of writing. Following my conversation with Wu, I talked to executive editors and managers at two other publications based in South Asia and Southeast Asia – *The Caravan* and *New Naratif* – to find out what their experiences have been during the pandemic. Asia may not have been a paragon of the free press. The Reporters without Borders 2020 Index shows that press freedom in the region has been in steep decline in the past decade and is now potentially in danger in just any country.²

Mainstream media in many countries throughout Asia, controlled by either their authoritarian government or corporations supportive of an establishment agenda, are commonly subject to censorship or self-censorship. But suppression of press freedom has provoked resistance. Leagues of journalists in Asia, who vow to promote freedom of speech, have come together to form independent outlets that strive to tell stories of and engage with the strikingly diverse communities in their countries or regions. These publications are either supported by a niche audience, or operate under a combination of grants and subscriptions. And they place a great deal of importance on investigative and long-form reporting that's becoming increasingly rare in traditional media.

Outlets like *Initium*, *The Caravan* and *New Naratif* started to emerge during the past decade. They are part of a global trend that gives rise to independent media after press freedom came under siege in major democracies and repressive states alike. The credibility they have established over the years enables them to generate higher subscriptions and, therefore, stay afloat during a global public health crisis, in the course of which many media behemoths have been laying off journalists. Combining innovative storytelling methods with rigorous investigative reporting, intrepid local journalists can tell stories of great public importance for their people. The publications themselves, though struggling to survive financially and thriving in spite of various constraints, have established themselves as crucial sources for the international press, whose access to local sources is limited and whose home audiences are faraway.

"The fact that nowadays, the Internet would allow small-size media, especially through crowdfunding or through readers' contributions, to exist, is a very encouraging element for the future of journalism," Cédric Alviani, the East Asia Bureau Head at Reporters Without

COVID-19 has allowed smaller-sized, public-interest publications to shine through.

Borders, told me. “Because for the first time, it’s possible to operate small-size media and put a special focus on ethics, which was really hard to do before, because the media needed a critical size of investment and advertising revenues to survive.”

During the pandemic, information control has intensified across the world. Many states in Asia have sought to muzzle reporters. In China, authorities detained volunteers involved in archiving censored news. In India, harassment of reporters over COVID-19 coverage has reportedly surged. In Malaysia, police investigated a reporter for her reporting on protests. But COVID-19 has also allowed smaller-sized, public-interest publications to shine through. Though operating under a far smaller budget than mainstream media, they have – against all odds – gained ground in providing credible information to their audiences. Through my reporting, I learnt that *Initium* is not an anomaly, and Chinese people were rarely the only readers who were hungry for independent news sources during COVID-19; throughout Asia, small-sized independent publications, including *The Caravan* and *New Naratif*, have seen surges in their subscription base during the pandemic.

***Initium*, Hong Kong**

Wu Jing, *Initium*’s editor, did not take a day off in February and March 2020. Her team of eight reporters at *Initium* and its league of freelancers worked around the clock to cover what then was a coronavirus outbreak in China. They brought readers stories of the trauma of Wuhan residents under lockdown.³ They dug into why personal protective equipment donations from across the world did not arrive in the hands of healthcare workers.⁴ And they tracked what happened to the people who called for free speech following the death of the Chinese whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang.⁵

“Every article we published went viral instantly.”

“Back then, every article we published went viral instantly,” Wu recalled.

Initium’s robust coverage of the crisis drove both its traffic and subscription numbers up by at least 30 per cent in the first three months of 2020, Wu told me.

Based in Hong Kong and free from the reach of censors in China, *Initium* financially relies on readers’ subscriptions and its investors.

Since its launch in 2015, the publication has strived to provide in-depth coverage of politics, culture and society for readers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and the global Chinese diaspora.

Amidst all the despair and grief in the spring of 2020, Wu felt a brief moment of dim hope after Dr. Li passed away. In a rare campaign, the Chinese public overwhelmingly called for freedom of speech and demanded the truth from the government on social media. Academics in China, discontent over the government's handling of the crisis, led hundreds of citizens to sign an online petition calling on the national legislature to protect citizens' right to freedom of speech.

People naturally turned to independent publications for reliable information in times of crises.

"Many of our colleagues did not sleep the night when Li Wenliang passed away; we were monitoring public comments about Li Wenliang's passing," Wu said. "It seemed the power of civil society erupted that night. It seemed that suddenly there was a certain degree of democratic enlightenment."

But the string of hope did not last for long. When the epidemic was under control in China and started to become a global pandemic, *Initium's* subscription growth rate flattened. Wu sensed Chinese people were ready to move on and were trying to forget the collective trauma. Now the reality of a post-epidemic economic slowdown is sinking in.

"I think the subscription growth was temporary," Wu said. "And even if there is a second-wave of an outbreak at the end of the year 2020, readers' interest will not rise again. The economic environment is such that readers' demand for non-essential goods will decrease. I am not very optimistic that subscriptions will keep increasing."

Political polarization in China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan also contributes to Wu's pessimism. In the ever-divisive Greater China, with rising nationalism in China and surging nativism and Sino-phobe sentiments in Hong Kong and Taiwan, *Initium's* pursuit of fair journalism and refusal to take a specific political stance is a particularly inspiring and challenging undertaking. Wu is concerned that the publication's target readers – an educated Chinese-speaking audience who embraces globalism – from across the region and overseas, will have less interest in stories from places that may feel increasingly alienating to them.

"Of course, I hope we will grow as a publication," Wu said. "The good thing is that the people in our newsrooms, those of us who embrace globalism, are sticking closer to one another in this divisive environment. We also cherish the opportunity to still be able to produce journalism, because once you step out of our newsroom, it's a different world. But we also hope to reach out to other people who are not like us."

When people found that legacy or mainstream media were unable to fulfill their role of informing the public, they naturally turned to independent publications for reliable information in times of crises, Cédric Alviani told me. While publications like *Initium* still face uphill battles in maintaining the upward momentum beyond the pandemic, Alviani believes that they are here to stay as long as they continue to produce high-quality, hard-hitting journalism for their target readers.

"It is a natural evolution of the media, just because part of the services that the mainstream media used to provide are now being provided in another way," Alviani said. "The [independent] media now feel more like niche services. And investigative journalism should be the core of journalism."

The Caravan, India

While life has seemingly returned to normal in China, in other parts of Asia, COVID-19 is still very much present, especially in India, whose official caseload, now at 6.4 million,⁶ is the second-highest in the world at the time of this writing.⁷ Investigative journalists there have also seen the impact of their work.

As death and infection rates have climbed in mid 2020,⁸ a spate of rape and murder cases and brutal harassment against poor farmers has also reignited public anger over violence against the lower castes. Indians are increasingly relying on independent news and information to make sense of the harrowing tragedies. *The Caravan*, an English-language, long-form narrative journalism magazine, continues to see spikes in subscriptions, which have now doubled compared to subscriptions generated in pre-pandemic days.

"I can only call it a miracle," *The Caravan's* Executive Editor Vinod Jose told me. "[It is] some kind of a blessing because I was really gearing

"The message was very clear that if you want critical stories even during COVID, you have to go to publications like The Caravan."

up for uncertainty in March. But then I saw the back-end numbers just going up. People were subscribing and we were able to communicate better, sharpen our message [...] So the trend is giving us confidence for sure.”

The New Delhi-based *Caravan* is a new avatar in India’s media industry. *The Caravan* was first launched in the 1940s. Vinod joined the magazine in 2009 when it was going through a relaunch. Over the next decade the initial staff of four journalists, including Vinod, have reinvented the wheel, turning the little-known publication into a subscription-first magazine that now employs 42 journalists. It positions itself as India’s *New York and Harper’s Magazine*.

India’s media industry is largely controlled by the historically privileged trading caste. The establishment does not particularly like independent publications such as *The Caravan*. As a democratic country, India does not have the type of direct government censorship that is found in countries like China, but the establishment that controls the country’s major media houses actively engages in self-censorship. “[Information control] happens in a far more sinister way,” Vinod said.

Back in March, *The Caravan* broke the news that hours before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a country-wide coronavirus lockdown, he met with top news executives and urged them to publish “inspiring and positive stories” about the government’s efforts to handle the crisis.⁹

“The message was very clear from March or April [2020] that if you want critical stories even during COVID, you have to go to publications like *The Caravan*,” Vinod told me.

Thanks to the dip in quality of mainstream Indian media and a public health crisis exacerbating the public’s distrust in legacy media, at a time when news organizations across India and the globe have slashed staff, *The Caravan* has been able to hold up and maintain its editorial integrity.

“Not only that we were able to maintain the intensity of what we are known for, which is investigative, long-form [journalism], but we were also able to increase the number of stories, both in quality and quantity,” Vinod said.

Since March, The Caravan has published a host of stories about the underrepresented groups and the underlying issues of the country's governance. It has shed a light on the plight of migrant workers¹⁰ and the struggles of sex workers.¹¹ It has also exposed the failure of a governmental program¹² that aims to ensure universal access to the country's civic infrastructure.

Apart from its monthly print magazine that delivers its most robust journalism to its subscribers, *The Caravan's* website offers readers news for free in both English and Hindi. Its readership, similar to that of *Initium*, is an intellectual and liberal crowd – a minority in India. Vinod is cautiously optimistic that the magazine could reach a wider audience and produce content in various other languages in the future.

"We haven't reached anywhere close to tapping into the full potential," he said. "I think the next stage will be to stabilize the model and then increase where we need to grow in terms of stories and people and so forth. But there is definitely a future if it's played well."

New Naratif, South East Asia

While Vinod has a 10-year vision for *The Caravan*, Thum Ping Tjin, or P.J. Thum, the managing director of the Southeast Asia-focused *New Naratif*, is focused on making it through the next year.

Thum co-founded *New Naratif* in 2017 with two fellow Singaporeans – Kirsten Han and Sonny Liew – to "define Southeast Asia for ourselves," in Thum's own words, instead of "[us being] defined by colonial boundaries, colonial borders, colonial mindsets and post-colonial authoritarian governments."

"Every time they use the law against us, our new membership spikes [...] It's great."

New Naratif publishes long-form reportage, comics and research in English – the common working language of South East Asian countries – and, occasionally, in Bahasa and Chinese translations. It positions itself as a platform that provides in-depth, contextual and evidence-based information to empower Southeast Asians to create political change to achieve greater democracy and freedom. The digital magazine operates on a membership-based model (starting from 52 USD a year), supplemented by donations and grants, to pay its 12-people staff and contributors. The publication's audience is

the educated Southeast Asian elite who speak English and are frustrated about their circumstances.

New Naratif does not cover day-to-day news about COVID-19 throughout the region. Instead, it shines with its sharp coverage revealing underlying structural issues in countries' governance and health care infrastructure that were exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19. In the past few months, it has published stories about the struggles of migrant workers in Singapore,¹³ the increasing challenges the indigenous people living in the rainforest of Malaysia encounter to rally for their rights to land during the pandemic,¹⁴ and the discrimination Cambodian Muslims face as COVID-19 cases rise.¹⁵

Because of its activism tendencies, *New Naratif* is not allowed to register in Singapore, where Thum lives, as a news outlet. The Singaporean government labels *New Naratif* as an agent of foreign influence, plotting to subvert domestic politics. In 2019, the government passed a fake news law¹⁶ to silence criticism posed by outlets like *New Naratif*.

In early July 2020, the government demanded *New Naratif* to issue a "correction" for an interview with a public health expert. The government accused *New Naratif* of creating "fake news" – a statement made by the source implied that the government had not consulted medical experts about a specific response to COVID-19.

To comply with the law, *New Naratif* issued the correction, which it wears as a badge of honor. The savvy advocacy publication has effectively campaigned against the "fake news law" in the past and turned each forced correction into an opportunity to educate the public about free speech.

When the government forces *New Naratif* to issue corrections, Thum told me, it follows the order and republishes the same content with the statements in question blanked out, assuring readers that the content is 100 per cent accurate because it has been verified by the government.

"I'm quite happy to just put up the correction notice," Thum said, "because every time they use the law against us, our new membership spikes [...]. It's great."

Beyond its robust journalism and analysis, the clever publication also takes a creative approach to audience engagement. It seeks dialogues with readers through a newsletter and a Telegram channel. It conducts survey studies to gauge readers' interest. In the past few months, the outlet specifically raised funds that eventually allowed it to bring on an audience research expert. And Thum himself started a personal talk show in March 2020 that offers satirical political analysis, which further drove up engagement when the country was under lockdown.

Over the first half of 2020, *New Naratif's* membership base increased from around 900 to 1,400 members, a near 56 per cent surge. And its readership skyrocketed during the 2020 Singaporean general election that was held in July. But the upward momentum stopped as summer wore on. In August 2020, only 17 new members joined *New Naratif*.

"We're really seeing the impact of COVID-19 now," Thum said. "Now that the government subsidies are ending, people are really feeling that economically it is biting."

In 2021, *New Naratif* needs to reach a membership base of at least 3,000 members to maintain its current operation – Thum himself is not paid and most of his staff are part-time. That would be a net gain of 1,600 additional new members.

"There are 600 million Southeast Asians," Thum said. "If we just get 0.001 per cent of them, that's more than enough [for us] to survive."

Thum recognizes the public's need for perspectives and news independent from the establishment agenda, and he is pleased that people are gradually realizing that if they want quality journalism, they need to pay for it. For now, he is taking baby steps to grow this small outlet that serves a niche audience, with the hope of expanding its readership in the future.

"I don't know how long it will take, but it is rare that you live a life where people frequently and directly tell you what a big difference you are making in their lives," Thum says. "It's such a privilege to know that you are making a difference in people's lives. So, we'll just keep going as long as we can."

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2. Central Eastern Europe



By Karolina Zbytniewska

Demand of High-Quality Information on the Rise

Several processes coincided when the pandemic erupted in the second half of February 2020 in Russia and Belarus, and in March in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and in Ukraine.

COVID-19 and the Quality of Media Publications

The fact that the number of coronavirus cases began to rise, stimulated a similar rise in the public's demand for information. First of all, because people were simply concerned and confused, which spurred their demand for knowledge about the public health situation. For instance, in Poland the percentage of people worried was growing day-by-day and reached 75 per cent by mid-March 2020.¹ Consequently, more people stayed at home and checked the situation online, especially the medical sections of online papers and news channels were promoted to the forefront or simply created to meet the soaring demand.

Second, when normal life stopped because of quarantine and citizens could not leave their homes, they had more time to explore this new, enforced interest as they stayed home to ward it off. Third, while staying at home, they hung on more to what was at hand – online information sources, TV, and radio – at the cost of the already fading print press.

The cumulative effect of these three reasons translated into a massive rise of online media consumption in the first month of the pandemic. For instance, readership of Poland's top ten information websites recorded a rise of over 57 per cent in visitors.² Some online papers in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region³ recorded an increase of 1000 per cent in readership, generally achieving their highest ever numbers of unique visitors and page views. At the same time, people started watching TV again, which was also the global trend – coming back home and reviving the custom of families watching TV together. In the first week of quarantine, television-viewing time among audiences over four years of age increased by 24 per cent, compared to the first two weeks of March 2020, and by 23 per cent in Moscow, according to Mediascope.⁴

The rise in online media consumption has not translated into better quality media. Quite the opposite, citizens experienced a flush of fake news and conspiracy theories that were blooming online because of the lack of institutional gatekeeping and proper editorial oversight present in established outlets. Furthermore, the access to information was restricted by governments safeguarding their monopoly to information about the pandemic, thus limiting freedom of speech – while independence of the media is the sine qua non for quality.

Citizens in Central and Eastern Europe experienced a flush of fake news and conspiracy theories that were blooming online, because of the lack of institutional gatekeeping and proper editorial oversight present in established outlets.

Often, the politicians in power were the ones responsible for spreading disinformation about the pandemic, with Belarussian president Alexander Lukashenka topping any rankings when advising Belarusians that they could avoid coronavirus by drinking vodka and going to the sauna (and afterwards contracted SARS-CoV-2 himself). At the same time, the independent media and activists in all countries reported instances of governments underestimating the pandemic along with overrating these governments' performance. The government-friendly media – serving as a tool for public propaganda – forwarded the optimistic outlooks on state leadership. CEE citizens, even if supportive of their leaders, but still historically beset by a post-Soviet aftertaste of distrust, were reaching out for online media sources which, however, did not necessarily offer better quality information.

Governments are partly to blame for this unceasing distrust. "They don't communicate transparently about the pandemic, and the way they publish official data is not the most user-friendly, to say the least" – Teczár Szilárd, from Hungarian weekly *Magyar Narancs* says.⁵ Indeed, the access to information about the pandemic and the state of the health care system was commonly restricted for the independent media due to the centralization of public health communication. This phenomenon was not restricted to CEE countries, although the limited access to information has been particularly remarkable here. Official press conferences were moved online and according to independent journalistic accounts, authorities often censored uncomfortable questions or those asked by critical media. Limiting the access to information so that officials could not be scrutinized, served as a discriminatory measure used to reduce independent media's capacity for reliable reporting. In Belarus, (relatively) free media outlets – mainly TUT.by and Onliner.by – added a disclaimer to their reporting of the official coronavirus statistics that they did not know the truth – Yaroslav Bekish, Belarussian civil society expert recounts.

Additionally, doctors in Poland and Hungary reported that they had been prohibited to talk to the media about the coronavirus under the threat of either dismissal or fines, especially if they pointed out the deficiencies in protective equipment for healthcare professionals. A Polish nurse was infamously discharged for reporting on the deficient working conditions and ill-preparedness of her hospital for the coronavirus epidemic.⁶ The Ministry of Health claimed it had nothing to do with such instances. In Hungary some university

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professors said they were forbidden to talk to the media, while some journalists – who criticized how the government was handling the pandemic – received death threats via email or social media.

Infamously, the Hungarian pro-government parliamentary majority further constrained the freedom of speech by tightening the Hungarian Criminal Code in the early stages of the state of emergency. It further limited the freedom to independently inform about the epidemic, as reporting problems could be considered as ‘incitement to fear’ punishable by imprisonment of up to 5 years. However, “no one knew what kind of opinion was regarded as a crime” – Gábor Polyák, associate professor at the University of Pécs explains. The legislation was followed by “concerted attacks and threats against independent media, accused of disinformation, although they reported on COVID-19 more responsibly than the pro-government media” – according to Reporters without Borders.⁷ In the end, no journalists were imprisoned, but several people were arrested in their homes and detained for several hours over social media posts that were critical towards Hungarian authorities. Furthermore, the police were investigating numerous cases on the basis of emergency regulations on the alleged publication of ‘fake news’ and of endangering the public. “The police are constantly monitoring the Internet”, the NGO said in a statement. As a result of these show trials, some journalists and media outlets resorted to self-censorship.

Poland has not introduced similar laws, though, under the guise of social distancing rules, two journalists from two outlets critical of the government – *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *OKO.press* – were accused of violating social distancing restrictions while covering a protest outside Law and Justice Party (PiS) leader’s Jarosław Kaczyński’s house in Warsaw in early May 2020. They faced fines of up to 60,000 PLN (almost 15,000 EUR), which is a huge amount of money, especially for independent Polish journalists, who often find themselves in precarious situations.

The strain on finances caused by SARS-CoV-2 and withdrawal of advertisement from the media, translated into smaller budgets for journalists, especially for freelancers. In Poland, precarious working conditions, without a proper job contract, have long been the norm in independent outlets, especially in online and print media. These facts also have not translated into better media quality, with newsrooms and newspapers shrinking along with rising prices. Apart from Internet accessibility and availability of all outlets online, the

relatively high prices of print media, have led more and more readers to search for information on the Internet, mainly at free websites without paywall. During the coronavirus pandemic, as already mentioned, this phenomenon was further advanced, as the possibilities of going out were restricted.

The transfer of our lives online had its positive aspect in the context of media quality – namely that many independent online media outlets opened access to their articles on coronavirus and public health measures, so that there would be no inequality in access to quality information and everyone could read it for free and without barriers. This has expanded access to quality content online. Ivan Kolpakov, the editor-in-chief at the independent Russian online newspaper *Meduza* (Riga-based) adds that as readers were completely overwhelmed with negative information following the outburst of the pandemic, *Meduza* – apart from publishing quality news – offered additional articles and videos to support readers in these hard times.

Simultaneously, and already prior to the outburst of the pandemic, more people were willing to pay for quality content. There was a further increase of this tendency during the time of lockdown, when many people realized that media was one of the sectors most acutely hit by the crisis and further weakened by illiberal governments. Therefore, they became more willing to support their favorite outlets, not only with paid subscriptions, but also with monetary donations, directly through these outlets or through crowdfunding websites. At *EURACTIV Poland media*, we also noticed the rise of interest from young people who wanted to contribute their work, as they believed that free, quality media is fundamental to liberal democracy.

Alina Mosendz, freelance journalist from Ukraine, recounts that in order to counter the spread of fake news on social media and low-quality websites, many quality outlets created mythbuster stories about the coronavirus. Many outlets engaged in debunking most popular and most harmful fake news also in other CEE countries.

All in all, along with the rise of fake information in the public sphere, especially online, and with governments limiting access to public health information, audiences have become more critical. More people have started to value quality content and outlets they can trust during these hard times. This development can have serious, long-lasting positive effects on the general online media quality, as

More people have started to appreciate quality content and outlets they can trust during these hard times. This development can have serious, long-lasting positive effects on the quality of online media in general.

“if paid content becomes the main source of media income rather than advertising, clickability will take the second place. The consumer will pay for information that they trust” – Natalia Ligacheva, Editor-in-Chief at the Ukrainian NGO Detector Media, states.

“I believe we are approaching a moment when quality content can be properly monetized”, she adds.

COVID-19 and the Economic Situation of Media Outlets and Journalists

As public life stopped due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, all types of media, apart from print media, noted an unprecedented increase in audiences. Some believed that the media had entered its golden age. But the situation was more complicated.

The increase in audiences was not followed by corresponding increases in advertising revenues. Quite the opposite – advertisers were withdrawing commercials and sponsored materials (e. g. week-end supplements). In Russia, the majority of the media (92.2 per cent) announced that some advertisers had left. And those who continued to cooperate reduced their budgets – according to a report by the Russian Union of Journalists.⁸ At the same time, state budget expenditures to support official media, i. e. public propaganda, increased by 3 billion rubles for the coming year – Ksenia Larina, journalist and columnist for the independent radio Echo of Moscow (*Ekho Moskvy*) reports. Its chief editor Alexei Venediktov summed up the dire situation of most independent media in his telegram-channel: “We have a drop of 37 per cent in advertising in May [2020]. We have cut management salaries by 90 per cent – we received 10 per cent for 3 months. We have not touched a penny of journalists’ salaries yet, but I am afraid we will have to”. Advertising budgets started to recover in June 2020. Nonetheless, it is expected that they will only be able to cover the losses during the second half of the year.

Why did advertisers withdraw their commercials? Because, according to the reports from media and marketing employees from CEE countries, some of them lost their own revenues, like car manufacturers, soft drink producers, airlines. The largest Russian airline *Aeroflot* announced at the end of March 2020 that it would completely abandon all advertising indefinitely, so as not to have to fire its employees. Another reason for restricting advertisement budgets was the image issue. Namely, some advertisers – also ones in the

At the beginning of the pandemic, some believed that the media had entered its golden age. But the situation was more complicated. The TV sector was least affected, while print media received the biggest blow.

health sector – preferred not to be associated with tough topics triggered by the pandemic, like illness, death, ill-equipped hospitals, but also layoffs and recession.

Also, other revenue sources of the media – like conferences and events – had to be cancelled. The TV sector was the least affected, while print media received the biggest blow, with some of the titles (especially lifestyle) having to close. At the same time, the number of subscriptions to print media's online outlets rose, along with the above-mentioned donations. This did, nevertheless, not allow a return to pre-COVID-19 financial situation.

As a result, most independent outlets had to respond with austerity measures – e. g. reducing number of hours worked and reducing salaries accordingly (also to receive public support from national anti-crisis schemes for companies), with 80 per cent as a typical reduction rate. Thanks to these measures, the outlets analyzed in the CEE countries avoided mass redundancies, although a small percentage (ca. 4 per cent) of contracted media workers lost their jobs. Also freelance journalists complained that they lost assignments, as boards preferred to save the jobs of the workers they had under contract.

In the context of this advertising and revenue situation, the independent media has a significant, structural competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis the government and government-related media, which are largely financed through public (state) advertising.

The competitive disadvantage of the private outlets is even higher in the media markets of the non-EU CEE countries analyzed here – i. e. in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, where the role of the media owned by oligarchs or the state is not to earn money, but to support the regime, or – as in Ukraine – the preferred political option. However, according to Natalya Ryabinska, a sociologist and associate professor at *Collegium Civitas* in Warsaw, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán seems to be using the full toolkit to catch up with the Ukrainian oligarchical model.

Czech media outlets expect a 30–50 per cent drop in advertising revenues – according to Aneta Zachová, chief editor at *EURACTIV Slovakia*. Some numbers are even higher. *Respekt*, one of the major print weeklies, recorded a 60–70 per cent drop in advertising revenue compared to pre-pandemic levels.

In Hungary, the situation is similarly dire, with a foreseeable 21–30 per cent slide in revenue⁹ for media companies in 2020, year to year – according to a survey by the Hungarian Publishers’ Association. Nevertheless, averages usually distort reality, which is also the case here. The pro-government media foundation, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) dominates the media landscape owning almost 500 titles, which results in the above-mentioned market distortion of state advertising outflow. Taking this into account, it is the independent outlets that are hardest hit by slides in advertising revenues – they expect a huge drop of 90 per cent in comparison to 2019. Teczár Szilárd points out that in Hungary “the drastic drop in advertising revenue can still be felt today. This further exacerbates the inequality between independent and government-friendly media, because while private advertising has virtually halted, state propaganda goes on unscathed”.

This disadvantage already existed prior to COVID-19, only that the pandemic has intensified the scale of the problem. For example, in Poland, freedom of independent media, critical of the government, has been limited by restricting access to public companies’ ads, public institutions’ paid announcements, but also to projects and grants administered by the government. This situation has been ongoing since the current government came to power at the end of 2015. During the pandemic, another version of this phenomenon materialized. Namely, according to reports of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and Press magazine, the governmental public announcements about the virus and the pandemic that were to address all Polish citizens and therefore appear in all nation-wide print media, were indeed published in all nation-wide print daily newspapers but one – *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which is Poland’s biggest broadsheet daily (only two tabloids *Fakt* and *Super Ekspres* have a bigger circulation). But it is also the one most critical of the government.

COVID-19 and the Digitization of Media

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the fourth Industrial Revolution, which had already been taking place. Its main technologies are artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, autonomous vehicles, robotization, and digitization permeating all spheres of our lives. Accelerated digitization has also materialized in the media market, whirling up online readership numbers, leading to a further dwindling of the sales of print media.

More and more often, we treat the Internet and social media as major news sources. The coronavirus pandemic has only fast-forwarded these processes.

Virtual reality has become ever closer to actual reality, thus merging our private and professional lives. Today almost 90 per cent of Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Slovaks have an Internet connection,¹⁰ and slightly less – around 80 per cent – of Russians and Belarusians, and around 60 per cent of Ukrainians.¹¹ Plus, every smartphone user has constant access to the Internet. We do not only chat, email, shop, and work online. “All debates and other events organized by media went online, journalists and media outlets were very active on social media and focused on modern content formats, such as live reporting, video, and podcasts” – Aneta Zachová, chief editor at *EURACTIV.cz*, explains.

More and more often we treat the Internet and social media as major sources of news. In 2016, 57 per cent of Europeans used social media news aggregators and search engines as their main sources of news.¹² Social media constituted the main source of news for a third of young people aged 18–24.

And the coronavirus pandemic has only fast-forwarded these processes, as people could make full use of their Internet connection during the lockdown. And, since the media market in Central and Eastern Europe – and worldwide – continues to move online, printed publications slowly but gradually continue to close, which translates into recurrent wage cuts and layoffs. The coronavirus pandemic has only sped up this ongoing process.

In Ukraine, social media constituted the major source for world news for 23 per cent of Ukrainians, while online media for 27 per cent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ As Galina Petrenko, Director at the NGO Detector Media, explains, the coronavirus completely changed this situation benefitting the first one. In August 2020, social networks constituted the main news source for 44.1 per cent of Ukrainians, almost a two-fold rise, while online media remained at 27 per cent, and TV watching levels remained the same during the pandemic as before with around 75 per cent.

In Russia, where over 100 million people use the Internet, the historic moment where online advertising outpaced television ads was in 2018¹⁴ (with a large part going to the Yandex company specializing in online services, owned by oligarch Arkady Volozh). Still – as already explained – the coronavirus crisis hit online media budgets especially hard (despite peaking audiences). One of the reasons is that the Internet is the (last?) bastion of independent media,

especially in Belarus and Russia. Cyberspace is still an uncharted territory for regulation and it also does not require big budgets to open and run media, in comparison to traditional outlets.

As a result of this painful pressure on online media budgets, innovation had to speed up, taking into account the demand for online information, and more and more often – for its quality. Therefore, donation campaigns and other forms of asking readers for support were started and are here to stay. Looking at Ukraine, Natalya Rybinska diagnoses a more general trend that has been visible in the whole CEE region: “people appreciated the value of verified information and of trust in these hard times. As a result, they are more ready to pay for access to quality content. Before people could not have even imagined paying for anything online, when there’s so much free content. Online piracy was absolutely overwhelming. The COVID-19 pandemic induced a change in people’s minds”.

In effect, during the coronavirus crisis subscription levels went up. Simultaneously, more and more digital media were hiding their content behind a paywall. While this had already constituted quite a normal practice in Poland before the crisis, this is not necessarily the case in all of the countries that were looked at. In Hungary, outlets started moving parts of their content behind paywalls during the coronavirus crisis. “This is a rather new and interesting development” – Teczár Szilárd comments.

Not only online media, but also bloggers used the crisis momentum to experiment with paid subscriptions. And they were often successful.

With these developments in online entrepreneurship, online media outlets, as well as information channels like YouTube and Telegram – especially in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine – are now more likely to make sustainable profits. “Beforehand, such independent online information sources existed, but usually only as startups, most of the time after having received some donations to be able to take off, hitting financial trouble once the grant ended. Now, after experimenting with fundraising and earning methods, they have grown in strength”, Natalya Rybinska explains.

Also, as life moved online and as people were spending around 7 hours a day on the Internet, traditional media outlets directed their attentive eye towards social media. They went beyond Facebook and

Twitter and experimented more and more with YouTube and other social platforms, such as Telegram and Instagram, trying to compete with “influencers” – Alina Mosendz points out for the Ukrainian example. Indeed, in Russia, the Russian version of YouTube experienced an increase of 40 per cent in viewing time between January and March 2020. The number of viewers increased by a quarter. “YouTube has become the most important independent media outlet in Russia among younger audiences, but also more and more among older ones”, Ivan Kolpakov from *Meduza* explains.

The most outstanding example of YouTube’s rise to stardom is Yury Dud, a tremendously famous 34-year-old Russian YouTuber born in Ukraine, who talks freely with famous people – artists, celebrities, politicians, experts – about just anything, not leaving out topics that are either controversial or just human. He also makes his own documentaries that run on his YouTube channel, which has over 8 million subscribers. His film on the uncomfortable topic of Kolyma gulag camps has been watched over 22 million times.¹⁵

Belarus also has its big YouTube personalities, including Sergei Tikhanovsky who announced on his YouTube channel in May 2020 that he would run in the presidential elections, which got him jailed, while his wife Svetlana Tikhanovskaya stood in elections instead. However, in Belarus, Telegram has become the major source of online news, especially after the above-mentioned rigged presidential elections. “Telegram channels are a bucket of everything – independent media, channels controlled by the state, personal channels, messenger, all absolutely without any rules”, Ivan Kolpakov explains. Telegram, founded by the Russian Pavel Durov, has become one of the most popular instant messaging applications in the world, especially popular beyond the EU and the West. And as Russia has Yury Dud, Belarus has *NEXTA* – its most important online media channel and also online media personality. *NEXTA* is the 22-year-old Belarusian Stepan Putilo (or Svetlov) who set up this Telegram channel, which is the largest in Belarus with over 2 million followers. This was the key media during the Belarusian protests following rigged presidential elections, posting mostly images and videos sent by people who witnessed the rallies. Putilo moved to Warsaw, where Yury Dud interviewed him in September 2020. Over 7 million viewers watched the interview.¹⁶

All in all, media continue to shift online, and the coronavirus pandemic has only fast-forwarded this already ongoing process.

Because of the precipitous loss in revenue in the beginning of the pandemic, online news producers – be it online media or social media information channels – creatively looked for new sources of revenue. Paired with growing respect of the readers for trustworthy content, they might now be more empowered to achieve sustainable revenue vital for quality and independence.

COVID-19 and Freedom of the Media

Media freedom in Belarus (153rd place out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index 2020¹⁷) and Russia (149th) de facto does not exist, with the space for independent media narrowed to a minimum. The COVID-19 pandemic has not changed that.

Nevertheless, there have been changes. In Belarus, the negligent and thoughtless reaction to the coronavirus by president Alexander Lukashenko, the outright lies about the pandemic by authorities and official “media” (Belarusian propaganda), along with a simultaneous drop in satisfaction with the economic situation, made citizens decisively turn towards independent online media sources and set the fertile ground for a revolution that started after the rigged presidential elections.

Independent online media – especially *NEXTA* (based in Warsaw) and *TUT.by* (independent web holding read by some 60 per cent of Belarusians) – were the winners of this situation. They were further strengthened by Lukashenko’s arresting of bloggers, which further undermined any remaining trust for the president and weakened online competition at the same time, Yaroslav Bekish explains.

In Russia, independence of the media is constantly shrinking. It has especially deteriorated after 2014 and the beginning of the Ukrainian war – Jaroslav Šimov, deputy director of Radio Liberty’s Russian Service (*Svoboda*) explains. All federal television and radio channels are under strict ideological control.

Almost all news agencies, Internet media and newspapers cooperate with the state in one way or another, and risk losing their licenses and funding opportunities if they do not. Political journalism is practically non-existent – independent experts can only be heard in the media outside of the Kremlin’s control, which include Russian bureaus of foreign media (*Svoboda*, *Voice of America*, *Russian Air Force*

Media freedom in Belarus and Russia de facto does not exist, with the space for independent media narrowed to a minimum. The COVID-19 pandemic has not changed that.

Service, Deutsche Welle), independent online publications (*Medusa, MBH media*), and individual Internet channels, Ksenia Larina, journalist and columnist for *Ekho Moskvy*, says.

According to Jaroslav Šimov, the pandemic served as an excuse for adding even more pressure on the media. Plus, it was difficult for independent media to write about the pandemic situation. But the Internet – i. e. online media, social networks such as Telegram and Messenger as well as YouTube – have become the bastion of the free press that has grown even more popular during the pandemic, as in Belarus. Even in Russia, the Internet is practically uncontrollable, it offers an alternative reality – independent opinion polls, free commenting, a huge potential for criticism – and the Kremlin is incapable of taming this wave.

Ukraine (96th place in the World Press Freedom Index 2020) fares much better than Belarus and Russia in terms of media freedom, which has been evolving, especially since the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014, although there is still much room for improvement. Strong oligarchization of the media landscape, underpaid public broadcaster, attacks on the media – here journalists will particularly be thinking of the killing of journalist Pavel Sheremet in 2016 and the fatal beating of investigative reporter Vadym Komarov in 2019.

However, the coronavirus did not serve as a pretext for authorities to pressure independent journalists. The financial crisis resulting from the pandemic translated into media and journalistic entrepreneurs in social networks searching for new revenue sources, which in the end will guarantee them more financial independence, while for the media, financial autonomy is fundamental for their independence and/or existence. This positive effect is further triggered by the already mentioned rise in readers looking for reliable content, who, as a result, have become more willing to pay for quality information.

While Ukraine has been making progress on the path towards media freedom, Hungary (89th in the World Press Freedom Index 2020) has taken the opposite path. The situation of the media there is deteriorating, especially since 2018 when *KESMA* (Central European Press and Media Foundation), the pro-government media foundation, took control of around 500 private media outlets. Titles that are in the hands of Fidesz's cronies are not the real media. "Their priority is to be loyal and serve the government's interests. And they are proud of it" – Gábor Polyák explains.

The coronavirus pandemic was exploited as an attempt to take further control of the media market, by introducing a vague law allegedly aimed at countering fake news, which in the end was used to investigate against people publishing posts critical of government. It served as a warning not only to journalists, but to anyone who wanted to express their criticism of how the government is tackling the pandemic, and translated into self-censorship by nurses, doctors, academics and also journalists.

What is more, access to information was limited for independent outlets: Questions asked at governmental online press conferences were rarely asked by independent media. Likewise, the economic impact of COVID-19 asymmetrically hit the independent press, which had already been the victim of unfair competition prior to the pandemic. But “the single most important development concerning the freedom of the media in the last couple of months (or even years) was the resignation of the journalists of Index.hu, thus by far the largest independent news site, because of external pressure from businessmen close to the government. I wouldn’t say this was a direct consequence of the coronavirus crisis, they were planning to destroy Index anyway, but the bad financial situation of Index in this crisis certainly helped them and could have sped up the process”, according to Szilárd Teczár. After the marginalization of Index, another editor-in-chief was dismissed in another medium – this time in the liberal weekly *168 Óra*. But there is also a silver lining. Especially that journalists who had been working at Index.hu until recently, now founded a new medium – *Telex*, financed largely by crowdfunding. The content of the portal is free for the time being, but in the future, it will be available only to subscribers. Editor-in-chief, Veronika Munk, said that the editorial team has managed to raise enough funds for several months of work.¹⁸

In Poland (62nd place in the World Press Freedom Index 2020, down from 18th in 2015) the state of media freedom and pluralism has deteriorated since the PiS party came to power in 2015. Passive censorship resulting from channeling funds to government-friendly outlets, recurring attacks on critical media by ruling politicians and public media, transforming public media into an outright government propaganda tool – this had already been the situation of Polish media prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Polish authorities did not need the pandemic to gain an advantage over the press.

Thus, Polish authorities did not need the pandemic to gain an advantage over the press. But they have. Along with the public “media”,

governing party politicians intensified attacks on critical media outlets (often pointing out their foreign ownership-structure if there is one), sometimes limiting access to information by not answering questions submitted for online press conferences by unapologetic journalists (the present government has reduced the number of press conferences and focused on announcements since it came to power). They published paid announcements about anti-COVID-19 measures in all national dailies apart from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the media outlet most critical of the government, but at the same time the daily broadsheet with the largest circulation.

Now the government plans the repolonization/deconcentration of the media, which is allegedly mostly in foreign hands, with German “hands” being presented as particularly unwelcome. These plans are not a consequence of COVID-19, as they had already been announced well ahead. The government has long been critical of influential titles by the German-Swiss-American Ringier Axel Springer group that owns Polish *Newsweek*, a weekly newspaper especially critical of the Polish government, and the *Fakt* tabloid, as well as TVN television owned by American Discovery, Inc. According to findings of *The Economist*, the biggest Polish state oil and fuel company *Orlen* is now negotiating the purchase of the Polish conglomerate of 20 regional newspapers published by Polska Press, currently owned by the German company *Verlagsgruppe Passau*. This staged take-over, if it takes place, will further expand PiS’ grip on much of Poland’s media market. Understandably, *The Economist* gave this article the headline: *The Hungarian model*.¹⁹

Democracies like the Czech Republic (40th place in the World Press Freedom Index 2020) and Slovakia (33rd place in the World Press Freedom Index 2020) also face the challenge of increasing oligarchization of their media markets, which had already been evolving before the pandemic. The coronavirus crisis translated into hindered access to public information, but journalists who were consulted did not indicate that this was as a major problem. The situation presents itself as much brighter than in other countries analyzed, although it should be followed closely to prevent downfalls similar to those in other Visegrad Group’s partner countries.

All in all, although the COVID-19 pandemic is used by governments to hinder access to public information (all governments), to intensify smear campaigns against unfriendly media (Poland), to further develop financial asymmetry in the media markets between

pro-government and independent media (most analyzed countries), and introducing laws hindering free speech under the guise of preventing incitement of social fear (Hungary) or jailing bloggers without legal basis (Belarus), the major changes characterizing today's media landscapes have already been in place before the pandemic. Therefore, the answer is that the pandemic has not had significant consequences for the freedom of speech of CEE states, as in most of them (apart from Ukraine) the situation had already been deteriorating before the onset of COVID-19.

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The background of the slide features a solid orange color. Overlaid on this is a faint, light-colored map of Europe. A crumpled, translucent paper texture is layered over the map, creating a complex, fibrous pattern across the upper and middle portions of the slide.

3. Germany

By Daphne Wolter

And the Winner Is ... Quality Journalism!

A country comes to a standstill: People spent most of their time at home for about two months in the spring of 2020. This was also reflected in media consumption. There was a great demand for information due to the constantly evolving news situation. Public broadcasters' media libraries opened their archives showing the variety of topics covered in the stored content. Some (pay) programmes were even made available free of charge during the "COVID-19 period". Never before has reporting been so condensed and serious, with journalism being so sensationalist and lurid at the same time. The media have a great responsibility, as they ensure that people are informed correctly and comprehensively, while simultaneously satisfying people's need for entertainment and distraction.

What Does COVID-19 Mean in Terms of Understanding the Quality of Journalism?

Almost all news media have gained in reach and trust as a result of the coronavirus crisis, while social media have lost trust.¹

Unfortunately, a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is also a suitable topic for spreading false information very quickly and easily. The World Health Organisation (WHO) even spoke of an “infodemic”. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram have become important news providers, making them particularly vulnerable to fake news. In contrast to traditional media, the different social media platforms lack a journalistic gatekeeper, i. e. someone to classify, explain and evaluate the topics. It is the task of journalism to present a factually correct and “full picture” of an event. Scientists see potential dangers here for the diversity of opinion, which is important for the opinion-forming process.

The destructive effect large-scale disinformation campaigns can have on society should therefore not be underestimated: They shake confidence in information in general and thus harm the credibility of information sources that are actually trustworthy. Disinformation can therefore undermine the ability and vocation of journalists, who are the very people who ensure reliability and transparency in society.

From the point of view of media policy, it is therefore important to have a stable and free media and communication system in Germany, or even better still, in the whole of the EU. Education and the transfer of skills to recognise fake news, etc. are further important pillars in the fight against disinformation campaigns. This is, first and foremost, the responsibility of government institutions at the federal and state level. For only through communication with the population and, in the best case, through educational narratives of one's own, can the impact of fake news be nipped in the bud. Yet, there is a silver lining: Overall, younger age groups tend to be more convinced of being able to distinguish facts from false reports than older users.²

This is exactly where the producers of high-quality journalism have an advantage vis-à-vis big platforms such as Google and Facebook, which do not have this in their “portfolio”. Good journalism, which also works with digital media, is therefore the guarantor of

Almost all news media have gained in reach and trust as a result of the coronavirus crisis, while social media have lost trust.

The trend that fewer and fewer people trust the media could actually be stopped by the coronavirus crisis.

the future for publishing houses, public service broadcasters and private broadcasters. A trend that existed long before COVID-19, namely that fewer and fewer people trust the media, could indeed be stopped: During the COVID-19 crisis, most people obtained information from public broadcasters and trusted their information. By contrast, in Germany only 14 per cent trusted news on social media, but 45 per cent trusted news in general. Only 22 per cent use Facebook as a news source – a very low figure compared to international standards.³

Are People Increasingly Returning to Quality Media as a Result of the Crisis?

In the meantime, the first studies have been published dealing with media consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown. For example, the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford recently published a representative survey in six selected countries, including Germany. The study investigated how the German population was informed about COVID-19 during the initial phase of the pandemic and how the compiled information was judged. The result is that news consumption has increased significantly. In Germany, the most popular source of information is still television and it has become more important during the COVID-19 period. However, the coronavirus crisis also shows that journalists themselves are not the only source of information people rely on. In all the countries surveyed, respondents place the greatest trust in scientists, doctors or health experts. Germans sought information from experts almost as often as they did through journalistic articles.

Quality media could come out as the winner: in times of crisis, you fall back on tried and tested methods and on the things you trust most.

The majority of German media users obtained information about COVID-19 through radio and television broadcasts, online news and press products. Only a few used social networks as a source of information.⁴

Television news broadcasts or news channels are the main source of information during the crisis. The most common sources of news and information about the coronavirus are news organisations, individuals from the scientific and medical communities, but also the national government.⁵

During the crisis, almost half of all television consumption in Germany was attributable to public service media. Public service

broadcasters reach 82 per cent of the population per week.⁶ The public service media are earning much praise for their reporting in times of the COVID-19 crisis. Following the cancellation of major events, the German public service broadcaster rbb, for example, broadcast selected events such as opera performances on livestream. The radio station Deutschlandfunk Kultur broadcast the award ceremony of the Leipzig Book Fair after it could not take place with fair visitors as originally planned due to coronavirus precautions.

Clearly, quality media could come out as the winner of this crisis. In fact, a similar phenomenon can be observed in media usage as in politics: in times of crisis, you fall back on tried and tested methods and on the things you trust most.

Thus, in these uncertain times of crisis, traditional media are particularly in demand and enjoy the highest level of trust as “established quality media”. Quality media provide orientation in unpredictable times. The usage figures speak for themselves: During the lockdown, most people fell back on linear television usage when they wanted to keep abreast of the news. On some days, more than 17 million viewers watched the *Tagesschau* daily news broadcast during German prime time at 8 pm, among them a considerable number of younger viewers.⁷

The other public service providers, such as radio and podcast services and the corresponding news services on the Internet, also recorded an increase in usage figures. The legitimacy crisis of public service broadcasting was already on the media policy agenda before the COVID-19 crisis. The opportunity to overcome it is here now: All that is needed to maintain and build on the regained trust and attention that existed during the crisis, is to take the appropriate communication and content measures. Especially in times when disinformation can spread almost unhindered, particularly in social media, public broadcasting must be a reliable partner providing information from trustworthy sources.

A scientific study also comes to a positive conclusion about reporting on COVID-19.⁸ According to the study, reporting was nuanced and not systematically dramatic. However, in view of the many special broadcasts, another study criticises the “narrow”, monothematic reporting in news programmes, leading to a neglect of reporting on other socially relevant topics beyond COVID-19.⁹

What Impact Does COVID-19 Have on the Economic Situation of Media Outlets and Journalists?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people's interest in news has increased, while at the same time, the advertising and promotion market has almost completely collapsed. The advertising-based business model of many media outlets has dissipated.

This is particularly fatal for privately financed media such as newspapers and private broadcasters and of course for all freelance journalists. The mood in media outlets is gloomy. In some publishing houses, short-time work is still ongoing after the summer, resulting in sales slumps of up to 80 per cent.¹⁰ The German newspaper publishers' association BDZV also speaks of a sharp decline in the advertising market. The question arises as to whether advertisers will at all return with their advertisements or if they have moved on to other forms of advertising.

The governments of several German states have classified journalists in Germany as "systemically important" since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, alongside the nursing professions, rescue workers and supermarket employees. Germany has adopted a COVID-19 aid package for people working in media and culture: The German federal government and federal state governments have adopted emergency aid packages to support artists and those working in the cultural sector, but also self-employed professionals such as freelance journalists. In addition, the Federal Government promotes a new start for cultural life in Germany with a comprehensive programme of rescue and future-oriented measures. A total of around one billion euros is available for the NEUSTART KULTUR programme (*A new start for culture*, a programme for the promotion of cultural infrastructure).

What is more, the publishing industry is hopeful about the growth in digital business. The demand for high-quality journalism has risen on all channels since March 2020 and the reader market has thus remained stable. At the same time, many large magazines such as *Stern* and *Spiegel* have seen significant growth in the digital market – an increase of at least 20 per cent in digital subscriptions. They could therefore attract new readers during the pandemic.

All the same, media economists are now concerned that the willingness to pay for information services is not necessarily higher during

Increasing the willingness to pay for online services – with attractive payment models, but above all with compelling content – will be crucial for the future of the newspaper and publishing industry.

the crisis, as entertainment services seem to be the only services with the potential to increase streaming subscriptions.

It is therefore crucial for the future of the newspaper and publishing industry to increase the willingness to pay for online services – with attractive payment models, but above all with compelling content.

One reason that things are moving in the right direction is that current news have been in great demand during the restrictions. This can also be observed in the increased willingness to pay: In March, for example, the regular consumption of news behind the payment barrier rose by 25 per cent and has not declined since. This, however, only applies to premium access to news websites, and not to digital newspaper editions.¹¹

The proportion of daily readers of free online news had risen by around 35 per cent in March; around a third of this growth has been maintained so far. Yet, in economic terms, ad-financed online news portals have hardly benefited from the increase in user numbers, as in many cases advertising revenue has been lost.¹²

How Does COVID-19 Influence the Digital Transformation in the Media Landscape?

A comparison between media consumption before and during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the crisis has definitely been accelerating the transformation of media. Media usage – and with it the entire media landscape – is becoming more digital, more mobile and even more platform-driven.¹³ Due to the lockdown and contact restrictions, more people have spent their free time at home and used entertainment formats since March 2020. The winners here include streaming providers such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+, which have recorded a 26 per cent increase in sales this year.¹⁴

The influence of the pandemic on media consumption by consumers in Germany was investigated in three representative surveys – in February 2020 before the outbreak of the pandemic, during the lockdown in March and during the normalisation phase in June.¹⁵ As a result, after a sharp increase in media usage during the period of curfews and contact restrictions to a new record level, a new normality is now returning. The pandemic is acting as a catalyst: digital,

The comeback of linear television during the lockdown has not proved sustainable.

high-quality content is being used more intensively, yet, the decline of traditional media services is accelerating at the same time.

After peaking in March 2020, media usage has fallen noticeably again – but not for all services: all signs are pointing to “digital”.

Digital quality content will benefit in the long term, while traditional, linear programmes remain under pressure. In the case of newspapers, daily readership has returned to the levels seen before the pandemic. Neither print nor digital magazines are showing any signs of a long-term positive effect. Online news, nonetheless, has benefited from the trend seen in recent months, with more and more media users continuing to read news even beyond the payment barrier. The number of regular readers of printed books is currently only slightly higher than before the crisis. E-books and e-book flat rates, on the other hand, are benefiting much more than before the lockdown.¹⁶

The comeback of linear television during the lockdown has not proven to be sustainable. Although television is still the most important news source for the majority of adult internet users in Germany (42 per cent), there is a downward trend.¹⁷

In contrast, the increase in the reach of social media as a news source continues unabated. Especially in the group of 18 to 24-year-olds, 56 per cent used social media as their main source of news in 2020. The share of those who cite the Internet as their main news source, on the other hand, has risen by two percentage points to 38 per cent. Overall, the share of adult internet users who cite social media as their main source of news has remained stable at 11 per cent.¹⁸

What Consequences Does COVID-19 Have for the Freedom of the Media?

Germany has a diverse media landscape. Press, radio stations and information services on the Internet are free. The German public service broadcaster is also independent and not controlled by the state: The ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court on the ZDF State Treaty has shown that neither the government nor state institutions have any influence on the organisation of information and entertainment programmes.¹⁹ Even in times of crisis, independence

is a great asset. State support and direct financial assistance for the media – as discussed in some federal states even before the COVID-19 crisis – should therefore be examined carefully. Even though the economic situation is deteriorating further in many publishing houses and media outlets, there are concerns about direct state support for journalism. Direct aid could create a danger of influencing editorial offices. It would be better to sound out specific needs and additional possibilities for assistance in concrete cases, or to expand the promotion of logistics for media services, as in the case of the German government's aid package, for example.

There are concerns about direct state support for journalism, as direct aid could entail the risk of interference. It is better to identify specific needs and provide assistance for concrete cases.

All the same, there is always a fundamental danger of restrictions on freedom of expression and media diversity through attacks of disinformation campaigns or hate speech. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is a very convenient topic of provocation, through which fake news can spread very quickly and easily. Fake news can be very dangerous in such a situation, as it causes panic, wrong behaviour and an increase of insecurity in the population. In the worst case, fake news can also be harmful to health. For example, there is always misleading advice on how to protect oneself against the coronavirus, or tips for treating symptoms with questionable methods. It is therefore important to take consistent action against such deliberately disseminated false information. Germany is trying to hold social media platforms accountable and to prosecute criminal content through legal regulations in the State Media Treaty (which at the time of writing is expected to enter into force as from January 1, 2021) and the Network Enforcement Act.²⁰

In addition, media and information literacy must be developed for all age groups of the population. Through systematic education and transparent transfer of skills, state institutions, authorities and especially journalists can help to draw attention to the phenomenon of "disinformation" in their reporting and take action against it. Users must understand the logic of social media in order to better recognise and deal with disinformation.

In this context, it is also right that official bodies such as the Federal Ministry of Health keep explaining the current situation in all media genres with transparent and easily understandable information campaigns.

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4. Latin America

By Nicolás Guzmán

Journalistic Challenges in a Troubled Region

The arrival of the coronavirus has represented a challenge for all institutions, and in particular for the media in charge of spreading information in times of crisis. But at the same time, the pandemic has become a great opportunity for people to trust the media again, not only national papers but also local ones.

COVID-19 has accelerated several transformations that were planned for the future, such as the digitization of media or new ways of working in newsrooms, which meant developing a new way of working – especially in Latin America, where working conditions for journalists are often far from the reality of other developed countries. With the pandemic, the poor conditions in which professionals have to work to provide the population with the best possible information have become even more noticeable.

However, news organizations and their workforce have stood out in recent months in the fight against fake news or even, many times, bad government decisions that have put the health of the population at risk and, at the same time, the survival of many media outlets and the integrity of independent journalists.

COVID-19 and the Quality of Media Publications

Nobody can say that there are no good journalists in Latin America. Some of the continent's most important trials against politicians are a result of journalistic research. Nevertheless, compared to other continents, it is true, there is a lack of specialized journalists in the newsrooms in the case of COVID-19, science journalists.

And even more so if we talk about what the situation is like in a small town, where there are usually only one or two journalists covering several topics in a single day and usually writing under pressure. The situation in the mass media is different. I will provide some examples.

In Colombia, the newspaper *El Tiempo* created a new section on 28th March. This newspaper focused on making the number of intensive care beds in the country transparent. To this end, the paper mapped the country by region and then provided the results that showed the country's limited capacity to face the pandemic.

In Costa Rica, the data journalist Hässel Fallas published how the coronavirus was advancing in the country on her own website. Fallas provided the number of tests in Costa Rica on an almost daily basis and illustrated the number of infected people with different types of graphics. She also compared the reality of her own country with the rest of Latin America.

Nobody can say that there are no good journalists in Latin America. However, there is a lack of specialized journalists in the newsrooms, in this case, science journalists.

In Chile, the website of the newspaper *La Tercera* opened the Fake News section to talk about the coronavirus situation in the country. Each day, *La Tercera* took different examples of Politicians, news on social media, or even from other newsrooms to check the information and give a final verdict to show if what was being read most on social media in the country was true or not.

At the same time, just a few months ago, *La Tercera*, started a very strong campaign to get more subscribers to its website, after the newspaper had taken the decision to promote digital media instead of the printed edition. And one of the new strategies was to provide all articles linked to the virus free of charge, without having to subscribe and pay for accessing the website.

In Brazil, there are also different examples of the treatment of COVID-19, but we will start by talking about the most popular media. The *Folha* from São Paulo created the section *Histórias de vítimas do novo coronavírus* (Stories of Victims of the New Coronavirus), where the numbers and names of the people who died from the pandemic were published. It did not matter how many pages were necessary to expose the reality of the country. The same exercise was undertaken by the newspaper *Estadão* and the website of *O Globo*.

O Globo even used its cover page to show the list of people who died, accompanied by the text: “10,000 stories: The deadliest event in Brazil in 102 years, the COVID-19 pandemic officially reached 10,627 deaths yesterday. So that the human dimension of the tragedy is not lost to the coldness of statistics, Globo honors the lives lost in a virtual memorial”.¹

And despite the great coverage by big media, the most notable thing has been the organization of small communities, such as the *favelas* in Brazil, considering that over 13 million people live in these places.

To inform people who live in *favelas* and probably do not have easy access to information and new measures against the pandemic, community journalists working in organizations such as *Maré 0800*, *Maré Vive* and *A Maré Vê* produced podcasts or even interviewed doctors who explained the current situation of COVID-19 in Brazil in a very simple way, how risky it can be, and how important it is to stay at home and avoid contact with other people.

At the same time, “they created posters and more than 60 banners were hung in crowded spaces like soccer fields and bars, reinforcing hygiene and social isolation guidelines”², explained the website ljnet.org.

Social media also had a role in these communities. Different hashtags were produced just to share the realities of the virus in *favelas* and small towns. This type of actions made it possible to publicize the needs of Brazilians living in vulnerable conditions and offer assistance mechanisms, such as the collection of food or hygiene items. There are several examples of this kind of community media like *Voz das Comunidades* or *Favela em Pauta*.

In Argentina, the newspaper *La Nación* also created a special section to provide daily updates about COVID-19 in the country. *La Nación Data* addressed another problem due to the virus, which was the situation of Argentines who were in another country during the worldwide explosion of the pandemic.

The response was quick, and the newspaper was able to compile a series of stories of compatriots who were in a difficult situation, also giving an idea of how many Argentines needed help to return to the country.

In Mexico, journalists tried to improve their articles by linking them under the hashtag #TómateloEnSerioMX to raise awareness among the population and work in coordination to combat Fake News. They presented themselves as follows: “The media and organizations that make up this coalition have a presence in various states of Mexico and represent an extensive plurality of voices, editorial lines, and journalistic and operational teams”.³

For this reason, the digital media decided to “generate and disseminate coordinated verified messages on the measures of social isolation, healthy distance, care and health protection implemented by the Mexican government in the face of the increase in infections in our country; to provide digital security advice to the users, so as not to fall into traps or be accused of cheating or of cybercrime in this emergency; and share best practices in health security safety practices for our teams, reporters and journalists covering the emergency associated with COVID-19”.⁴

The journalists did a great job reaching out to all types of audiences during the crisis and under adverse working conditions.

COVID-19 and the Economic Situation of the Media

The economic situation of the media before COVID-19 was already complicated in Latin America, as was probably the case in the rest of the world. Nonetheless, it is widely known that television channels, newspapers, radios, and currently websites are in command of the most powerful economic groups of each country.

Not all the media in Latin America receive state funding, so everything depends on advertising and the market. Here, the media of small cities or regions have an advantage over big media, as they can survive from the sale of their newspapers or from the advertising of small businesses in the same city.

During COVID-19, the economic situation of both national and local media has been affected in different ways. Here we can see some examples from each country.

If we start from the north, we can take Mexico as an example, where important media such as *El Universal*, *Forbes Mexico*, and *Record* had to reduce the salary of their employees, as a consequence of the economic crisis due to the pandemic. The economic difficulties already existed previously, when President Andrés Manuel López Obrador came to power and cut some of the spending on official advertising.

The economic situation of the media before COVID-19 was already complicated in Latin America, as was probably the case in the rest of the world.

At the same time, local and small media have been strongly affected and have had to make tough decisions. For example, in the eastern Mexican state of Quintana Roo newspapers noticed early on during the COVID-19 pandemic that they would not be able to pay salaries for some time or even worse, they would have to stop new editions. In general, these types of media outlets do not generate the same income as big ones.

In Guatemala, the situation is similar. For example, there is the very famous newspaper *Prensa Libre*. The pandemic has affected its income, and as a result, it had to reduce the wages of those with the highest wages in this publication. The company made this decision to avoid the dismissal of their workers.

The situation in Costa Rica is even more dramatic. During March, the newspaper *La Nación* recorded a 48 per cent reduction in its sales, compared to the previous year. That is the reason why the publication had to reduce the working hours of some of their journalists by 50 per cent for three months to face the crisis. Unfortunately, at least 17 journalists have been fired and it is probable that there will be more job losses in the future.

Regarding Panama, also in Central America, the newspaper *La Estrella de Panamá* has reduced salaries by 37 per cent and cut the normal working day of 8 hours, at least during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, other media outlets in the country started to bring out a weekend edition, thus cutting the Saturday and Sunday editions, which allowed them to reduce the number of employees.

The situation is similar in El Salvador. Here, the publication *El Diario de Hoy*, one of the biggest and most recognized in this country, has been forced to reduce salaries and working hours.

In general, newspapers are the ones most affected by this pandemic in Latin America.

As we can see, in general, newspapers are the ones most affected by this pandemic in the region. The same happened to South America. Let us start in Colombia. Newspapers were already facing a big economic crisis here and with the virus, the advertising dropped considerably, even though people wanted to get more information during this time.

Different factors have influenced this. The *Asociación Colombiana de Medios de Información* (Colombian Association of Information Media) has explained that the rise in the dollar has increased the price of printing paper by 22 per cent. As a consequence, free media such as *ADN* and *Publimetro* were obligated to stop publishing, at least during this time. The same happened with the media *La Opinión Cuenta*. This process was also confirmed by the *Asociación Mundial de Periódicos y Editores de Noticias* (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers).

But not only well-known media outlets have had problems. Colombia, one of the biggest countries in Latin America, has many local media outlets that have been especially affected by COVID-19. Many of them have been closed or their journalists hope to return to work when the situation improves. To face this reality, the *Federación Colombiana de Periodistas* (Colombian Federation of Journalists) promoted a campaign through social media to push

the government of President Iván Duque to support journalists affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

*"@IvanDuque Presidente: urge medidas para garantizar el funcionamiento de pequeños y medianos medios de comunicación y el apoyo a periodistas independientes. Escuche e implemente propuestas de gremios #periodistas. La situación es muy difícil"*⁵, was the tweet, which translates to: "President Ivan Duque: Urgent measures are needed to guarantee the operation of small and medium-sized media and support independent journalists. Listen to and implement proposals from the journalist unions. The situation is very difficult".

In the case of one of the biggest countries of Latin America, Brazil, the coronavirus has intensified the media crisis. Not only because of the attacks by current President Jair Bolsonaro, but also because of the economic crisis faced by the media. There are several examples reflecting this situation. One of the important media in Brazil, *Globo*, stopped printing six monthly magazines. The same happened to the sport magazine *Lance!* and the newspaper *Aquí* from Recife, which canceled its print.

In addition to this, dozens of local media outlets have closed their doors, because they have not had the possibility to sell their editions for weeks, due to the pandemic. At the same time, some of the big media companies used certain measures for all economic sectors, allowing them to suspend employment contracts and reduce wages.

The researcher at the Communication Policies Laboratory of the University of Brasília (UnB) Jonas Valente explained to the website www.observacom.org that such measures helped different media outlets to reduce their workforce. "*Grupo Estado*, which publishes the *Estado de São Paulo* newspaper and operates Internet sites, announced to its workers that it will reduce their wages by 25 per cent. *Record*, the second largest TV network in the country, is also doing the same"⁶, he assured.

To face this type of decision, the *Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas* (National Federation of Journalists) appealed to the labor courts in Brazil, which ruled in favor of the workers, preventing the *Record* company from reducing its employees' salary by 50 per cent.

The same role has been assumed by the *Federación Argentina de Trabajadores de Prensa* (Argentine Federation of Press Workers), which

accused the economic group *Publiexpress-Revista Pronto* of trying to shut down media outlets and fire 80 people, in circumstances that Argentine law does not allow, at least, during coronavirus.

The *Asociación de Entidades Periodísticas Argentinas*, ADEPA (Association of Argentine Journalistic Entities) also published a report explaining the importance of saving and protecting the media during this pandemic. The president of this organization, Daniel Desein, in his speech during the 172nd meeting of the board of directors, said that “journalism and the media are more necessary than ever, because COVID-19 is the event with the most journalistic coverage in history”.⁷

The report of the ADEPA also concluded that “there is a need to strengthen institutional communication for prevention and service regarding the pandemic, as various countries around the world have been doing. In this sense, it is necessary that such communication be carried out with federal criteria, taking into consideration local and regional media and protecting them”.

If we also want to talk about numbers from other countries, the *Asociación de Prensa Uruguaya* (Uruguayan Press Association) counted about 200 dismissals of journalists in the country in the first weeks of the pandemic.

Journalists' situation in Chile is also complicated, because all nationwide media outlets have been reducing their staff, following the outbreak of COVID-19. For example, the free daily newspaper *Publimetro* closed in May and magazines *Capital* and *Grupo DF* suspended their print edition. But as is happening in other countries of the region, local media has suffered more than big media.

For example, the newspaper *La Discusión*, from Chillan (a small city in Chile) on March 24th had the headline “The paper is paused” on its cover page. It then went on to explain on one of its pages that “the global coronavirus pandemic and its strong impact on our city, leads us to make one of the most difficult decisions of printed journalistic media: suspending the circulation of our paper edition. An extraordinary measure, for an extraordinary situation.”⁸

One of the spokespersons of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Edison Lanza, addressed the current situation in the region but also highlighted the difficulties in generating new media. “It is

correct that at the time when audiences are at their greatest, the media are unable to generate income. We are seeing that in many countries dozens or even hundreds of journalists are being fired”, he explained.⁹

COVID-19 and the Digitization of the Media Landscape

Before starting to talk about the changes in digital media in Latin America, it is important to try to understand what the reality of digitization is in the region. Because if we compare the statistics in Latin America with those on other continents, the numbers are totally different.

The *Observatorio del Ecosistema Digital en América Latina* (Observatory of the Digital Ecosystem in Latin America) in its last report shows that only 68 per cent of the region’s population have access to the Internet. This indicates that more than 30 per cent of the people in Latin America do not have access to online information, despite the growth of digital media.

The Sherlock Communications agency, famous in South America, has published a new study about how the media changed during COVID-19. In its “Report on Latam Media Consumption, Evolution of Traditional Media in Latin America: What to Expect?”, it found that in the last five years, digital media has increased more than any other web platform, especially in countries like Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico. In fact, according to the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) Latin America, this increase was even higher in Brazil, which is thus becoming the “most digital” nation in the region.¹⁰

More than 30 per cent of the people in Latin America do not have access to online information, despite the growth of digital media.

GSMA also assured that by 2025, 79 per cent of Latin Americans are expected to have smartphones. In 2018, only 53 per cent of people in the region were regular consumers of Internet services.

To further clarify the digital reality in Latin America, the Reuters Digital Institute indicated in its 2019 report that in recent years, social media have been most widely used to access information and news and in the last three years, mainly through WhatsApp and Facebook. The only problem, Reuters Digital Institute added, is that information sharing can become dangerous due to fake news.

For this reason, the Latam Chequea coronavirus project was created during the pandemic, uniting 33 fact-checkers from 17 countries from Latin American and Spain. The project's website <https://chequeado.com/latamcoronavirus/> explains that “faced with the ‘infodemic’, the spread of rumors and false content news, Latin American fact-checkers have joined forces to share the information we produce and, thus, provide better information to our communities. The misinformation that circulates is in many cases the same in different countries. Being able to count on the work of others, helps to disprove falsehoods more quickly and helps to prevent their spread”.¹¹

Other research, this time from Comscore Social, shows that if we analyze the number of times the word “coronavirus” or “COVID-19” was used on the Internet, digital media have the first place as main publishers in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. The research analyzed the number of interactions on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, from March 1st to 18th 2020. “In Colombia alone, there was a 14 per cent increase in searches for the words ‘coronavirus’ or ‘COVID-19’” the report said.¹²

There are two examples, which can better explain the above. The newspaper *Clarín*, from Argentina, began a new system to face the coronavirus. *Clarín* is one of the most important and acknowledged media outlets in Argentina and was one of the first newspapers to change the way they work. The editors decided to cut the editing team to three people to coordinate the work on the web and a few more to manage the print edition.

To also better manage the home office situation and the change from the printed edition to digitization, *Clarín* delivered more than 200 laptops to their employees along with the necessary software. The reception in general has been good, *Clarín* explained in one of its articles, because the staff also takes time to talk about the difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, before taking up work from home.

On June 16th 2020, *Infobae* published an article with the conclusions of the 2020 Digital News Report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford in England. In this report it said that in Latin America, digital media have seen a larger increase than traditional newspapers and audiovisual media.

EMarketer – an international company offering data and research for digital businesses – also compiled a study called “Digital Ad Spending in Latin America Is Growing Despite Market Volatility”, in which it concludes that “the fallout from the coronavirus and the political turmoil seen throughout the region in recent months will have more negative consequences for traditional media this year than for digital media. While we expect traditional media outlets to decrease by 17.5 per cent, digital will continue to grow in terms of share and real investment as advertisers pivot their ad budgets toward online channels amid market volatility”. And it adds that “from 2015 to 2020, digital ad spending in Latin America more than doubled from 4.18 billion USD to 9.33 billion USD. That means, for the first time, digital will account for nearly 40 per cent of the regional ad market. Under these current circumstances, this share should further improve in the years ahead.”¹³

Gerardo Berroa, director of the newspaper *La Estrella de Panamá*, during his presentation at the web conference *COVID-19: Crisis de la verdad y retos del periodismo* (COVID-19: Crisis of Truth and Challenges for Journalism), stated: “The virus has anticipated all those circumstances that were not seen before,¹⁴ referring to the arrival of digital media in the country.

In Brazil, the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper explained on its website that during March, the number of visitors was 404.5 million: the third highest in its history. The media outlet cited the research by the technology analytics company Chartbeat, which stated that *Folha* had received 82 million visits in just one week in March. What is more, a third of these visits only accessed information about COVID-19.

Therefore, despite the fact that digitization levels in Latin America are lower than in other parts of the world, digital media have been forced to accelerate their implementation, given the circumstances of the pandemic.

COVID-19 and Freedom of the Media

In the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders – Latin America, the organization drew some conclusions about the current situation of the freedom of the press in the region. The report explains that “the environment in which journalists in Latin America work is increasingly complex and hostile.

Those tackling sensitive issues are facing increasing pressure, violence and intimidation. In most countries of the region, large smear campaigns have been launched against the press”.¹⁵

At the same time, the report confirms that freedom of the press has worsened all over the world during the pandemic. The organization concludes that “[t]he COVID-19 pandemic highlights and amplifies the multiple crises that threaten the right to free, independent, plural and reliable information”. Here are some more examples about the freedom of the press in Latin America during the coronavirus.

In Nicaragua, working conditions for journalists had already not been particularly good for some time. Thus, you can imagine how complicated it must be to work in journalism during a pandemic in that country. It is like a double burden for journalists: trying to provide information facing an authoritarian government that prevents free access to information and punishes those who have a different opinion.

In this context, journalists do not have the protection they should have to report a very dangerous pandemic and face a high risk of infection all the time. It's the opposite, actually. The government has hidden relevant information from citizens about the virus and blocks access to information by threatening sources, in this case doctors, who want to give reliable information to independent journalists. It was thanks to independent journalists that the country was able to find out about the “express funerals” that the authorities had hidden.

Another country in a similar situation in Latin America is Venezuela. According to the UN, Venezuela is experiencing an economic collapse that has worsened since Nicolás Maduro came to power. In addition, there is the censorship of those who oppose the government, including journalists.

According to data from the National College of Journalists in Venezuela, 18 professionals have been arbitrarily detained since the onset of the pandemic. And the information has been confirmed by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

The most famous case illustrating this reality is the arrest of Darwinson Rojas on March 21st 2020, when 15 police officers took him out

Darwinson Rojas was arrested by 15 police officers on March 21st 2020 for questioning the official COVID-19 figures on his social media account.

of his home for questioning the official figures on his social media account. Rojas was in prison for 12 days and, at the time of writing, he faces charges of incitement to hatred for which he could spend many years in prison. This is a common technique used by the Venezuelan government to intimidate those who think differently.

Journalists Arnaldo Sumoza (Channel 15) and Hidalgo Rincón (from Zulia State) were also arrested in Venezuela after providing information on the current situation in the country during COVID-19.

Brazil is another country where journalists have been at risk because of their work. Even before COVID-19, the relationship between the government – especially with the president Jair Bolsonaro – and the press has been complicated.

In April 2020, the Brazilian government decided to stop publishing the number of deaths resulting from the pandemic in its social media. And, in early June, it decided to change the statistical method to end up omitting parts of the death toll. The government only stopped because the Supreme Court of Brazil prevented it from continuing with this practice.

Due to this situation, the main Brazilian media created a consortium with local governments and produced parallel reports that further increased stress between the press and the authorities. Later, President Bolsonaro said that the coronavirus is not worse than a common cold, which has made it difficult for journalists to provide information about the problems in hospitals and for specialists who have different opinions.

On July 7th 2020, President Bolsonaro announced in a press conference that he was infected with the coronavirus. The problem was that he did not respect social distancing even though he knew the steps to take if someone tests positive for COVID-19. That is the reason why a few minutes later, the *Associação Brasileira de Imprensa* (Brazilian Press Association) confirmed that it would file a lawsuit against Bolsonaro for not respecting the reporters' health safety distance and for removing his mask at the press conference while announcing that he was infected. "The country cannot observe continuous behavior that is more than irresponsible and constitutes clear crimes against public health without reacting"¹⁶, the president of the association, Paulo Jerônimo de Souza, said in a statement.

Further south, in Chile, the government of Sebastián Piñera also took measures that some journalists considered as an attack on the free press, specifically on independent journalists. After the increase of infections in the country, the government issued a document with new health measures for those areas under total quarantine. The problem was that it excluded journalists and independent or community media who do not work in large companies.

In local areas of Chile, there are many freelance journalists working for social media or even for media abroad. Not all of these journalists are part of a large media outlet, especially those who live in small cities.

The *Colegio de Periodistas de Chile* (Chilean Association of Journalists) reacted very quickly and made its opinions on these new regulations known in a statement: “We ask the government to annul the measures that require, in certain cases, a collective safe-conduct for the professional work of journalists and communicators, given the various conditions in which the communications sector operates in Chile. These measures limit free press and information, rights enshrined in various international conventions that the State of Chile has signed and ratified”¹⁷, said the document.

In this context, many independent journalists continued to work without official permission, putting their safety at risk. A couple of weeks later, President Piñera gave independent journalists different options to resolve this problem.

In Peru, journalists do not have the best working conditions, although it cannot be said that there is a clear problem of freedom of the press. As of Friday, July 24th 2020, the number of journalists who died during the pandemic was 58, according to the *Asociación Nacional de Periodistas de Perú* (Association of Journalists of Peru). “For us, the number is explained by the very high degree of precariousness that the profession has in this country. In the union we have always talked about this internally, but I think it is the first time that the public has realized that a journalist, especially in certain areas, is really unprotected. In my 20-year career, I have never seen scenes like those of this pandemic” the vice president of the organization, Zuliana Lainez, said to the *ijnet.org* website.¹⁸

Conclusions

In the course of the research, similarities of how the coronavirus has changed the functioning of the media in Latin America could be observed.

Quality of Media Publications

- › The pandemic has reflected the poor conditions under which many journalists have been working every day, even before the virus. This can be observed, above all, in those media outlets that operate in rural areas or that do not have the funding to protect journalists who are exposed to COVID-19 on a daily basis.
- › The pandemic has strengthened the collaboration between different journalistic organizations to coordinate the type of information to be published as well as the protection of professionals. Community organizations, as in the *favelas* of Brazil, have shown a great level of support and concern for those who do not have easy access to information.
- › With their work, journalists have also played a supervisory role in each country to update and make transparent information about the consequences of the coronavirus.

Economic and Financial Situation of the Media

- › In Latin America, there is still a lack of laws protecting professionals in times of crisis, which has also been evident in recent months. Many media outlets, large and small, have laid off a significant part of their workforce or reduced their salary, which, for example, could not be observed in companies and industries outside of the communications sector.

Digitization in the Media Landscape

- › The coronavirus has accelerated the implementation of digital media in the region, affecting the circulation of printed newspapers. On the one hand, it is positive that Latin America is adapting to current times. On the other hand, not all people have access to the Internet, as is the case in other parts of the world. Social media have become the main source of access to information for users or the means connecting them to digital media in each country.

Freedom of the Press

- › In Latin America it has been observed that governments such as in Brazil, with Jair Bolsonaro, or in Venezuela, with Nicolás Maduro, have not cooperated with the delivery of information. Quite to the contrary, they have made the work of journalists difficult, even putting their integrity at risk.
- › The work of independent journalists, especially in countries where the press is persecuted, has played a fundamental role in making information transparent and delivering truthful information to the population.

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| <p>1 https://oglobo.globo.com/meu-oglobo/uma-homenagem-do-globo-as-mais-de-10-mil-vidas-perdidas-na-pandemia-de-coronavirus-24421331 [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>2 https://ijnet.org/es/story/los-comunicadores-de-las-favelas-de-brasil-crean-conciencia-sobre-el-covid-19 [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>3 https://ladobe.com.mx/2020/03/quedate-en-casa-tomatelo-enserio/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>4 https://ladobe.com.mx/2020/03/quedate-en-casa-tomatelo-enserio/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>5 https://twitter.com/FECOLPER/status/1250111923682770945 [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>6 https://www.observacom.org/medios-y-covid-19-en-america-latina/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>7 https://elmundodeberisso.com.ar/2020/05/29/periodismo-los-medios-mas-necesarios-nunca/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>8 https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/sin-editar/2020/03/26/centenario-diario-pone-el-papel-en-pausa/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>9 https://larepublica.pe/politica/2020/04/11/entrevista-a-edison-lanza-relator-especial-para-la-libertad-de-expresion-de-la-cidh/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> | <p>10 https://imgcdn.larepublica.co/cms/2020/07/17205302/Ebook-Consumo-Medios-Am%C3%A9rica-Latina-1.pdf [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>11 https://chequeado.com/latamcoronavirus/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>12 https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/America-Latina-El-Impacto-Mediatico-del-Coronavirus-en-Redes-Sociales [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>13 https://www.emarketer.com/content/digital-ad-spending-latin-america-growing-despite-market-volatility [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKGS8yCZNrw&feature=youtu.be [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>15 https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2020-index-latin-americas-dark-horizon-press-freedom [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>16 https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/07/08/la-asociacion-de-prensa-de-brasil-demandara-al-presidente-bolsonaro-por-exponer-a-los-periodistas-a-covid-19/ [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>17 https://www.colegiodeperiodistas.cl/2020/04/coronavirus-la-respuesta-del-colegio-de.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter [03 Dec 2020].</p> <p>18 https://ijnet.org/es/story/per%C3%BA-lamenta-el-deceso-de-m%C3%A1s-de-50-periodistas-por-causa-del-covid-19 [03 Dec 2020].</p> |
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5. Middle East and North Africa



By Reem Maghribi¹

One Problem among Many

With citizens in the Arab world facing so many hardships, it's difficult to measure the impact of COVID-19 as a distinct challenge. Millions are internally displaced; tens, if not hundreds of thousands are forcibly arrested, missing, or in combat; poverty and unemployment are high; and the hope for change that blew through the region a decade ago is all but forgotten. All these factors influenced the way in which media outlets and journalists operated and reported on current events prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the virus and the measures taken by governments in the name of preventing a further spread have also impacted the economic, political, and social challenges that already existed and the way in which media professionals work.

Covering COVID-19

“Fake and fabricated news became active, and the challenge at the level of our work in the news industry became the continuous sifting and verification of that news,” says online manager at pan-Arab daily *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, Shahira Salloum.² “Certainly, it is not possible to compete with social media in spreading news, but verifying the credibility and providing the correct information to the reader was one of the toughest tests that the Arab media faced.”

With audiences moving online and feedback, both in terms of readership figures and engagement, more immediate, Amin Ahmad of the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press believes that “Arabic media focused more on the audience than the news and so certain news that may cause a great stir and not sit comfortably with the audience is covered only in a very shallow way.”³

Ahmad also notes the challenges associated with a lack of a “clear editorial line in many outlets due to their sensitive future-oriented agendas.” Such lack of vision and purpose – and in many cases freedom and resources – no doubt impacted the quality of reporting on COVID-19 in the Arab media. “With almost no confirmed cases of the virus in the region by late February, Arab mainstream media initially maintained an air of distance from danger, reporting on the coronavirus as just another segment in their coverage of international news. This, however, was in noticeable contrast to rumours about the virus, which were circulating online, particularly through social media networks and WhatsApp,” noted Lobna Khairy and Sarah El-Shaarawi in an article published in the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* in June 2020.

Arab media responses to the growing crisis, say Khairy and El-Shaarawi, focused predominantly on the role of foreign nationals; concern for states with high levels of the virus; refugees and internally displaced people; and the important nationalistic role of citizens in limiting the spread of the virus.

Trust and Credibility

Given the actual and potential impact of the pandemic, globally and individually, and the barrage of information and misinformation that has been released since it was first announced, many expected

to observe a correlation between the crisis and public trust in the media, traditionally the source of public news. There was, nevertheless, little change to perceived credibility of Arab media outlets between 2019 and 2020, according to a survey⁴ of journalists working for Arab media outlets conducted by this author in September 2020. On a quantitative scale, participants gave an average credibility rating of 2.72 and 2.57 (out of a maximum of 5) for each year respectively. Respondent comments, however, suggest that overall, most journalists surveyed believe that the COVID-19 crisis negatively impacted perceived credibility of Arab media outlets more significantly than the figures suggest.

Confusion resulting from misinformation and rumours spread through social media channels coupled with a slow response and inconsistent messaging by traditional media channels were among the key factors noted for the perceived decline in public trust in the media. Respondents also noted that the credibility of Arab media outlets had already been low prior to the crisis due to the affiliation of most to specific political parties or ideologies. Among the top challenges faced by Arab journalism, according to the results of a survey of over 600 journalists in 2008, were government control (70 per cent) and media ownership (56 per cent).⁵ Ownership of many, if not most, Arab media outlets by political parties or entities closely affiliated with them directly impacts editorial policy. During the COVID-19 crisis, this was reflected in reports that focused on the designation of blame and critique of policy of opposing parties, as was the case in other countries globally.

While editorial policies are imposed by owners and donors, who are often highly politicised, they are carried out by journalists. In a paper on the mission of Arab journalism published in 2008, its authors⁶ noted that Arab journalists see their primary mission as driving political and social change in the Arab world. This has not changed in the past decade. If anything, the events of the Arab Spring will have strengthened the relationship between journalism and activism. Indeed, many young journalists active today began their careers during the Arab Spring as citizen activists engaged in media activities.

As such, media consumers often follow journalists whose political leanings are similar to theirs. This, says Jad Shahrour, is why media consumption habits in Lebanon did not change as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Shahrour is the communications officer at

the Samir Kassir Foundation, an organisation supporting journalists across the Arab world, named after the prominent Lebanese journalist and political activist assassinated in 2005.

Notwithstanding ideological allegiances, media consumers are critical of misinformation and highly wary of disinformation. Despite the often altruistic intentions of journalists upon joining the profession, the sudden collapse of long-standing authoritarian regimes, rise in militia control, lack of livelihoods, and ambiguous regional and international political agendas have all influenced the behaviour of many existing and emerging journalists, which in turn can impact their perceived credibility. As one survey respondent put it: “When the reported news doesn’t correlate with what citizens are seeing on the ground, trust cannot be built.”

One Dubai-based TV journalist working with a pan-Arab outlet⁷ nonetheless believes that, during the COVID-19 crisis, it is not the credibility of the media outlets that is questioned as much as that of the official sources of information providing the data. “The audience knows that we are only passing on information, so it isn’t our credibility that is impacted.” This supports observations made by Amin Ahmad of the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press, who noted a change in perceived credibility between state and privately owned media channels in Libya: “State media responded too slowly in providing information to the public and so lost credibility, whereas private media outlets were able to work more flexibly and use social media more effectively and therefore gain more of a following.”

Shahira Salloum, the online manager of *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, is among those whose platform experienced a rise in audience figures. “Readership of our electronic edition shot up to its highest since we launched, suggesting growing credibility and trust in professional journalism.” Notwithstanding, as one staff writer at a digital pan-Arab newspaper points out: “There isn’t necessarily a correlation between following a media outlet and trusting it.” This may be especially true during times of quarantine and isolation, when consumption of digital media is likely to have gone up across the board.

Syrian journalist Zayd Katreeb⁸ believes that more people were in fact relying on social, not traditional media for what they perceived as reliable information: “Official media channels were not honestly or accurately reporting cases [...] and more reliable information could be obtained from Facebook pages created by journalists and

Many papers ceased their print editions, automatically leading their readership to the Internet, where there is a plethora of choice and views.

activists.” This is particularly noteworthy in Syria, where print media is the preferred source of choice among large swaths of the public. Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 crisis, many papers ceased their print editions, automatically leading their readership to the Internet, where there is a plethora of choice and views.

This plethora of views, says the Dubai-based TV journalist, has made the consumption of information more challenging for many who are used to the more two-sided approach to debate taken by most TV channels. “Digital media may have surpassed traditional media such as TV in terms of audience size, but not in terms of news coverage and credibility. TV maintains an easier-to-comprehend black and white approach, whereas social media created chaos in the presentation of many opinions and views, leading audiences to prefer TV for this reason.”

Finance and Sustainability

While the effect of COVID-19 on the credibility of different media platforms may be debatable, its financial impact on people and businesses worldwide is not. Almost all economies have seen a decline as a result of restrictions in movement brought about by the virus. Businesses have folded and employees lost their jobs in almost all sectors. Though social media platforms saw an increase in business and profits, traditional media outlets were not spared the downturn. Many newspapers and magazines ceased printing as a result of fears about spreading the virus through touch and restrictions on transport and distribution. Others limited their programming due to office closures and remote working solutions that made studio time impossible.

While media outlets and platforms earn significant income from advertising, revenues of which shrunk as readership and client budgets contracted, they also make money by hosting events, which were restricted due to the virus. As a result, income and expenses shrunk. 64 per cent of those surveyed believe that expense budgets decreased in 2020, with 79 per cent of those attributing it to COVID-19, while 15 per cent believe expense budgets had actually increased.

In a bid to cut costs, some outlets let go of staff, stopped paying them, or officially reduced their working hours and/or salaries.

Half of the respondents believe that salaries had been cut, with some reporting that cuts had been as high as 50 per cent in some cases. 60 per cent of respondents believed freelancer fees had also declined and almost as many think COVID-19 had resulted in fewer opportunities for freelancers. This may be due in part to restrictions imposed by ministries in Arab countries that allowed freedom of movement only for journalists registered with a relevant union or authority, which many freelancers are not.

While one respondent claims that a media outlet in his country had only survived because it became a platform controlled by the government, another claims that at least one outlet had used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to significantly lower their expenses and redirect investment to other more politically timely interests. “Arab governments do not care about nurturing the media or maintaining its share of power. Some said outlets were closed because of the financial fallout of COVID, but in my opinion they took the opportunity to reallocate their resources to other priorities under this guise,” says the Dubai based TV journalist. “The rise of the right wing globally plays a significant role in changing priorities and loss of interest in funding media that concerns itself with the fate of the people. COVID-19 demanded people prioritise national borders, as does the right wing, and so it was an opportune time for Arab and global funders to stop supporting the Arab media.”

Determining exactly what factors impacted different media outlets is very difficult, given the number of factors at play in a long-troubled region. When Lebanon’s *As-Safir* newspaper shut down three years earlier, after having been in operation for 42 years, it cited insurmountable financial challenges. “So many events impacted Lebanon this past year, it’s so difficult to know. COVID-19 intertwined with an economic crisis. The economic crisis had the biggest impact on media, and COVID was the cherry on top,” says Shahrour of the Samir Kassir Foundation.

He adds that the twelve families who own most of the Lebanese media are primarily motivated by politics and “don’t understand marketing or concepts of content or ethics. Some do well on occasion, then revert to their own weak party politics.”

Many, he adds, started paying half or quarter salaries, while others stopped paying altogether. “The pandemic prevented people from meeting and travelling to pursue new contracts.”

While the effect of COVID-19 on the credibility of different media platforms may be debatable, its financial impact on people and businesses worldwide is not.

Salloum, of London-based *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, says that her office did not lay off any staff: “Since offices were closed and people worked from home, both expenses and costs went down. We didn’t let go of any staff. Naturally we had to rationalise our expenditure because of the situation, but we maintained and prioritised the work of staff.”

The same cannot be said of media outlets in Syria, says Katreeb, managing editor of *Tishreen*, a weekly Syrian newspaper. “News-papers in Syria stopped printing, so saved on expenses. But they didn’t need their full staff capacity, content instead to rely on a select few to run their online presence. This applies to both official and private media.”

Digitisation

Digitising their presence “presented a great challenge for those outlets that hadn’t previously made an effort in the digital sphere prior to COVID,” continued Katreeb. In Syria, Facebook became the platform of choice for media consumption. “Facebook is the main news platform in Syria, and video production increased greatly to show doctors explaining risks and offering information absent from the official site of the ministry of health [...] Syrian doctors living abroad were especially prominent during this period.”

Digitisation has become an imperative in the present, spurred on by both COVID-19 and changing consumer behaviours.

As Shahrour notes “media is content, not platform,” and so videos and articles published on social media platforms become part of the media landscape, forcing outlets established in print or broadcast formats to adapt not only technically but also in terms of the impact of web technology on consumer behaviour. “Lebanon entered digitisation late. Some papers closed without going digital, but new media in Lebanon is surviving – sites like *Megaphone* and *Daraj* that had launched as online media platforms from the outset. They create attractive content and know how to use social media. It is still too soon to tell what real impact COVID had on digital media,” says Shahrour.

The virus and its consequences led to an acceleration of digitisation among media outlets, so say 60 per cent of survey respondents. Nevertheless, 10 per cent believe that the COVID-19 crisis has slowed down digitisation. This may reflect interruptions to planned digital media programmes due to a loss of financial and human resources. A lack of unanimity in some survey responses is to be expected and

highlights the fact that countries and media outlets across the heterogeneous region face different challenges and restrictions.

Asked to quantitatively reflect on the success of Arab media outlets in embracing digital platforms in recent years, the average score given was 2.8 out of a maximum of 5. This may explain why some outlets adapted by speeding up their uptake of digital platforms, and others were unable to compete due to lack of preparedness and experience. One respondent adds that “Arab media outlets haven’t done well at using digital platforms due to a lack of experience.”

Regardless of their digital imprint in the past, digitisation has become an imperative in the present, spurred on by both COVID-19 and changing consumer behaviour. The team behind the *Arab Media & Society* journal agree and compiled an issue (summer/fall 2020) dedicated to digital transformation: “For several years, the world has been experiencing a trend toward the digitisation of all kinds of systems and services, dependent upon the Internet as a backbone and communication medium for all fields including education, information, science, culture, art, and many other aspects of human activity. With the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, the Arab region – like the rest of the world – has accelerated the pace of digital transformation as an inevitable path of resilience and confrontation. These tools have ceased being merely an available and convenient option and have, in many cases, become a necessity.” Digital media, they added, is no longer a means for socialising but also for entertainment, education, and information.

Similarly inspired, many survey respondents expressed enthusiasm, perhaps even hope, when it comes to digital media. Lower costs, increased flexibility, and reduced capacity for state monitoring were among the benefits highlighted. Reporters for *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* also embraced digital technology behind the scenes to aid production and communication. “We began conducting meetings and training online, not letting logistics hold us back. We took advantage of digital technologies to develop our meetings – they have become more concentrated and intensified, more rich and multiple. In the past we waited a week or a month for a specific meeting, but now we meet regularly on a permanent basis and many times the meetings are open,” says Salloum, the outlet’s website manager.

Freedom of Expression

There is no media freedom in the Arab world that could be impacted. There was no freedom to change. Such was the sentiment shared by a number of survey respondents and interviewees when asked about the impact of the virus and its consequences on freedom of the media in the region. “The Arab world and media freedom are two parallel lines that do not meet,” says one staff journalist with experience writing for outlets from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Syria.

“The ceiling of press freedom has become higher as a consequence of corona [...].”

According to survey respondents, there has been no significant change in freedom of the press as a result of COVID-19. Media freedom in both 2019 and 2020 received an average score of 1.6 out of 5, with over half of respondents giving a score of only 1 and noting that COVID-19 had no impact. Some did, however, note that the digitisation that followed restrictions imposed by the virus led to more freedom. “The ceiling of press freedom has become higher as a consequence of corona, which was not planned or intended by the institutions supervising the media. The reason is related to the issue of electronic publishing, which is difficult for officials at ministries to monitor and follow up, as they had done when printed materials were delivered to their offices,” says Syrian journalist Katreeb.

While monitoring new media may be more challenging for dictatorial regimes, issuing new legislation to curtail them is not. Before COVID-19 brought with it a mountain of challenges, officials in Lebanon were already looking for ways to shut down new media channels that had sprung up in recent months and years to challenge the status quo. “A proposed new media law that would force existing and new media outlets based in Lebanon to pay 100,000 USD in registration fees was under discussion,” explains Shahrour. This would make impossible the viability of truly independent often youth-led media outlets, which are essential in the fight against political entrenchment in the Arab media sector.

While the restriction of media freedom in Arab countries is always on the agenda of despotic regimes, COVID-19 gave them license to restrict movement and freedom in the name of national interest, much as they have done during states of emergency normally reserved for wartime. “The first victims of COVID were freelance journalists who may have press IDs but are not official members of unions or other authoritative bodies,” explains Shahrour. “Famous freelance journalists are well read, so I think the strategy to keep

them away was intentional. They wanted to prevent journalists from roaming freely.”

A writer for a newspaper in Jordan points out that regimes in the Arab world “used defence laws to impose further challenges to freedom.” Indeed, they did. The non-profit organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) documented and reported on various such infringements.

Their Freedom of the Press Index for 2020 places 15 of the 22 Arab League member states within the bottom 30 per cent percentile globally. In a map of the world used to classify countries’ media freedom by colour, many of the region’s countries are presented in black, denoting a “very serious situation”. Only a handful of other countries worldwide are presented with such gloom.

Even Arab states often considered more progressive have been cracking down on journalists during the pandemic.

Salloum notes that many of these restrictions were reported about in *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*: “Some regimes have taken advantage of COVID-19 to put restrictions on freedoms. We published human rights reports that came out about such infringements in Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example.”

Of Saudi Arabia, ranked 170/180 in the Freedom of the Press 2020 Index, RSF wrote: “Saudi Arabia permits no independent media. The authorities keep Saudi journalists under close surveillance, even when they are abroad, as Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in Istanbul in October 2018 illustrated.”

More recently, Egypt has come under fire for blocking access to a number of new media channels, allegedly as a result of their reporting on the pandemic. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), Egypt’s main media regulator, announced blocking or limiting access to a dozen news websites and social media accounts during the month of March 2020, without expanding on its justification for doing so beyond alleging that these sites spread “false information.” The SCMR has blocked over 500 websites since 2018 for this reason, among them the website of RSF.

SCMR has also blocked access within Egypt to the website of Egyptian online newspaper *Mada Masr*, considered a beacon of independent journalism in the country. This “deprives it of visibility and complicates its economic survival,” wrote RSF in a press statement. Authorities detained its editor in chief, Lina Attalah, in May 2020 as part of its “constant harassment” on the new media outlet and its staff.

Journalists working in Egypt for foreign outlets are not immune either. Ruth Michaelson, a correspondent for the London-based Guardian newspaper, was stripped of her credentials in March 2020 after allegedly exaggerating estimates of the number of positive cases on COVID-19 in Egypt. Her figures were based on quotes made by Canadian medical researchers. “By taking advantage of the coronavirus-related information crisis, the authorities are abusing their prerogatives and are trying to use their regulators, the State Information Service and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, to control what journalists report,” said Sabrina Bennoui, the head of RSF’s Middle East desk.

Even Arab states often considered more progressive have been cracking down on journalists during the pandemic. In Jordan, two TV journalists were arrested and detained for three days in April 2020 after criticising the lockdown imposed by the government to combat the spread of COVID-19. The *Roya TV* report included footage of citizens complaining about the economic impact of the lockdown. The privately owned satellite channel’s general manager Fares Sayegh, one of the two arrested, was later among 17 journalists worldwide awarded the Deutsche Welle Freedom of Speech Award, which was “dedicated to all courageous journalists worldwide who are suffering repressions because of their reporting on the pandemic.”⁹

Nidal Mansour, head of the Centre of Defending Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ), notes that *Roya TV* was issued 40 permits at the start of the lockdown, compared to 600 issued to the state-owned *Jordan TV*. CDFJ published a report in June 2020 entitled *Under The Ban*, in which they outlined 17 violations against journalists as a result of Defence Order No. 8. The “coronavirus defence law”, issued in April 2020, prohibits “posting, republishing, or circulating any news about the epidemic that might cause citizens to panic.”

Algeria issued similar legislation in the same month. The Algerian bill criminalizes “fake news” that “undermines public order and security” or “state security and national unity.” First time violations are punishable by one to three years in prison or by up to five years if they take place “at a time of a public health lockdown or a natural, biological, or technological catastrophe or any other form of catastrophe.”

A journalist, who in April 2020 revealed the existence of coronavirus cases in the Arab League member state of Comoros Islands, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, was harassed and ordered to reveal

her source. The state had not officially reported any cases and the journalist, Andjouza Abouheir, reported that samples taken by people suspected of being infected had not in fact been sent for analysis. A government spokesman reacted by threatening to bring legal proceedings against all journalists publishing information about the public health crisis “without going through the official channels.”

Journalists in the Comoros have, says RSF, suffered “a spate of breaches of press freedom unprecedented in recent years, coinciding with the disputed constitutional referendum in 2018 and the 2019 presidential election, including assaults, arrests, intimidation, and censorship.” The country has been ranked 75/180 in the RSF Freedom of the Press Index this year, down 26 places in two years, highlighting the impact and dominance of politics over power in the media sector.

“Freedom is far removed from consequences of the pandemic. Freedom requires a different political environment and new social and cultural environments that are simply not present in the Arab world,” notes one journalist. Whether a burgeoning independent new media sector can gain the credibility and readership it needs to flourish in a region that is suffering an economic depression and is predominantly controlled by dictators content to resort to violence and arbitrary detention, when legislation does not silence journalists, remains to be seen.

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- 1 The research for this paper was conducted with the assistance of Syrian journalist Omar Alshikh.
 - 2 Interviewed by author, September 2020.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Survey responses by 52 freelance and staff journalists for print, broadcast and digital channels in 15 Arab countries as well as pan-Arab media outlets (Maghribi, 2020).
 - 5 “Inside the Arab Newsroom”, Journalism Studies (Pintak & Ginges, 2008).

- 6 “The Mission of Arab Journalism: Creating Change in a Time of Turmoil”, The International Journal of Press/Politics (Pintak & Ginges, 2008).
- 7 Interviewed by author, September 2020. The interviewee asked not to be named.
- 8 Interviewed by author, September 2020.
- 9 DW Report, 03 May 2020, in: <https://www.dw.com/en/deutsche-welle-freedom-of-speech-award-17-laureates-from-14-countries/a-53306033> [4 Dec 2020].

6. Southeast Europe





By Mila Serafimova

Tough Test for a Fragile Media Landscape

COVID-19 has made existing problems in the Southeast European media landscape more visible. As a magnifying glass, the epidemic has made the shortcomings in the functioning of the media both more visible and more serious. COVID-19 has been a catalyst for some negative changes in the Southeast European media, but, at the same time, it is also a catalyst for the transformation of digital media, as high-quality media has become more influential. The pandemic has boosted the audiences of major news organizations.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic Concerning the Quality Aspect of Media Output

In September 2020, the topic of COVID-19 no longer brings positive reactions for anyone – neither for politicians nor for the media. Media inform less about it. They receive statistical data, but not positions and statements from the responsible state institutions and the government. Political leaders prefer to remain silent, as well. COVID-19 is no longer a preferred topic, as it accumulates mostly negative reactions and hostility among audiences. Lately media coverage has been limited mainly to statistical data.

Quality media coverage is not possible, unless journalists have access to in-depth information and pluralism of sources.

From the beginning of the epidemic in March 2020, governments centralized the provision of information and there were no other sources available for journalists. For example, in Serbia on March 28th, the government adopted a five-point decision regulating the centralization of public information on the coronavirus pandemic during the state of emergency. The decision mentions that all information addressed to the public is to be shared by the Prime Minister or by individuals authorized by the Crisis Management Taskforce. The decision also refers to the implementation of health-related measures and other information related to the treatment of COVID-19. This decision seems to exclude media and journalists from obtaining information on the pandemic from sources other than the ones mentioned in the decision.¹

Quality media coverage is not possible, unless journalists have access to in-depth information and pluralism of sources. In Serbia, for example, there have been direct clashes between officials and the independent media at press conferences concerning the pandemic.² The Crisis Headquarters held daily press conferences, which included expert members of the Crisis Headquarters and occasionally also the President and the Prime Minister. Public officials used the platform provided by press conferences to express their displeasure with questions and remarks coming from independent outlets. On April 10th, the government decided, that from the next day onward, the media would not be allowed to be present at the press conferences due to 'safety concerns'. Instead, journalists could pose questions online.³ It has been argued that this decision was most likely adopted in order to prevent professional media from asking Crisis Headquarters⁴ critical questions and was condemned by media associations, the opposition parties, and the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

In Bulgaria, the state created a National Operational Headquarters, which is headed by a general, the director of the Military Medical Academy. The media has been fully reporting on his position. He has been personally announcing the damage caused by COVID-19 as well as the impacts of the pandemic and has taken emergency measures. The government seems to have sensed the shortcomings of this information model and created an alternative to headquarters – a Medical Expert Council. It included leading specialists and was headed by one of the most enlightened and dedicated Bulgarian doctors. But it was short-lived and was only in operation for about one week. Furthermore, the results of its activities remained for “official use” only. Some pointless journalistic questions, which were directed at the single available state official – the chief of COVID-19 Headquarters, were an even bigger incentive for him to limit his dialogue with the media and at a later stage – not to provide any briefings, statements, or interviews to the media at all. Regular news conferences have been discontinued and, as a consequence, there has been a lack of analysis of statistical data in addition to the lack of statements by government institutions.⁵

During the summer of 2020, the topic of COVID-19 was gradually falling off the media agenda, thus violating the right to complete and objective information. Governments and political leaders were further hesitating to make statements on the topic, because of its sensitive character and its negative connotation. Lack of trust in government information about COVID-19 in the Southeast European countries resulted in limitation of state official's statements about the epidemic. The audience is reluctant to continue to listen to more on the pandemic. It is also tired of the abundance of information, fake news, and misinformation campaigns. This negative public attitude, in turn, does not encourage in-depth media coverage, and thus we have come full circle. On September 25th, Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boyko Borissov ordered the practice of providing the media with up-to-date information on the epidemic situation in the country at weekly briefings to be resumed, particularly in relation to the beginning of seasonal influenza.

The Romanian government has also created an official website for the dissemination of official information and has urged the public to only get information from this source. The portal stirioficiale.ro⁶ was launched at the beginning of the state of emergency, but, for the most part, it provided press releases already published on the platforms of other institutions such as the website of the Ministry of

Internal Affairs. It later added a section on data and useful tips for different social categories, such as tips for parents, diaspora, etc.

In Albania, the media is faced with the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 information monopoly introduced by the Government, low levels of transparency, self-censorship, and economic hardship, according to Zef Preci, Executive Director of the Albanian Center for Economic Research (ACER).⁷

"[...] Authorities in a number of Southeast European countries have extended the amount of time state bodies have to respond to freedom of information (FOI) requests, which is a vital tool for journalists trying to cover the pandemic. This makes it easier for them to avoid reporters' questions. Emergency measures in Romania, Moldova and Serbia extended freedom of information (FOI) deadlines. In Montenegro, rights groups decried a decision by the government to press ahead with public consultation on proposed amendments to the country's FOI law despite the restrictions imposed on public life amid the pandemic.⁸ Such moves follow a consistent pattern of undermining FOI rights across the region."

The quality of media output during the COVID-19 pandemic is also deteriorating due to the spread of fake news. The boom of fake news at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 resulted in a later decline in media trust.

The coronavirus crisis exposes the extent of disinformation and propaganda in Southeast Europe. False publications, conspiracy theories, and misleading photos – the coronavirus pandemic also infects Southeast Europe with fake news and anti-EU narratives about lack of adequate actions and solidarity among the EU countries and about support for the "mask diplomacy" of Chinese and Russian donations for Italy.⁹

For example, the Serbian government's attitude was very biased towards the assistance coming from China, according to Igor Novakovic, Research Director of the International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC). "In the beginning of the crisis, there was this notorious criticism coming from the President, who said that there is no EU solidarity and that China is the only country that can help", he pointed out and added that the EU's approach to communication in Serbia should be much more efficient, because the other actors are having better results with far less funds.¹⁰

False publications, conspiracy theories, and misleading photos – the coronavirus pandemic also infects Southeast Europe with fake news and anti-EU narratives about lack of adequate actions and solidarity among the EU countries.

The US ambassador to the NATO said in April that the Atlantic alliance would help its newest member, North Macedonia, deal with a wave of fake news and disinformation, which lately has been about the coronavirus and comes from both Russia and China. “There are false reports that they [Russia and China] are sending assistance, there are false reports that the virus emerged from Europe or the United States. This is absolutely false and we are trying to respond with facts,” the ambassador told the press briefing.¹¹

What are the negative phenomena of COVID-19 media coverage in Southeast Europe half a year into the pandemic? On the one hand, there is still fake news about the disease and COVID-19 health measures. On the other hand, governments attempt to control the media coverage or even worse – to avoid the subject, as it leads to an explosion of discontent among the audience, which is tired of COVID-19 news and reluctant to follow the measures against the pandemic.

There is clearly a link between the poor quality of information on COVID-19 and the growth of COVID-19 positive patients.

Protests against measures to control the pandemic are widespread in the Balkans. In the beginning of the pandemic, the Kosovo government coalition resigned, in Bulgaria, there are anti-government protests, which have been ongoing for a number of months. This led to a restriction of communication on the topic by the responsible state institutions. They are reluctant to take responsibility for unpopular measures and to speak about them, which is a risk for their political stability and future.

We will find out in the coming months if this phenomenon of silence about COVID-19 will be the “new normality” in the media of Southeast Europe. Lack of in-depth information and pluralism of sources of information could be related to the rise of COVID-19 cases. An ill-informed public took wrong decisions just to ignore the existence of COVID-19 instead of following safety measures.

In September 2020, the Southeast European countries registered a sharp jump in coronavirus cases. The start of the school year made the topic hot. As a consequence, media and politicians started to speak again about COVID-19. The reluctance of politicians to take responsibility for and comment on measures that seem unpopular influences the quality of media coverage. It's like going round in circles. But there is clearly a link between the poor quality of information on COVID-19 and the increase in positive COVID-19 cases.

In a context of unprecedented challenges for the media and digital technology sectors, UNESCO has created a “resource center” of selected responses to COVID-19. It includes a collection of examples of actions related to communication and information made available for the purpose of sharing practices, identifying priorities, facilitating partnerships, amplifying good practices, providing advice and technical assistance to governments and relevant national stakeholders, and fostering North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation in order to improve the quality of media output, which is especially significant for Southeast European countries.

To further build trust in the media, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) has launched a competition to award professional coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by journalists in North Macedonia. The Call for Best Journalistic Stories was open to all professional journalists and media having covered the health crisis in North Macedonia.

Support for quality media output is especially important for Southeast European media, which have marked a negative trend in their functioning and independence, even before the COVID-19 crisis.

Effects on the Economic Situation of Media Houses and Journalists

Just a few months ago, the media recorded an impressive audience growth. People have consumed huge portions of news content about the disease 24-7. Television and online media were preferable sources of information. But in Southeast Europe, there are major worries over the economic impact of the crisis, in particular the plummeting of advertising revenues for media outlets. The number of viewers and readers is at a record high, but revenue is at a record low due to the loss of advertising. However, in a region considered among the most vulnerable to the spread of disinformation, news media have enabled access to reliable information on the pandemic versus the disinformation shared on social media.¹² The urgent search for information about COVID-19 stimulated and intensified the news production about the virus. At this point, the theory of infodemia emerged – we do not only have to survive a pandemic, but also an infodemic. On social media, people started to blame the media that they were making a profit on COVID-19 news. Conspiracy theories emerged about some sort of secret agreement between

The number of viewers and readers is at a record high, but revenue is at a record low due to the loss of advertising.

governments, international organizations, and the media to create a global crisis. Lack of trust in the media is widespread in the region.

At the same time, media have suffered from a sharp drop in advertising and sales and, as a consequence, registered disastrous financial losses. Print media have been most affected. The sudden sharp shock to the global economy caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to an immediate slump in advertising revenue on which the survival of most media organizations directly depends, as the marketing budget is the first to be frozen by businesses during a crisis. According to data from the European Parliament published in April 2020, the decline in media advertising revenues at the pan-European level is 80 per cent.¹³

In Romania, for example, “one by one, most of the national printed weeklies suspended their print editions and most of the local print newspapers reduced the number of pages in order to cut costs.”¹⁴ The local media editors said that their income fell by 70–90 per cent in March and April alone. National TV stations also saw their income diminished, but in a much smaller proportion. According to data from Publicis,¹⁵ the TV ad market fell by 36 per cent, while print and radio lost 60 per cent.

The lack of advertising revenue has forced media in Southeast Europe to support governments’ efforts to restart the economy despite the disease. From one extreme – plenty of information about the coronavirus, including false, they went to the other extreme – starting to neglect the topic in the name of economic growth and revenue from advertising. Some journalists lost their job, some were forced to take paid or even unpaid leave or to work with reduced salaries. These actions were presented as part of the anti-epidemic measures and as actions against the economic difficulties during the lockdown. Unfortunately, some media owners and even public media managers have taken advantage of COVID-19 to get rid of and fire journalists.¹⁶

Media owners receive state support from the financial funds for COVID-19 to pay journalists’ salaries. COVID-19 compensation mechanisms, thus, make them more dependable on governments and their financial aid. In Bulgaria, the so-called 60/40 measure provides financial funds for 60 per cent of the salaries of the journalists, while 40 per cent are paid by media owners. The funds are guaranteed by the EU’s Human Resources Development Operational Programme.¹⁷

Lack of advertising revenue has forced media in Southeast Europe to support efforts to restart the economy despite the disease, so they started to neglect the topic of COVID-19 in the name of economic growth and revenue from advertising.

The distribution of state advertising can also be used as a means of pressure on the media.

In Albania, media were forced to cancel some of their programmes (such as entertainment programmes involving a significant number of staff) due to the COVID-19 crisis. Marketing activity was reduced, which has led to a decline in advertising revenue for many media outlets. In March 2020, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) proposed that the government subsidise the salaries of employees working in the media sector, who represent an important link to the provision of real-time information for citizens.¹⁸ It has also been proposed that no fines be imposed until the end of June for all Audiovisual Media Service Providers (OSHMA) and the AMA, allowing time to establish communication with the tax and customs authorities to minimize taxes on advertising, profit tax, social security payments, and suspension of state rent payments. This request was supported by the President, but Prime Minister Edi Rama said that the media falls into the category of big business and that the government cannot support it with grants but has made available a guarantee if they need to take out a loan to pay employees who are at home.¹⁹

"[In Romania], the government decided to allocate around 200 million RON (40 million EUR) to media outlets (audio, video, print, online) through Emergency Ordinance 63/2020.89.²⁰ Funds for each outlet were established based on the audience or visitors they have, as audited by independent bodies. The scheme essentially offers money for clicks/views. This measure has raised concerns about the establishment of undue political influence on media outlets (some even labeled it a bribe)."²¹

"[In this Balkan country], granting aid to the media led to accusations of the exercise of undue political influence, while the reluctance of Albanian decision makers to consider media as a sector eligible for special assistance as part of the measures for tackling the consequences of the coronavirus has further deepened the economic plight of the journalistic profession."²²

"[In Romania], there has also been an economic and financial fall-out for journalists as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Advertising budgets have declined, while corporate social responsibility budgets of companies have been redirected towards sustaining the healthcare sector and organizations and campaigns dealing with

As a general observation, in Southeast Europe, the small media organizations suffer more than the big ones, regional media are in a more difficult situation during COVID-19 than national ones, and print media are more affected than TV, radio, and online media.

the effects of the health crisis (by, for instance, funding the purchase of testing equipment).”²³

As a general observation, in Southeast Europe, small media organizations suffer more than big ones, regional media find themselves in a more difficult situation during COVID-19 than national ones, and print media are affected more than TV, radio, and online media. They transform their content into digital content. Instead of every day, some regional media are only printed 2–3 times a week due to the coronavirus. The gradual disappearance of paper publications has affected the entire production chain everywhere, from journalists to newspaper sellers, through paper production, printers, and suppliers.

In Southeast Europe, only a small part of the media exists on a market basis (through subscription, advertising, and sales), and they are suffering from market turbulences during COVID-19. The rest of the media rely on fixed subsidies and depend on their sponsors’ financial situation during COVID-19.

One positive development is that, during the pandemic, people are looking for credibility, objective journalism, and quality analyses. Sensational sites and those that reprint unconfirmed information chaotically do currently not attract new audiences. The hope is that quality content media with a paid subscription base will be able to increase their profits as a small compensation for shrinking advertising revenue.

Effects on the Digitalization of the Media Landscape

The print media were most affected by COVID-19. Citizens were mainly looking for information online. The coronavirus is accelerating the end of print media. Due to the health crisis, it is difficult for daily newspapers to reach the points of sale, and it is difficult for customers to get the newspapers. The crisis has accelerated the almost certain transition to a 100 per cent digital future. It is hitting an industry that has already been weakened by declining sales and advertising revenue, its two main sources of revenue. Small local newspapers, whose street sales collapsed due to the blockade measures, have been hit the hardest.

The coronavirus is accelerating the end of print media.

The biggest digital newspapers can benefit – in some cases digital revenue has surpassed that of paper editions for the first time.

Since news went online during the COVID-19 pandemic, many content creators, editors, and journalists have lost their jobs. Although many media outlets have adapted to the digital transition, this trend has put local media companies, which are often closest to citizens, at particular risk. Digital technologies have created new opportunities for accessing and sharing information, but also new risks to freedom of expression and media pluralism.

COVID-19 is a catalyst of faster media digitalization in Southeast Europe, but digital media in the region often means low quality content, which could lead to pseudo-journalistic web platforms dominating the entire region.

Online journalism can be divided in two categories: online news websites with a subscription, implying high quality content, and free or very cheap online news websites, implying an insufficient quality of content and the risk of fake news and social media domination. It will be a dangerous situation if entire regions such as Southeast Europe, for example, fall under the influence and domination of such cheap digital pseudo-journalism.

Nevertheless, certain positive developments in the Romanian media environment have also been observed. Most of the media outlets from the new wave of digitally born media startups (such as *RISE Project Romania/OCCRP*, *Recorder*, *G4Media*) refused to access state-allocated funds in order to preserve their independence. Some of these organizations also managed to identify other sources of revenue (e. g. emergency funds released by foundations). A lot of them have further maintained a significant level of financial support from the public, mainly through small donations.²⁴ For example, *Recorder.ro*, one of the most followed multimedia platforms, announced that it would not access funds from the Government but rely on donations.²⁵

Social media are an alternative and free space for public debate. Many traditional media have been transformed into online editions during the COVID-19 lockdown, but digitalization and social media have become a trap for quality media content. Trust in media has been declining over the past decade across the world, including in Southeast Europe. According to various surveys, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that social media is facing the biggest “trust gap”, with only a minority of persons considering this source to be trustworthy.²⁶

Hoax and propaganda feature in mainstream media, but to a bigger extent on social networks – from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

to messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Viber. Marija Vucic, a journalist in *Raskrikavanje*, the fact-checking portal of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, KRIK, said the group had its work cut out dealing with fake news in Serbia. “There is more fake news, especially on social networks, but also in tabloids,” Vucic told BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, a network of non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech, human rights, and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe):²⁷ “As soon as I enter a tabloid site, I can find fake news on [the] corona[-virus] within half a minute.”²⁸

Ivana Zivkovic, from the Croatian fact-checking website *Faktograf*, also expressed concern about the huge quantities of false information: “An even bigger problem are the groups on WhatsApp and similar communication platforms, which also carry a huge amount of misinformation,” Zivkovic told BIRN, warning that, in such closed groups, misinformation is more difficult to suppress. “Those who spread it do so mostly for profit; therefore, on a false content that can produce panic, they generate traffic and monetize for ads. There are also, of course, propagandists and spreaders of conspiracy theories.”²⁹

In most cases, while the disinformation might not be malicious, it is a result of poor-quality journalism, Balkans-based digital engagement trainer David Bailey argues. “People are not fact-checking, not doing simple reverse image searches to verify reasonable sources,” Bailey said. “Together with catchy headlines, normal readers simply share without thinking. The result, then, is obvious. Also, it’s amazing how many journalists both on- and offline still don’t (or won’t) link to the World Health Organization (WHO) site, which provides definitive info.”³⁰

During the pandemic, social media were the main platform for public debate. Major criticism focused on the actions of governments and crisis headquarters. Fake news and disinformation have a long history in Southeast Europe and are not a new phenomenon. The pandemic intensified the existing problems of fake news and disinformation and the media environment, thus, suffers from the spreading of conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and misinformation. Fake news have become a much more widespread reality with digitalisation and the online transformation of traditional media. COVID-19 is a catalyst of faster media digitalisation in Southeast Europe, but digital media in the region often means poor quality news content and

many fake news websites with no clear ownership and low standards of journalism. The existence of a small number of quality digital media in the region, whose content is only available to a small number of subscribers, promotes the growth of popular sensational online websites. Using a subscription for quality digital news content is not a typical model for the region. This could cause a negative trend – i. e. pseudo-journalistic web platforms dominating in the entire region of Southeast Europe. Low quality digital information will result in a lack of trust in the media in general.

Effects on Freedom of Expression and of the Press

At a time when free, reliable, and responsible media working in the public interest is more important than ever, governments in Southeast Europe are increasingly taking advantage of emergency legislation aimed at tackling the coronavirus to push through restrictions, which seriously erode press freedom. Attacks on press freedom in Europe are at serious risk of becoming a new normal, 14 international press freedom groups and journalists' organizations warn, as they launch the 2020 annual report of the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalists. The fresh assault on media freedom amid the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened an already gloomy outlook.³¹ The report analyses alerts submitted to the platform and shows a growing pattern of intimidation to silence journalists. This trend was accelerated, with the pandemic producing a new wave of serious threats and attacks on press freedom in several Council of Europe member states. In response to the health crisis, governments have detained journalists for critical reporting, vastly expanded surveillance, and passed new laws to punish "fake news", even as they decide themselves what is permissible and what is false without the oversight of appropriate independent bodies. These threats risk a tipping point in the fight to preserve a free media in Europe. They underscore the report's urgent wake-up call to Council of Europe member states to act quickly and resolutely to end the assault against press freedom, so that journalists and other media actors can report without fear.³²

Governments in Southeast Europe are increasingly taking advantage of emergency legislation aimed at tackling the coronavirus to push through restrictions, which seriously erode press freedom.

According to the Media Pluralism Monitor 2020 (MPM2020)³³, journalists continue to face a number of threats and attacks, both physical and online, and their working conditions have further deteriorated. Since the beginning of this year, at least 50 journalists and other media workers covering protests in Europe have been

attacked. The report also shows that the media remain vulnerable to political interference.

Excessive government control, democratic backsliding built on the pre-existing trend of media capture, and shrinking space for media freedom are strikingly similar in consequence to the COVID-19 measures imposed across Southeast Europe. This was the conclusion of the panel discussion organized in May 2020 by the Centre for Study of Democracy from Bulgaria and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung about the space for media freedom in the region during the COVID-19 emergency.³⁴

The main conclusion of the panel discussion is that the state of emergency has exerted a negative impact on media freedom in the region of Southeast Europe. An overall trend can be observed whereby decision-makers pushed for limiting freedom of expression and the diversity of opinions for the supposed sake of the public health benefit.³⁵ This was justified by the argument that views criticizing government measures aimed at dealing with the coronavirus crisis could lead to public harm, as they may incite behavioral deviance from the measures. Thus, government-provided and sanctioned information was promoted as the primary and most credible source on COVID-19.

One of the most important manifestations of this trend was related to the attempt, or indeed actual ability, to pass excessive regulations against disinformation as part of emergency legislation. Under the guise of combatting coronavirus-linked fake news, such regulations went beyond tackling disinformation and restricted freedom of speech by vesting authorities with new powers for controlling the media.³⁶ In March 2020, the Romanian government passed a number of emergency decrees affecting freedom of expression and access to information and allowing authorities to issue take-down orders on articles and websites accused of spreading “false information” about the pandemic.

In the same month, authorities in Bosnia-Herzegovina introduced punitive new measures against spreading panic and “fake news” regarding the coronavirus outbreak, in a move that could impede the free work of journalists and their ability to report on the pandemic.

In Bulgaria, in mid-March, the parliament adopted a State of Emergency Law. This also included stricter action against false news.

Their spread should result in a prison sentence of up to three years and a fine of up to 5,000 EUR. However, Bulgaria's president vetoed this part of the law. The reason was that, since no definition of fake news was formulated, there is a danger of self-censorship and a restriction of freedom of expression. The Parliament then removed this section from the law.

In Albania, the anti-defamation package was adopted by the Parliament, although all international bodies expressed concerns over it, as it gives the government the authority to regulate online media, for example by blocking a web-site.³⁷

In Serbia, pro-government media dominate and independent media occupy relatively small parts of the media landscape. During the COVID-19 emergency, the government tried to centralize information distributed to the public, and a journalist from the NOVA S portal was arrested for reporting on the dire conditions in the hospital in Novi Sad.³⁸ The Serbian government initially passed (but later reversed) a decree, penalizing local institutions for releasing information to media about the coronavirus that was not sanctioned by the government.³⁹

The Republic of Moldova also provided negative examples of restrictions on media freedom. The so-called Audio-Visual Council, responsible for the approval and control of all audio-visual media, decided on March 24th, 2020, that the media would only convey official positions (e. g. from the government or from the WHO). According to this regulation, it was forbidden to evaluate official statements, especially to criticize them or to ask other experts. On the basis of a petition signed by numerous media organizations, and following the criticism by Moldova's President Igor Dodon, the Council limited its intervention in COVID-19 media coverage.⁴⁰

In Montenegro, there were arrests for allegedly spreading false news. A man was detained for three days for claiming on Facebook that the government was hiding the real number of people infected with the coronavirus.⁴¹ Opposition and civic society groups condemned the arrest and detention of an opposition Democratic Front activist for posting fake news that President Milo Djukanovic was infected with COVID-19, saying "fake news cannot be fought with arrests".⁴²

A Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) analysis of information and data rights in late March 2020 showed an increase

in arbitrary arrests, surveillance, phone tapping, and privacy breaches, as countries of Central and Southeast Europe imposed emergency laws to combat COVID-19.⁴³ The report concludes that alarmingly some authorities are exploiting the crisis for their own political gain. The pandemic has encouraged and enabled governments to clamp down on journalists and in this way worsening an already dire situation for independent media in many countries in the region. Journalists across Eastern Europe and the Balkans were already facing a new level of threats, harassment, and the risk of imprisonment, the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists said in a report published in late April 2020.⁴⁴

The Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index, also published in late April, showed increased government pressure on independent media and public broadcasters alike, with Turkey, Bulgaria, and Montenegro singled out as the worst in Southeast Europe.⁴⁵

On September 17th, Vera Yourova, Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for values and transparency, said in her speech at the M100 Media Award "Prize of the European Press": "All these attacks make the media sector more vulnerable, vulnerable to those who want to interfere and impose their narrative. This means that our democracies are weakened as a result. Because media are not only an economic sector, they are the pillars of democracy."⁴⁶ This summer, European leaders agreed on a historic recovery package in response to the crisis. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the media industry. According to Yourova, in the post-COVID-19 media order that she would like to see, "journalists everywhere on our continent will be able to do their job freely and safely, in full independence and in fair economic conditions, as this is the only way for democracy to thrive."⁴⁷ She announced that by the end of the year, the European Commission will present a series of initiatives to strengthen democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and to support the recovery of the media sector and the successful and comprehensive transition to digital transformation. The recovery plan should support the media sector, while fully respecting its independence. According to Yourova, the commission alone cannot win this battle and it needs action from governments, politicians, and regulators in the European Union. She stressed the need for everyone to realize the key role of free and independent media – a role that social media will never be able to play.

The main conclusion – that freedom of the press is a right not only for journalists, but for all citizens – is also valid for the Southeast European countries, which are not members of the EU, and their battle for freedom of press and expression during crises like COVID-19 is a crucial one for their democratic development. A lesson learnt from COVID-19 in the period March to September 2020 is that the restrictions on the free flow of information, lack of media pluralism, disinformation campaigns, and fake news result in dramatic consequences for human health and can lead to an escalation of the pandemic.

Conclusions

- › The worst consequence of the COVID-19 crisis for the Southeast European media would be if the philosophy of survival would prevail over the understanding of freedom and independence of the media.
- › The reluctance of politicians to take responsibility for unpopular measures can result in the deterioration of the quality of the public debate and access to information, as well as in negative influence on in-depth media coverage of COVID-19.
- › A positive consequence is that COVID-19 has taught people to look for credible information, provided by quality media. It became clear that sensational media can be dangerous for your health.
- › The hope for a positive scenario in the post COVID-19 world comes from the media with quality content, a quick reflex to new technologies and high professionalism. The crisis will be successfully overcome by those media, which are still able to tell the truth about what is happening in the public interest.
- › COVID-19 has not only accelerated some negative changes, but it is also a catalyst for media transformation. The important lessons learnt are to maintain the quality of journalism, to adapt media products to the demand of the audiences, not to be afraid of changes, and to be brave and creative enough to survive telling the truth.

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7. Southern Europe



By Nikos S. Panagiotou

Consolidation of a Hybrid Media System

COVID-19 was a major disruption that brought a new “normality” by affecting all societies on a global scale. Its impact has affected various social domains, including media and journalism. News have become a valuable resource, especially regarding COVID-19. In this analysis, we examine the changes that are taking place both in media systems and for journalists in Greece, Italy, and Spain as well as their incidence in democracies. Through this preliminary analysis and our questionnaire, we aim to analyze the news media sector in this new environment. As our analysis shows, major developments, such as changes in the current business model, resurgence of the role of legacy media – especially television – an increased demand for news, and changes in journalists’ working environments, will alter the relevant field. The findings are particularly significant, taking into account the importance of credible information during pandemics and in times of crises, in general.

The coronavirus outbreak has been a major challenge for societies across the world that caused major changes in every field. As Casero-Ripollés¹ argues, in critical situations of high complexity and risk to human life, such as the outbreak of the coronavirus, citizens consider the search for information and the following of news as key activities. According to Avery², “a richer understanding of audience channel selection and message reception during routine and crisis situations through receiver-oriented research” will offer a deeper understanding of the changes that have occurred in news perception, consumption, and distribution. In the last 30 years, media systems in Southern Europe have faced many changes. The transformation of the media involved changes in the institutions, in rules and values, but also in the practices of media professionals (including journalists) and in the media-related practices of audiences. “The changes that emerged with commercialization and privatization of the media landscape in South Europe have hindered the media’s capacity to operate in accordance with their public role in democracies. Various interconnected elements of the media system reflect this – media policy, media ownership and finances, media self-regulation, media content, journalism as a profession, and media audiences. Major institutional changes are necessary if we want to advance the public role of the media. This will necessarily require ‘de-naturalizing’ the assumption that such a change is possible without ‘de-naturalizing’ the dominance of private commercial media”, Popović claims.³ In South European countries, semi-tabloid journalism has almost completely taken over the market from serious newspapers.⁴ The Mediterranean model derived from Hallin and Mancini’s⁵ typology resembles the South/East European model proposed by Peruško et al.⁶ in terms of three media system dimensions: the media market (newspaper circulation is lower than average in the analyzed group of countries), higher political interference and dependency, and lower professionalization of journalism. The group also exhibits a lower to medium quality of public service television, which was the indicator used to show the role of the state. Low political interference in the media was a characteristic of the liberal model included in Hallin and Mancini’s⁷ typology. We have selected Greece, Italy, and Spain due to the common characteristics such as: low levels of newspaper circulation, a tradition of advocacy reporting, instrumentalization of privately-owned media, politicization of public broadcasting and broadcast regulation, and limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession. The Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model is characterized by the following elements:

Table 1: Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model

Newspaper Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Low newspaper circulation › press oriented towards the political elite
Political Parallelism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › High political parallelism › external pluralism, commentary-oriented journalism › parliamentary or government model of broadcast governance › politics interference and dependency
Professionalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Weaker professionalization › instrumentalization
Role of the State in Media System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Strong state intervention › press subsidies › periods of censorship › “savage deregulation”

Hallin & Mancini (2004).

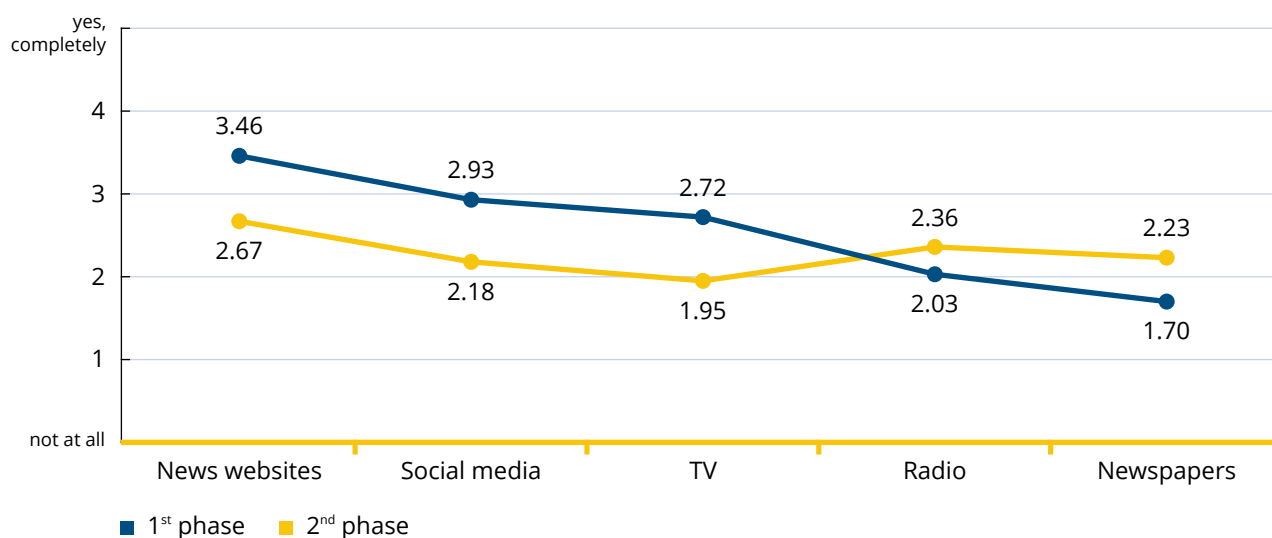
COVID-19 and Media in Greece

For Greece, which has witnessed a severe economic crisis over the course of the last 10 years, with a tremendous political, economic, and social impact, the pandemic created additional fear and insecurity. It was and remains challenging not only in economic terms but also in societal terms (especially for the younger generation) and in political terms, given the low levels of trust in the political system. Media in Greece rank among the least trusted by the public, according to various research.⁸ The lack of trust is not a new phenomenon; it dates back to 2006. In addition, a combination of ownership issues, clientelism, and the economic hardship in the period 2010–2018 have produced a problematic media landscape. During COVID-19, no new legal amendments were introduced regarding media freedom. All radio and TV stations were obliged to transmit one-minute-long information messages on the prevention of the spread of the coronavirus. The Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers issued an announcement⁹ on 18th March, 2020, reminding all press stakeholders of their obligations with regard to factual reporting, refraining from spreading fake news and compliance to journalistic

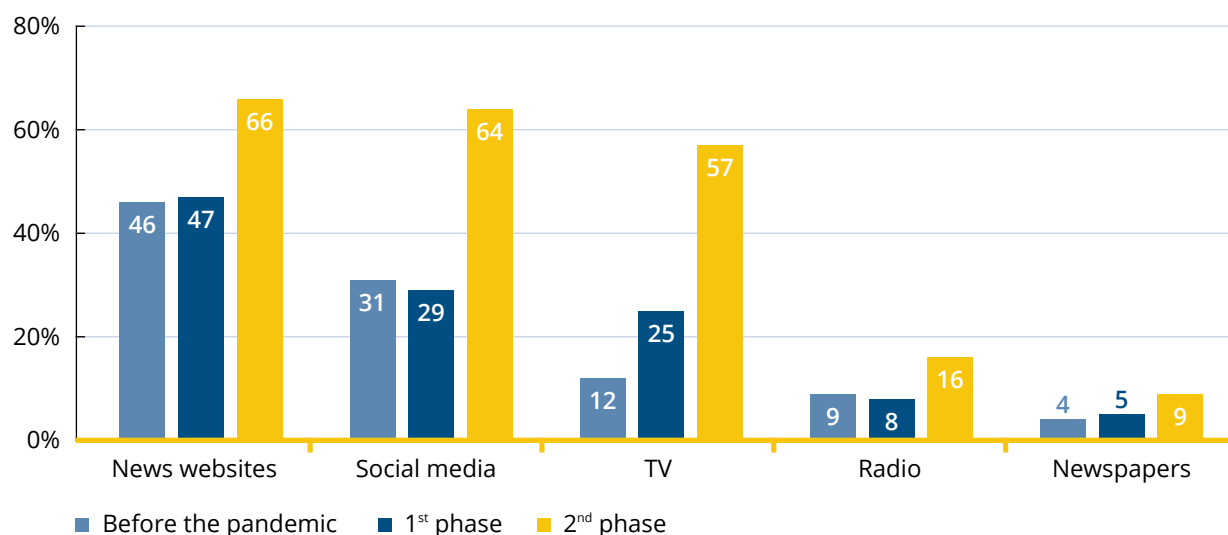
ethics. Incidents of fake news and misinformation were limited in the professional media followed by most people. On 6th March, 2020, the Minister of Health pressed charges against a newspaper for spreading fake news, an offence according to article 191 of the Penal Code. Furthermore, the National Council for Radio and Television (NCRTV) also received complaints against a TV station,¹⁰ which advertised a commercial of an ointment minimizing the risk of COVID-19 contamination. NCRTV immediately initiated disciplinary procedures against the TV station. During the period examined, the pandemic affected attitudes toward the media, as citizens have been paying a great deal of attention to the news at levels not seen recently in Greece.

According to the first research that we conducted as Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki¹¹, there are important changes, such as an increase in media trust in Greece for the first time since 2006, with 26 per cent of the respondents stating that they trust the media. During the first period of quarantine, March till April 2020, we saw an increase in trust in the media that tends to decrease in the second period examined (phase 2 in table 2) as a result of the infodemic, i. e. people overwhelmed with information related to COVID-19, as well as disinformation.

Table 2: Do you trust the media?



Research conducted by the Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Table 3: Which news media do you use for your daily update?

Research conducted by the Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

The analysis by variables of news consumption in three periods – before, during the introduction of, and at the end of special coronavirus mitigation measures – confirms the impact of COVID-19 on the media system, as we have recorded a spike in news attention, which is typical during crises. Health and economic topics attracted most of the audience's attention. However, the increase in trust was temporary, since, in newer research that we have conducted¹², 85 per cent of the respondents stated that they do not trust the media. This development is the result of the negative publicity that followed when the Greek government allocated 20 million EUR to media outlets for them to carry "Stay at Home" public health messages. This public communications campaign has been perceived as a means of influencing the media.

COVID-19 had a negative impact on the financial situation of media outlets and journalists, since a major newspaper closed and journalists were fired. For all the media, COVID-19 had a negative impact regarding the existing business model that relied heavily on advertising. The lockdown and the economic impact of the pandemic on companies led to a decrease in advertising spending of up to 67 per cent. Sports media in particular received a major blow, due to the lockdown in sports. Sports journalists suffered the most, since there

were no sports activities and, thus, no longer any corresponding media coverage. In addition, it had an impact on all sports media, both digital and traditional, in contrast with other media categories, where newspapers were those most impacted (with a decline in circulation of around 40 per cent).

COVID-19 and Media in Italy

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Italy very hard. The country has suffered a high number of coronavirus deaths per capita. Since the lockdown, the news agenda was dominated by the pandemic. “One of the most chilling details illustrating the impact on journalism comes from Bergamo, the most badly affected city in the entire country: On 13th March, 2020, the local daily *Eco di Bergamo* featured 10 pages of obituaries”.¹³ During this period, science journalism has emerged as a leading area of reporting, as there has been an increased demand for health-related news. Its contribution is now more important than ever before. As Luigi Mastrodonato argued, “for journalists focused on sports, entertainment, and events, there was nothing to write about for several weeks. COVID-19 has cannibalised everything else.”¹⁴ Fake news and disinformation have been a major issue during the pandemic and mainstream media had to deal with it. “Mistakes in reporting on the coronavirus contributed to the chaos and confusion over its spread in the country – some outlets have reported draft laws as definitive, and false stories have also circulated in the mainstream media”.¹⁵ The barrage of misinformation was mainly witnessed on the Internet – from WhatsApp forwards, playing down the virus’ potency, to viral videos claiming it was cooked up in a laboratory by one great power or another.

The situation in Italy highlighted the importance of media as a major source of information especially during crises. *Corriere della Sera* leaked news of a decree in Lombardia on 7th March, 2020, before it came into effect. This resulted in panic within the areas that were to be quarantined and prompted reactions from politicians in the region.¹⁶ As a consequence thereof, 41,000 people were prompted to move around the country at a time when it would have been absolutely crucial that people would respect orders and not move around to avoid spreading the virus.

The current pandemic situation was a huge blow for broadcasters, rights holders and content providers, with a loss of approximately

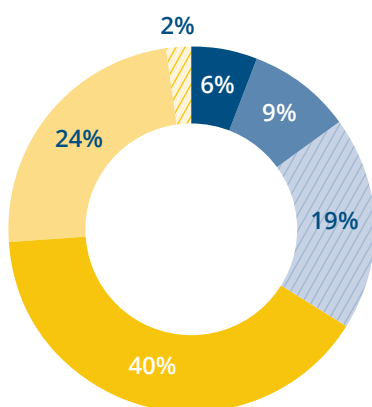
720 million EUR, most of which is due to a loss in revenues from non-delivery of live football matches and hence, no broadcasting. The pandemic “has paused what had been a lengthy period of decline for traditional media in Italy – especially for newspapers, whose sales have fallen more or less continuously since the 1990s. If the rise of the Internet is the underlying factor in that trend, a powerful catalyst has been the breakdown of public trust in mainstream news sources over the same period”.¹⁷ Before COVID-19, 40 per cent of the Italians polled¹⁸ said they trusted the news media, while this percentage has increased to 45 per cent during and after the first wave of COVID-19. According to Carlo Verdelli, editor-in-chief of *La Repubblica*, “[b]efore the coronavirus, we averaged approximately three million unique visitors a day. Now on our busiest days we reach 14–15 million visitors. Sales of physical copies have also increased, despite the closure of thousands of newsstands”.¹⁹

COVID-19 and Media in Spain

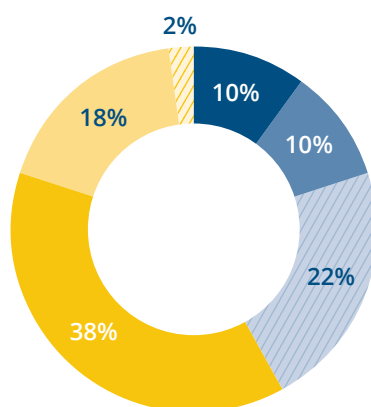
Spain has also been one of the countries most affected by COVID-19. Its media system is similar to that of Greece and Italy, forming part of the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model. The media sector has a significant impact on the country's economy, the 12th largest in the world. “The ownership of the private media is distributed mainly among a group of four large nationwide multimedia corporations (Atresmedia, Mediaset España, Prisa, Vocento), in addition to other smaller groups, mainly regional in scope (Grupo Godó, Grupo Zeta, Corporación Voz de Galicia, Editorial Prensa Ibérica, etc).²⁰ In Spain, Masip et al.²¹ found that, during the COVID-19 period, online newspapers (38.9 per cent) and television (33.9 per cent) were the main sources of information, far ahead of social media and messaging services (11.4 per cent), and radio (8.3 per cent). These would be the “refuge media” to which people come back to during challenging times.²² Media has played a key role throughout the pandemic, with over 50 per cent of the Spanish population surveyed stating that the media had done a good job explaining to the people how to deal with the situation.

Table 4: Quality of COVID-19 media coverage

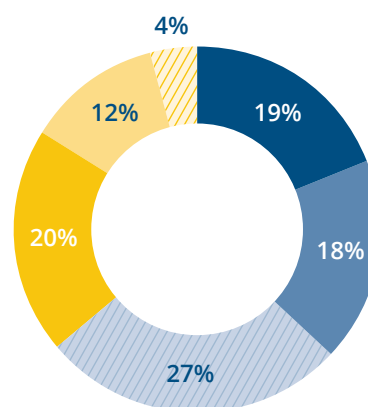
Part A: Media have explained how I can cope with the pandemic



Part B: Media have helped me understand the pandemic



Part C: Media have shown too exaggerated a picture about the pandemic



■ Completely disagree ■ Slightly disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Slightly agree ■ Completely agree ■ Do not know

Source: Statista.com.²³

Advertising revenues have decreased due to the current COVID-induced economic slowdown, as marketing budgets have been slashed. Advertising revenues at some TV channels have decreased by some 50–70 per cent. Yet, at the same time, broadcasters are expected to offer high quality programming to an audience more tuned in than ever. COVID-19 added to the challenges that broadcasters have faced in recent years – cuts to advertising and ferocious competition. They will now have to make up the financial shortfall during 2020, but their ability to do so will depend on wider attitudes and appetites to invest once the initial pandemic stage is over. In the meantime, online media – streamed at home and on demand – is benefitting from the crisis. Providers such as Netflix and Amazon have received an influx of new and returning customers. During the pandemic the Spanish Ministry of Labour adopted a measure designing a Temporary Employment Regulation File (ERTE), addressing the force majeure resulting from COVID-19. In addition and regarding journalists who lost their jobs, free help lines for the self-employed have also been created.

Discussion

Over the past decade, the media sector has proven to be resilient. While COVID-19 creates a new kind of disruption, media organizations – and the teams that lead them – have experience in finding new routes to market and have been demonstrating ingenuity in keeping people from switching channels. The sector's recent history could therefore provide valuable lessons for its future. As people spend more time at home, news and content providers are caught between increased customer demand, fierce competition, and falling advertising revenues. While some stand to gain from new working arrangements, others are losing this battle. As might be expected in these extraordinary times, the task of serving the public interest – which has never been more vital – has also been fraught with complexity for news organizations in the countries examined. In order to analyze the situation that media organizations are facing in this new demanding environment, we have conducted an online survey. The following key questions have been examined:

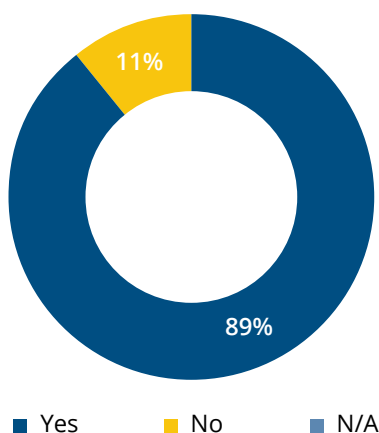
- › What consequences does COVID-19 have concerning the quality of media publications?
- › What consequences does COVID-19 have concerning the economic and financial situation of media outlets and journalists?
- › What consequences does COVID-19 have concerning the digitization of the media?
- › What consequences does COVID-19 have concerning freedom of the media?

The questionnaire was sent to 100 journalists and we have received 47 completed questionnaires: 15 from Spain, 18 from Greece, and 14 from Italy.

COVID-19 has had an impact on the quality of media publications in the relevant countries in that they had to address a larger audience with less advertising revenues (TV, radio newspapers), a decline in circulation (newspapers), and less points of sale (newspapers). All respondents agree that, during COVID-19, the need to increase digital content is an imperative. It is a way to respond to decreasing revenues and, at the same time, an increased demand for digital content. It bridges existing requirements with future directions and

business models for the media. What we have seen in all the countries examined is that the consolidation of the use of digital platforms for information has generated the configuration of a hybrid media system, where old and new media coexist.²⁴ This co-existence has been accelerated during COVID-19, as a result of the increased demand for information but also the equally important demand for credible news. In critical and highly complex situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens consider the search for information and following news key activities. As a result, there is a vast increase in news consumption.

Table 5: Did the pandemic increase the need to move to the digital age and increase digital content to attract your audience?



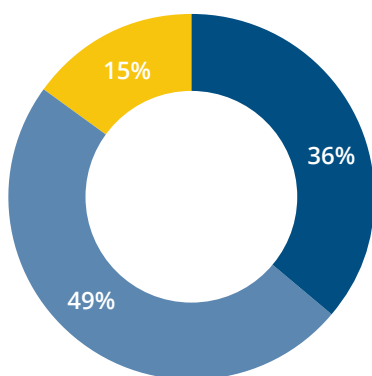
Based on a survey conducted by the author.

In all countries, journalists and editors have witnessed a change in preferences from newspapers to digital content and TV. 49 per cent of the respondents agree that during COVID-19 they have witnessed a shift from newspapers to digital content and television, 36 per cent say that there has been a shift from newspapers to digital content, while 15 per cent argue that they have seen a shift from social media to traditional media content. What remains to be seen is whether or not the characteristics of this situation will be permanent. Though most of the respondents tend to agree that this demand is a sign for permanent change that will influence the relevant business models accordingly. In the meantime, online media – streamed at home and on demand – has benefitted from the crisis. Providers such as Netflix have received an influx of new and

returning customers. However, the long-term picture could include a fundamental reshaping of consumer habits. Customers may also find their way back to traditional news channels, as we have seen in the current crisis, after rejecting online current affairs platforms. The data show the hybrid nature of the media system at present.²⁵ The current situation illustrates that traditional media have the highest percentages of news consumption and trust, while digital media are still experiencing significant increases compared to the period before the health crisis. This manifests the fully established symbiotic coexistence between traditional and new media. The results even suggest the existence of a dynamic of media complementarity rather than exclusivity, with the exception of newspapers. This is the result of different needs and trust in each medium. Uses and Grati-fications Theory (UGT) and Complementarity Theory – meaning high consumption and simultaneous information seeking from multiple media and channels – are helpful for explaining the use of media during the pandemic crisis in Greece, Italy, and Spain.

I argue that particular attention should be paid to sports media – the ones most severely hit in all countries examined – as well as to the necessity to change the existing business model that relies heavily on advertising revenues. Scholarly attention has mainly focused on types of media in the sense of “traditional” versus “new”, while ignoring the diverse consequences that COVID-19 has had on media according to the subject matter covered, e. g. sports media versus general news media.

Table 6: Did you notice an increasing change of preferences of people from newspapers to digital content or from digital content and press to television?

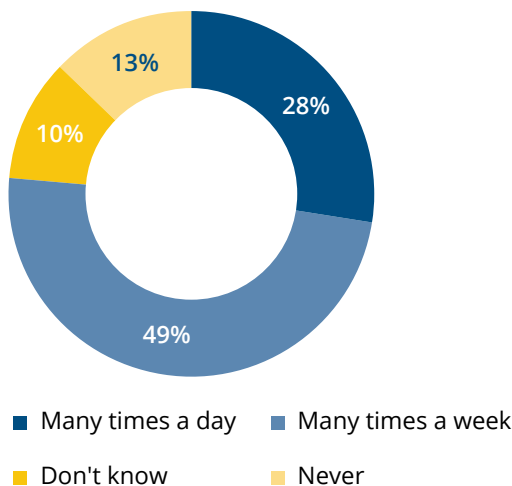


- From newspapers to digital content
- From newspapers to digital content and television
- From Social media to traditional media

Based on a survey conducted by the author.

Our survey results demonstrate the scale of the 'disinfodemic', which journalists are confronted with, along with the key sources and propellants of false and misleading content associated with the pandemic. The scale of the disinfodemic highlights the importance to equip journalists and news organizations with competencies that enable them to tackle fake news in order to maintain the trust of their audience. Trust has proven to be a critical factor that prompted audiences to favor traditional media as credible sources of information over digital media. As Andreu Casero-Ripollés²⁶ points out, "COVID-19 demonstrates the limits of social media to inform about highly relevant public affairs. Despite the growth experienced by these media to access the news in recent years²⁷, the data demonstrate that they do not succeed in displacing traditional media as a priority source of information during the health crisis".²⁸ Social media are also below the average coverage rating in terms of credibility. Besides, the results indicate that people who use social media to obtain information detect a higher percentage of fake news related to the virus.²⁹

Table 7: How frequently did you encounter disinformation?



Based on a survey conducted by the author.

Over 60 per cent of our respondents reported encountering COVID-19 related dis-/misinformation at least once a week. This element is very crucial if we take into account the fact that most journalists lack the necessary competencies for fake news debunking, while, at the same time, media organizations do not have the necessary capacities/structures or cannot afford them, especially under the current circumstances.

A major consequence resulting from the current situation in all countries examined, and a major challenge, has been gauging the boundaries of what constitutes ethical or responsible journalism during a public health emergency of such unprecedented scale. The above-cited example of *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most widely read newspaper, is characteristic and related to freedom of the media. While legislation restricting freedom of speech has not been introduced in the countries examined, other elements have been critical. Disinformation, the case of *Corriere della Sera*, or debates that took place in Greece regarding whether or not media should provide a forum to anti-vaccination and anti-mask movements, highlight a very crucial debate regarding the boundaries of media freedom. The impact of COVID-19 on the media sector reinforced some of the aspects of the polarized pluralist media systems that are dominant in the countries examined and that feature: a) strong state intervention; rely strongly on subsidies, exacerbated by the collapse of

media's main business model; b) low newspaper circulation; a press geared towards the political elite. At the same time, and despite weaker professionalization, we have seen that journalistic unions in all countries have taken a lead role in order to pressure governments to support journalists and media organizations.

Our analysis illustrates that COVID-19 has presented both challenges and opportunities for the media. As Casero-Ripollés³⁰ suggests, we are witnessing “the emergence of important developments such as the resurgence of the role of legacy media, especially television, and the fact that citizens who usually do not access information have shown a renewed interest in the news. Therefore, existing inequalities regarding news consumption among citizens have been reduced, at least in part. This generates potential benefits for democracy in terms of equality and accessibility concerning public affairs”.

While COVID-19 creates a new kind of disruption, media organizations have experience in finding new routes. The sector's recent history could therefore provide valuable lessons for its future. It is a moment in which traditional media can regain the trust of its viewers, listeners, and readers by offering different kinds of journalism that aims to understand the root of the problems and not to compete in ‘who will be the first to break the story’. It is a choice between speed versus accuracy, i. e. offering more depth and content. Today more than ever, journalistic ethics are important and journalists are responsible for providing meaning and narrating it well to the public in a clear and balanced way.

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8. Sub-Saharan Africa



By Christoph Plate

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff?

The pandemic was like a turbo. Like an accelerant or like a gust of wind that stirs up a fire in the savannah, to destroy what wants to flourish. COVID-19 was never the cause of the alarming developments in the media and elsewhere. Rather, the pandemic has accelerated crises that were already there before. In Africa, airlines like South African Airways are collapsing, hotels are closing, and small businesses are suffering. But these developments are not new – they started years ago and are a consequence of mismanagement and corruption or a suffering economy.

From Inertia to the Need to Adapt

In print media, the devastation is continuing, sped up by the external cause that affected the whole world. Only the informal sector has adapted rapidly to the new normal in many places. For example, Jua Kali craftsmen set up homemade soap dispensers and water containers so that people could wash their hands in the markets in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa right at the beginning of the crisis. And the street hawkers at the crossroads in South Africa's metropolis Johannesburg, who usually sell socks, corn on the cob, or charger cables, changed their assortment to mouth-nose protection masks within no time.

Thousands of jobs in the media sector have been lost. If a long-established company like the *Nation Media* Group in Nairobi has to draw on its savings, this – for Kenya – is the equivalent of what it would mean if the *Guardian* or the *Times* in the UK were to close down or if the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany would be facing serious trouble. Tremendous potential is lost when former writers and reporters in Johannesburg, Kampala, or Niamey have to take on jobs as Uber-Drivers to ensure their survival and that of their families. Such an intellectual loss for African societies can weigh much more heavily than the brain drain of past decades; the migration of academics from the African continent to where research is free and valued, as is the case in Europe or the USA.

Media houses on the African continent are not as rigid, inflexible, and expensive to run as an airline. But they, too, are often driven by a frightening immobility, driven by a “we’ve always done it this way”, helpless in the face of the need to act flexibly, to keep making new attempts, to fall down, get a bloody nose, and to then try again. They are not as mobile as the informal sector, which adapts. Often, they hardly know how to react to crises, with many ideas of which only a handful can be turned into reality in the end.

Just as the crisis has accelerated the decline of media companies, it has also highlighted the increased need for verified and sound information, ideally combined with the willingness to pay for it. Many innovative start-ups in Lagos or Nairobi have been encouraged to make the feared step towards entrepreneurial independence, which seems more urgent than ever.

Just as the crisis has accelerated the decline of media companies, it has also highlighted the increased demand for verified and sound information, ideally combined with the willingness to pay for it.

Long before the pandemic, KAS Media Africa, the sub-Saharan Media Program of the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, organized conferences on the media's credibility crisis or on the various business models that can be used to finance substantial journalism. These conferences were also about comparing the different experiences on the continent. In addition, we brought in experts from Germany, Switzerland, and the USA, because exchange is beneficial for all involved. And even if the circumstances of the media in the Sahel state of Niger are somewhat different from those in Zurich, Switzerland or Johannesburg, South Africa, there are still a lot of parallels, especially in the attempts to maintain and consolidate credibility.

Business models differ a lot: Some companies do not even bother to compete economically for advertisers and subscribers but immediately flee into the arms of powerful philanthropists like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, and others. This creates very unpleasant dependencies, often influenced by how well individuals, such as the editor-in-chief and the chairperson of the foundation board, get along with each other or do not. Often enough, the philanthropist has no idea about media making, while the editor-in-chief dislikes figures and balance sheets. This kind of philanthropic media work is by no means better than that of upright publishers, who would do whatever it takes to save their newspaper or radio station. Media solely relying on donors' drips tend to gloss over their situation, which supposedly is entirely free from economic dependencies. What nonsense!

What is more, young journalists, in particular, have the fatal impression that they do not have to worry about balance sheets, because they are working for a higher goal, namely the truth. It is precisely the somewhat older publishers and editors-in-chief who display particular creativity in finding funds for their work: Moussa Aksar, editor-in-chief of *L'événement* in Niger's capital Niamey, for example, knows that he has to tap the purses of the diaspora in France and Canada and persuade them to support a publication back home that maintains the connection when they are homesick. The managers of the South African online portal *Daily Maverick* introduced a membership model to tie readers and donors to the publication. This concept was successfully adapted at *263 Chat* in Zimbabwe and at *Premium Times* in Nigeria.

Those with Innovative Ideas Will Get through the Crisis

Those who have already tried to counteract the delicate rejuvenation in newsrooms with fresh ideas or who have been looking for ways to stop the decline in quality in many African media seem to be coming out of this crisis stronger. Concern and competition are more likely to stiffen among those who have relied too much on money from well-meaning donors. This is because these funds through redistribution, for instance into health projects, are being significantly reduced for the media. The anxiety that spreads in newsrooms in Johannesburg, Nairobi, or Abidjan has become stronger and more tangible. And we all know that fear is not a good advisor, especially not in journalism, which in its most ideal form sees itself as an enlightening force, which wants to help societies in their search for the right or best way forward.

At the same time, however, this pandemic has also produced stories of cautious optimism, as our examples of Joel Konopo from Botswana and the Kenyan reporter Asha Mwilu clearly show.

Print media in South Africa have had a very good reputation for many years. The magazine *Drum* already made a name for itself in the 1950s with a mixture of fashion, music, and social reporting. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, it was daily and weekly newspapers that pilloried the absurdities and crimes of the apartheid regime, forcing ministers to resign. And even in 1994, when Nelson Mandela became president, the print media played the role of critical companions. Not everyone in the new ruling party liked this. They thought that the once sympathetic press should be a little more lenient with its former companions in the resistance struggle.

But even the press, once so important for the fall of apartheid, has fallen into a crisis of meaning, and, on top of that, it has seen a drop in quality. One reason is that South Africa's approach to the question of what journalism is supposed to be is very lax. Many journalists and those who call themselves such, would also see themselves as activists at the same time. And that is a growing problem, especially for celebrated media like the *Daily Maverick*. When some of their journalists are cheered for digging through the rubbish bins of their political opponents and discovering champagne bottles and used condoms, this raises the question whether we are witnessing a new journalistic low.

The idea was simple: When borders close due to the pandemic, modern technology still helps to get information and distribute it without costs.

Nevertheless, there are a number of interesting financing models on the continent. The *Daily Maverick*, for example, which is mostly read by white people and written by white people, advertises that one can become a member of the exclusive club of *Maverick* readers, which is comparable to a European theatre subscription. During the pandemic, it was even decided to publish the best of the *Daily Maverick* in a weekly print edition, which would be distributed in cooperation with the retailer Pick n Pay. This model has an antagonistic effect at a time when media production all around seems to be in decline. What is more, it remains to be seen how independent the very close cooperation with a large retailer will be.

The membership model was also applied to two other media houses, which was facilitated by KAS Media Africa: The online publication *263 Chat* in Harare is now trying to do the same, despite the challenges of managing three different currencies in almost bankrupt Zimbabwe. And in Nigeria's capital Abuja, Dapo Olorunyomi, the busy publisher of *Premium Times*, has combined membership with access to exclusive content. Drawing on experience gained in francophone Africa, especially in the Sahel states, he is exploring the enormous potential of the diaspora as a co-financier of independent media. Nigerian remittances abroad are the second largest source of income after oil. And the *Premium Times* is using this financial potential efficiently, because homesick Nigerians in the diaspora want news from home.

During the pandemic in South Africa, there were two developments that illustrated the dangers and the opportunities in equal measure: on the one hand, the publishers of the legendary magazine *Drum* declared that in the future, they would only distribute a digital edition. This marked the end of an era, which – of course – had never been uninterrupted. During the apartheid era, the magazine had to cease publication for political reasons. The pages torn out of *Drum* magazine showing pictures of music stars and South African beauties glued to the wall are now a thing of the past. This can also be seen as a natural consequence of digitization. But as one thing fades and disappears, new and exciting things are emerging: Simon Alisson, Africa editor of the *Mail & Guardian* in Johannesburg and his editor-in-chief, Sipho Kings, launched the first continent-wide WhatsApp newspaper in April 2020. With the support of KAS Media Africa, articles from the *Mail & Guardian* as well as new ones were published in short form on Saturdays via WhatsApp. Within a very short time, the number of subscribers to the free Saturday newspaper *The Continent*

shot up. The idea was simple: When borders are closed because of the pandemic, modern technology still helps to get information and distribute it without costs. Sooner or later, *The Continent* will also have to earn money. This is most likely to happen through advertising. Those who manage advertising budgets want to know who they are reaching and where they are, in order to secure continued publication. Determining this is one of the major challenges Simon Allison and his team are facing. It is reckoned that, at present, around 70,000 people read *The Continent* Africa every weekend. And the team is optimistic and actively planning to produce a French edition.

Facts Are in Great Demand Again

The pandemic has led to an increase in news verification requests. In Africa, this was initially limited to the need to distinguish right from wrong. It is not for nothing that the international fact-checking organization *Africa Check* has noted an eightfold increase in visits to its website. The citizens, whether in Kinshasa or in Abidjan, wanted to have at least some clarity in these times of wavering certainties about when a vaccine is available, how the coronavirus is transmitted, or even whether the responsible health minister really does his job for the common good.

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At newspaper stands in Kampala or Abidjan, even before the pandemic, it was always a challenge of picking out the really serious and reputable publications amongst all the semi-pornographic nonsense on paper and those titles that only seemed to campaign for their owners' political agendas. Even if it seems too early to back this up with data, there is reasonable hope that the wheat has been separated from the chaff and that a lot of the journalistic rubbish that was on display will no longer be there after the pandemic.

Of course, not only the projects with high journalistic standards will survive. Public awareness of news and the value of researched news has increased. The filter or gatekeeper function of trained editors seems to be more appreciated now than ever. In some countries such as Kenya, for example, the government wants to know from media houses what they can contribute to their survival. Of course, this also means that the government spokesperson wants to be quoted and would like to see their calls for tender published. But it also seems to underline the realization that a critical press can be

an important companion in difficult times, even if the media does not always report nice things about you.

The crisis has led to a catharsis in the surviving African newsrooms. What counts is the news, verified and true, even if it may be unpleasant. What counts much less than before are opinion pieces by powerful writers. Social media has challenged the role of the opinion pages of many publications even prior to the pandemic. Journalism will have to concentrate on what its job is: to filter, to report, and, if possible, to tell a good story.

It was feared at the beginning of the pandemic that African governments would try to restrict the freedom of reporting. Here too, COVID-19 was merely an accelerator of authoritarian tendencies, which had already occurred before, such as in Tanzania. In Ethiopia, the democratic process and the liberalization of the media landscape under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed have slowed down considerably. But this development, including an increasing hardening of the government's attitude towards the media, despite the head of government's confessions to the contrary, had already begun months before the pandemic.

It is interesting, however, that apart from the odd praise for the People's Republic of China and its handling of the pandemic, African media is mainly interested in the formation of an African narrative. This emphasizes the African way of dealing with former insidious diseases such as HIV-Aids or Ebola. It emphasizes that the continent knows very well how to apply recommendations of the World Health Organization to the conditions in African slums or village communities and how to bring them to the people through the mediation of mayors, imams, and priests. In this context, attempts by the South African government to use First World resources to respond to a pandemic that has ravaged the majority of South Africa's Third World regions are viewed very critically.

Digitization is in many cases driving media, not the other way round. Individual examples, such as *Premium Times* or *The Continent*, in which digital opportunities are used, can be role models, but should not be confused with the need for media to constantly adapt. The Chinese app TikTok, for example, is rapidly advancing on the continent and is becoming increasingly interesting for the advertising industry. This, in turn, cannot be ignored by old top dogs like Twitter and Facebook. But the question is whether media houses that serve

There is reasonable hope that the wheat has been separated from the chaff and that a lot of the journalistic rubbish that we have seen will no longer be there after the pandemic.

to educate, which should encourage social discourse, really have to go along with every digital fashion. Newspapers, serious radio broadcasts, and investigative research do not necessarily appear on TikTok, just as one would not chase subscribers in a slapstick show.

The media has an offer to make, also in Africa. When TikTok consumers tire of the silly stuff and start yearning for information affecting their lives, they will find their way to serious media.

By Joel Konopo

The Necessary Evil – Journalism After COVID-19 in Botswana

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media industry is being felt acutely around the world. Hamstrung by the far-reaching negative impact and devastating consequences of the coronavirus, which has left a trail of destruction in its wake on economies around the world, not least in Africa and the southern African region, plummeting advertising revenue and dwindling sales, as well as shrinking budgets, have led newsrooms across the world to announce staff layoffs and to suspend or cancel their print operations. Others downsized significantly. Back home, the Botswana Gazette newspaper quickly abandoned printing for the first time in three and a half decades and shifted to digital platforms, but not without teething problems. Other newspapers have hinted at closing down and may or will have to do so much quicker.

While the pandemic has caused a massive disruption, it was just a catalyst for the already ailing media-sector in Botswana, which has been struggling to keep up with the advent of technology, an upsurge of social media, and declining revenue from advertising.

This challenge has been a slow death for newspapers particularly in Botswana, who have been slow to embrace digital platforms, even before the outbreak of COVID-19. For instance, on the eve of the general election in 2014, government introduced an advertising ban on some critical media, which undermined their financial health and also led to job losses. For one newspaper, *Mmegi*, this resulted in the loss of nearly a quarter of its staff between 2013 and 2016.

Never in our lifetime has there arguably been a greater need for independent, high quality journalism.

How the Lockdown Impacted INK Centre's News Gathering and Distribution

Never in our lifetime has there arguably been a greater need for independent, high quality journalism in Botswana than during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdowns and physical distancing measures put in place in varying degrees of severity in the country had direct implications for INK Centre for Investigative Journalism, Botswana's only not-for-profit investigative journalism news organization. It is during the lockdown that the public's need for credible, unvarnished information is vital more than ever. At the same time, public confidence and trust in the news and news media are at disconcerting levels, as mass-market consumption in news shifts from traditional forms to social media. Because of these disturbing trends, INK Centre for Investigative Journalism has been grappling with ways to stay relevant and continue telling the story in an effective and efficient manner amid an uptake of digital news that mostly rewards speed over quality and accuracy.

INK Centre and its supporters acknowledge that investigative journalism is crucial in unveiling matters of public interest that would otherwise remain concealed, and in this way, it plays a key role of informing the public and holding governments accountable. Over the past five years of its existence, INK has been able to shine an investigative light on the deep dark crevices of corruption, despite a hostile operating environment.

At INK Centre, we have come to realise that social media is a necessary evil for investigative journalism. On the one hand, we prosper in the face of leaks flooding Facebook and get unusual but impressive quotes from Tweets by officials, who under normal circumstances shun the public space. We do not take these leaks at face value, we investigate further and, in most cases, end up with impressive stories. Take the example of the recent public fallout between former President Ian Khama and his successor, president Mokgweetsi Masisi. Facebook can be a place of misinformation, but it can also generate useful tip-offs. The Majority of the Khama-Masisi differences played themselves out on Facebook pages, in some cases official letters get posted on social media, and even sensitive information is shared very liberally and quickly.

When the country's head of intelligence, Isaac Kgosi, was dismissed in April 2019 by the new president, information that the Directorate

on Corruption and Economic Crimes had compiled on him was leaked. All of a sudden, it was all over social media, including confidential information about Kgosi's bank accounts. INK Centre started looking into the allegations, which were that Kgosi had diverted millions of dollars to purchase weapons in Israel. It all began with the WhatsApp leak, which the Directorate later confirmed was accurate.

But social media has also been an unwanted disruptor. Sometimes the public tends to fall for the narrative peddled on social media to the detriment of mainstream media. Narratives are forged and gain traction on Facebook without fact checking and proper verification. To remain relevant, we sometimes find ourselves having to work faster to ensure that we do not get “scooped” by an influencer who has a massive following on Twitter and Facebook. This competition with social media influencers explains traditional media's vulnerability to digital platforms.

COVID-19 as a Trojan Horse for Censorship

If the coronavirus outbreak has taught us anything beyond the necessity of washing our hands and wearing face masks, it is that its victim has been leadership in Africa. In the case of Botswana, the government started a “censorship pandemic” on private media, using wide-ranging restrictions as a cover to violate freedom of expression. Take the example of the Emergency Powers Act of April 2020. The Act prohibits journalists from using “source(s) other than the [Botswana] Director of Health Services or the World Health Organisation” when reporting on COVID-19.¹

To remain relevant, we sometimes find ourselves having to work faster to ensure that we do not get “scooped” by an influencer.

Journalists who use other sources potentially face a fine of 10,000 USD or a five-year jail term. As independent journalists, we know that it is not desirable to rely on a government we are expected to police. However, such laws compound journalists' ability to hold those in power to account.

At INK Centre, and indeed most independent news outlets, we are used to walking the tight rope of serving the public interest without worsening an already adversarial relationship. One way to remain relevant has been to adopt other forms of storytelling that have proven to be more effective and are able to draw readers' attention away from overreliance on social media.

We use data journalism techniques to find unique stories and execute them for watchdog functions, using visuals and maps. This is especially important in times of financial peril and reporting during the pandemic.

INK Centre also uses other techniques of storytelling such as commissioning satellite imagery when it is in the public interest to avoid official barriers to reaching certain places.

In 2017, we ended up spending 5,000 USD to contract DigitalGlobe, a US-based satellite imagery firm, to obtain images of former president Khama's residence after a tip off that he was using public funds to construct his post-retirement home. It is true that the overarching official restrictions during the current pandemic compel INK Centre journalists to find efficient means of storytelling, including the use of drones and encrypted communication to avoid surveillance.

How the Public View the Media During COVID-19

It is important to note that the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) is seen as being wholeheartedly in favour of the government regulation of the media. During the campaign for office in 2019, president Masisi repeatedly extolled the free press in Tweets, saying that when he assumes office, he will repeal the draconian Media Practitioners Act, which has drawn disdain from journalists and rights activists alike. After almost three years in office, the adversarial relationship between the government and the media has not changed.

State media has the widest reach, particularly in rural areas. Private media, with limited budgets and declining circulation, have been systematically weakened and are no match to state media with their deep pockets. During the "hard lockdown" – a period of restricted movement particularly between April and June 2020 – a majority of people consumed news on state-owned Botswana Television, as private newspapers could not print. Thus, the dominance of state media as the trusted source of news and current affairs was maintained, whereas in some cases, private media was relegated during the State of Emergency and routinely denounced as peddlers of fake news.

By Asha Mwilu

In Search of Meaning

On March 13th, 2020, the Ministry of Health in Kenya announced the first coronavirus case in the country. At the time, I was serving my notice period at Kenya's leading television station. March was supposed to be my last month with my employer. Needless to say, things had to take a drastic turn. I ended up staying at the station an extra two months to help report on the unprecedented and ever-evolving news of the pandemic.

I have worked in mainstream television in Kenya for a little over ten years. My career has been anchored in covering local news and the big stories of the region like the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia, the South Sudan crisis, and Nelson Mandela's death, but the true success of my career has been in investigative journalism, which has won me top accolades in Africa. However, like many of my colleagues in the region and beyond, a quiet revolution has been bubbling inside of me for several years. I am not sure whether it's the dwindling audience's interest in news, the rush to salvage collapsing business models, or just our own editorial decisions to sometimes focus on polarising politics ... The traditional newsroom that sharpened my nose for news was gradually robbing me of my passion for the profession. I knew that I had to find meaning again in journalism.

Covering the Pandemic

So you can imagine the sunken feeling I had, as I began covering news of the novel coronavirus. My plans to start an independent digital outfit were in complete disarray. But something else was happening. Something good. For the first time in my entire professional life, the whole newsroom was forced to follow a single story for months. This meant that all of us – political reporters, court reporters, investigative journalists – had to turn our lens towards a health story. Instead of wallowing in the daunting reality that my start-up was facing the test of times even before its launch, I threw myself completely into the biggest story of the year. From markets to deserted

streets, interviews with scientists and doctors, even tapping into my investigative instincts and fearlessly reporting from the then intimidating coronavirus wards. It was physically and mentally exhausting; and I felt the joy of journalism creeping back into my life again.

For a brief moment, I did stop to question whether my decision to leave the traditional newsroom would be a misstep. A self-induced guilt-trip, that I was perhaps choosing to abandon traditional media at its most crucial hour, was threatening to paralyse my plans. But then, a few things happened that strengthened my resolve to seek new ways of speaking to news audiences. Only three weeks into the coronavirus pandemic in Kenya, my employer chose to slash the salaries of all employees by 20 to 30 per cent. Another month in and one of the other television stations fired the majority of its newsroom employees overnight, via text message. News of media companies haemorrhaging some of their most crucial desks was spreading across the industry and whispers of looming retrenchments were competing with the conspiracy theories of this virus that was slowly sweeping over the mightiest of economies. What did it for me, however, was the narrative that we needed to slow down on coronavirus coverage and go back to covering politics, which was gradually creeping back into the newsroom. While I recognised the *covid-fatigue* that the audiences and, by extension, we were battling, I knew that I simply could not go back to factory settings. I put my pen down and walked away.

Starting Something New

On July 1st 2020, I launched Debunk Media; a youth-focused digital news product that helps young people understand the implications major news events have on their lives. One of the successes of what we have created is the fact that our team is as diverse as it is innovative. I was lucky to have about a dozen young people believe in the new approach of storytelling that I wanted to inject into the industry. I now lead a team of data journalists, data scientists, illustrators, animators, and filmmakers to create what we describe as cool and relatable audio-visual content for traditionally non-news reading audiences.

Of course, like many start-ups, the beginning comes with its fair share of reality checks. For the most part, however, it has been a confirmation that our decision to prioritise the audiences over

The coronavirus pandemic, albeit gloomy, also reaffirmed the need for data in our storytelling.

monetisation is a step towards the next phase of journalism globally. The coronavirus pandemic, albeit gloomy, also reaffirmed the need for data in our storytelling and data is the foundation of our content at Debunk Media. Over the years, the newsroom colleagues, whose work has inspired mine, have always taken a leaning towards data storytelling. Nevertheless, most of these journalists are business and health reporters or those working on special projects, thriving on taking more time and attention to detail in their reporting. Data is barely used in daily reporting and when it is, it's done hurriedly. This is the gap that I felt needed to be filled, especially considering the growing misinformation and disinformation in digital space.

So what is next? Are you ever coming back to our screens? I miss your in-depth reporting. Why did you move from such a big platform to scramble for the small and restrictive online space? I get these and other similar questions in my inbox almost daily. And on the flip side, I am also flooded with many comments about how refreshing the work is that we are producing at Debunk. I will not claim to reinvent the wheel. I am not sure that is even possible in journalism. Despite all the challenges that the profession is battling at the moment, the bottomline is that journalism, when practiced right, is the reflective check and balance that modern society needs.

New Forms, Same Principles

What fuels me daily is something that I realised very early as a young reporter; journalism is a vocation. There are no shortcuts in this profession. Sure, we are more prone to emotional burnout as compared to our peers in other industries; but this is a 'get your hands dirty' profession. The medium of choice is changing, and we certainly must adapt to these new realities, but the very foundation of what journalism is and what it stands for is non-negotiable.

No artificial intelligence can replace that. I believe strongly that if journalism chooses truth, fairness, impartiality, and, above all, humanity, it can survive the trials that it is facing today.

I do not think that digital journalism is the only solution for African media. But we cannot ignore the growing penetration of smartphones and the Internet across the continent. Despite the past tough and sometimes confusing years I have faced working in traditional newsrooms in Kenya, I still see an opportunity for

If journalism chooses truth, fairness, impartiality, and, above all, humanity, it can survive the trials that it is facing today.

mainstream media to shift their approach of news towards inclusivity, diversity and fearlessness.

Adventure, courage, borderless, limitless are all words that drive my work today. The possibilities of self-reinvention and self-realisation are endless for journalists and progressive media companies in this new era of journalism. So back to March 13th, 2020; and as the Cabinet Secretary for Health announces the first case of the coronavirus in Kenya, I am following keenly from the newsroom, oblivious to the fact that the roller-coaster this pandemic will take me on over the next couple of months will also leave my career with something that I had been seeking for so long; meaning.

1 <https://bw.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/125/Emergency-Powers-COVID-19-Regulations-2020.pdf> [12 Nov 2020].



9. United States

By Sabine Murphy

Between News Deserts and Warp-Speed- Digitization

The for-profit financial model for local newspapers in the United States, dependent on advertising from local businesses, was already in decline when the coronavirus pandemic hit in the Spring of 2020 and collapsed further during the economic downturn that followed.

Can Newspapers Survive the Pandemic?

A study¹ from August 2019 showed that newspapers are the most important source of local journalism. They outperform TV, radio, and online-only outlets in original, local stories that often address critical information needs. At the time of the study, online-only outlets' output represented only about 10 percent of local news stories.

Newspapers were already hemorrhaging money since the recession of 2008. Today, digital giants like Facebook and Google earn 75 percent of advertising dollars. The strain on local newspapers and, to a certain extent, on local television stations intensified with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Most papers were hit with a loss of advertising revenue of 40 percent to 50 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Many businesses that advertised in local papers closed their doors temporarily due to quarantine orders and may not be able to survive the crisis; those advertising dollars may be gone for good. Predictions on how long the economic downturn will last range from months to years.²

Like many businesses, media companies are looking to Washington for financial relief in the form of payroll protection or tax credits for hiring journalists says Penelope Muse Abernathy³, Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the Hussman School at the University of North Carolina. In March, the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act) provided relief to businesses suffering from the economic shutdown due to the coronavirus and helped many local papers through the first months of the crisis. According to Abernathy, if there is not more help coming from Congress, more layoffs will be inevitable and even more newspapers will shut down for good. Despite the government's payroll protection legislation, approximately three dozen newspapers shut down during the pandemic and an estimated 46,000 journalists were furloughed or laid off due to quarantine. The economic downturn in the wake of the coronavirus led to an acceleration of the downward trend for newspapers.

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News Deserts

At the turn of the millennium, newspapers in the United States were at their peak in terms of circulation, readership, and advertising. According to the Pew Research Center, at least 55 million American

homes subscribed to a daily paper, about double what it is today.⁴ Since then, more than 2,100 daily and weekly newspapers – more than a quarter of local and regional publications in the United States – have closed their doors. By the year 2019, print newspaper circulation had declined by five million copies. More than 6,000 local journalists around the country lost their jobs. Either because the newspapers folded or they became “ghost” publications with as few as one journalist in the newsroom.

News deserts are defined as areas that are not served by any newspapers or only have a rudimentary presence of a few journalists, too few to effectively cover the news in the area. News deserts are not confined to rural spaces, they exist in inner-city suburban areas and rural villages. One could drive in a news desert corridor from the Mexican border through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas all the way to Canada.

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Penelope Muse Abernathy is a leading expert on news deserts. She published a 2020 report on the impact of the shrinking of local media outlets and shares interactive maps of the United States, showing the number of daily and weekly newspapers county by county. More than 1,500 counties only have one newspaper, while 225 counties have no newspaper at all. Especially the middle of the United States shows a vast area that is underserved.⁵

The coronavirus pandemic serves as an accelerator of the decline of journalism outlets. Penelope Muse Abernathy writes about fearing that the coronavirus crisis is an “extinction-level event” that “leads to the collapse of the country’s local news ecosystem”.⁶

According to her information, half of the readership of local newspapers has disappeared in the past two decades. Many readers have turned to digital offerings and read their news on sites like Facebook and Google.

“And when you lose a small daily or a weekly, you lose the journalist who was gonna show up at your school board meeting, your planning board meeting, your county commissioner meeting,” says Muse Abernathy.

Ghost Newspapers

According to the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, it is unclear how many of the roughly 1,300 remaining daily papers in the U.S. are working with only a skeletal newsroom and are therefore considered “ghosts”.⁷

An example of a ghost newspaper is the Ithaca Journal in the Northern part of New York State. They have no locally based editor or publisher and rely on one single reporter to cover the local news in a city of 60,000. The Ithaca Journal is part of Gannett, the largest newspaper publishing group in the U.S. by total daily circulation.⁸ Over the last decade, many locally owned newspapers were sold to large conglomerates owning dozens of papers. Earlier this year, two of the largest media companies – Gannett and Gatehouse – merged, creating a large conglomerate controlling hundreds of daily and weekly papers in small, medium, and large markets in the United States. Mergers lead to more layoffs of journalists.

The Poynter Institute⁹ reports that many of Gannett’s daily papers have a staff of fewer than ten journalists and several have fewer than five, leaving the papers as hollow shells of their former selves, or ghost papers.

Because of the small local reporting staff in many dailies, readers are often underserved with local news and the papers are supplemented with stories from communities miles away.

The *Washington Post* media reporter Margaret Sullivan writes in her book “Ghosting the News – Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy”¹⁰: “Some of the most trusted sources of news – local sources, particularly local newspapers – are slipping away, never to return. The cost to democracy is great. It takes a toll on civic engagement – even on citizens’ ability to have a common sense of reality and facts, the very basis of self-governance”.

Financial Impact of the Pandemic

While there is greater news consumption due to the virus, Matthew Weber¹¹ does not see news consumers’ behavior “translating into an increase in local news subscriptions in the United States”. The associate professor at the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass

Communications at the University of Minnesota calls the pandemic “a significant disruption to the media ecosystem”, which is especially challenging for media organizations that are already struggling, like small and medium size newspapers. He is worried that the “downward trend for local news is likely to accelerate in the next five years” as a result of the pandemic’s financial disruption.

Tim Franklin, Senior Associate Dean at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, and Integrated Marketing Solutions calls it “one of the great paradoxes” of our time that there is great demand for trusted local news media, while, at the same time, its “business model is being ravaged by the pandemic”.¹² Because of the economic downturn, local businesses stopped advertising and took away the lifeline of many local papers. For most papers, subscriptions are just a small part of their income and they rely heavily on advertising. If this revenue source crumbles, so does the business model for the local news media.

For most papers, subscriptions are just a small part of their income and they rely heavily on advertising. If this revenue source crumbles, so does the business model for local news media.

Furloughs, Pay Cuts, and Layoffs

The Poynter Institute has been keeping a tally of the coronavirus crisis’ economic impact on the news media since early April 2020.¹³ The findings are eye-opening. The news industry’s loss of journalists and papers has been staggering since the spring of 2020. Poynter is updating the list on an almost daily basis. It shows staff furloughs, pay cuts, layoffs, cuts in circulation, suspensions, and print editions being shut down and newspapers being closed. News media of all spectrums are impacted: television networks, digital news sites, radio stations, national newspapers, city and national magazines, and, most of all, daily and weekly local papers.

In October 2020, the Poynter list included television stations, magazines, digital sites, and radio stations. Hundreds of local newspapers have been especially impacted, some of them with very long histories in their communities. Long-running, renowned newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Seattle Times*, and the *LA Times* announced pay cuts, reduced hours, and furloughed or laid off some of their staff. The parent company of the *LA Times* closed three of its community newspapers in Southern California.

Many of the papers that stopped publishing or had to swallow massive cuts had been in the limelight just a few years ago as Pulitzer

Prize winners for outstanding coverage, like the famed *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. The paper printed its first copy in Louisiana in 1837 and earned a Pulitzer for its coverage of the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2009. Since then, the *Times-Picayune* had merged with a newer competitor and turned into a digital news site, laying off many of its experienced community journalists with deep roots in their community. Now, because of the coronavirus, it had to furlough another 10 percent of its staff.

Newspapers Without Newsrooms

In the past, many local papers owned prominent, highly visible downtown buildings conveying the impression of “a muscular news organization that’s doing serious work in the community,” says Tim Franklin.¹⁴ Because of the pandemic, journalists are working from home and many will not have a newsroom to come back to.

Because of the pandemic, journalists are working from home and many will not have a newsroom to come back to.

In 2018, the *Capital Gazette*, in Maryland’s capital Annapolis, survived a brutal attack when a heavily armed gunman broke into the newsroom and started shooting randomly. Five staff members were killed. The surviving *Capital Gazette* journalists kept working and produced an edition for the following day. The newsroom was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their reporting on the massacre in the face of mortal danger and unspeakable loss. Now, two years later, the parent company *Tribune Publishing* is closing several newsroom buildings because of the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus, including the *Capital Gazette*.¹⁵ Reporters and editors who worked from home during the quarantine do not have a newsroom to return to. A newsroom fulfills vital functions in fact-based reporting. Young journalists learn from their seasoned colleagues in close proximity and coworkers can easily fact check each other. One of the *Gazette* reporters, Danielle Ohl, is quoted in a *Washington Post* article, “You take the eyes out of the community when you take the newsroom away”. One of the local politicians agreed. “If we lose the *Capital Gazette*, talk about the loss of democracy,” said county executive Steuart Pittman.¹⁶

Among the five other properties of *Tribune Publishing*, which lost their newsrooms, is the famous *New York Daily News*, founded in 1919 and the first tabloid in the United States. The *New York Daily News* was one of the most successful daily papers in the U.S. with

a peak circulation of more than two million copies in the middle of the twentieth century.

According to the Pew Research survey, residents who see local journalists as connected to their area, give their local news media far higher ratings than those who do not. For example, those who say journalists are in touch with their community are more likely to say their local media do a good job of dealing fairly with all sides.¹⁷

Considering that many local newspapers or digital sites are operating with just a handful of journalists, compared with the large newsrooms of the past, deep roots and connections in the communities they serve are much harder to establish. Traditionally, journalists covered their respective beats for years, establishing sources and deepening connections in their communities. It takes a substantial newsroom to fulfill the civic commitment of covering all aspects of a community. Civic commitment became highly visible during the coronavirus pandemic, when journalists worked in difficult and dangerous conditions, often having to accept pay cuts and reduced hours or lost their jobs.

Digitization of Newspapers

Since the beginning of the pandemic, hundreds of newspapers switched either the whole paper to digital editions or reduced the printed editions to only a few days per week. Tim Franklin says that “the pandemic has put the digitization of the news media on steroids. It has put the shift from print to digital at warp speed”. Franklin points to the *Tampa Bay Times*, a well known and well regarded newspaper in Florida, which, a few weeks into the pandemic, eliminated the print production for five days per week. Only the Wednesday and Sunday editions are still available in print. With a successful marketing campaign, the *Tampa Bay Times* had been able to sign up 50,000 daily readers of its digital edition by the end of April. *Mc Clatchy*, the second largest newspaper chain in the United States, eliminated the print editions of Saturday papers in most markets.¹⁸

“The pandemic has put the digitization of the news media on steroids.”

Nancy Lane, the CEO of the Local Media Association, says “the crisis has forced (publishers’) hand to implement a plan that maybe was three years out, to implement it in three days”.¹⁹ Tim Franklin predicts that in the future, most newspapers will only publish a weekly

print edition on Sundays and will offer only digital products for the rest of the week.

The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Little Rock may be a model for other papers. The publisher devised a remarkably successful strategy to retain subscribers when they converted to a digital model with Sunday only print editions in 2019. The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* is loaning subscribers Ipads to give them access to their digital edition. The publisher Walter E. Hussman told the Northwestern University's Local News Initiative the two key elements of his strategy are that the digital version is a visual replica of the paper and exceptional customer service.²⁰ Subscribers get a personal training session to learn how to use their new iPads. It is not clear, yet, if the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* will turn a profit, but their ability to retain subscribers so far is encouraging to the publisher.

Access to a working computer or tablet is not the only barrier for many American readers. According to Penny Muse Abernathy the digitization of newspapers limits the availability of news in markets without reliable Internet service. Particularly Americans living in rural areas often do not have access to the Internet. But even in markets with reliable service, many citizens simply cannot afford to pay for Internet access.

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approximately 19 million Americans – 6 percent of the population – still lack access to fixed broadband service at threshold speeds. In rural areas, nearly one-fourth of the population – 14.5 million people – lack access to this service.²¹

Nevertheless, digitization of news is accelerating and, especially in urban markets, digital sites are stepping in to report local news. Yet, for many digital outlets, this challenge does not automatically lead to economic success. In 2019, more than 80 local online sites were founded, but an equal number went offline.

Muse Abernathy calls the low number of staff journalists at many digital sites insufficient. In the past, a traditional newspaper in a mid market town employed more than a hundred reporters and editors in a newsroom.

Muse Abernathy uses the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* as an example – a newspaper that served several million citizens in Cleveland, a city in

Ohio. In April 2020, amidst the coronavirus pandemic, the paper laid off most of their newsroom staff and announced that a digital site will take over the coverage of the city with only a skeletal staff.

Are People Turning Towards Quality Media During This Crisis?

Tim Franklin sees a surge in interest in local news since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. “Having access to accurate news could literally be a matter of life and death”. He calls the level of interest in information about “local schools, businesses, health care providers, first responders, and neighbors truly extraordinary, even historic [...] it’s not an exaggeration to say that the intensity of interest in local news and information is higher now than at any time in the last century.” Franklin cites data that shows that many local news sites saw their traffic more than double during the height of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. Digital subscriptions to local news sites soared by 80 percent according to the media consultancy Piano, which monitors subscriptions at 300 websites.²²

Many local news sites saw their traffic more than double during the height of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. Yet, Americans’ praise for the news media does not necessarily translate into their willingness to open their wallets.

The media giant Gannett told the Medill Local News Initiative that it saw an 85 percent increase in net subscriptions in 2020.²³ Franklin says that so far, news organizations have been able to hold on to these new subscribers. He calls the increase in people paying for local news “eye popping”.²⁴

Viewership of traditional network evening newscasts has been up, as well. Before the pandemic, ratings were on a steady decline for the flagship evening news programs of the big TV networks. In March and April, when Americans were especially eager to consume news about the coronavirus, ratings were up 23 percent to 44 percent. *World News Tonight*, on the ABC television network, made ratings history in July, when it led all shows on broadcast and cable for the week in total viewers, adults 18–49 and adults 25–54. No network nightly newscast has been able to pull off this kind of success since the early 1990s. The major cable news networks enjoyed an increase in ratings of up to 153 percent (CNN) in April. Since then the ratings have been declining again.

Matthew Weber, Associate Professor and Cowles Fellow of Media Management at the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, says that “the pandemic

has significantly altered global media consumption patterns”.²⁵ According to Weber, there is “clear evidence that time spent online engaged with social media has increased significantly” in the US. He says that the initial increase at the beginning of the pandemic across local and national news and all formats (online, TV and print) has tapered off, although some consumption remains higher compared to a year ago. Weber sees the most significant gains in social media. “Many consumers (shifted) to social media platforms for access to news and information”. Local news has played a particularly important role as a source of information for Americans during the pandemic. Weber cites the findings of a Pew Research study from August 2020.²⁶ 70 percent of the respondents gave the news media fairly good marks for covering the COVID-19 crisis.

Yet, Americans’ praise for the news media does not necessarily translate into their willingness to open their wallets. In March 2019, the Pew Research Center had conducted a comprehensive survey on how Americans view local news, digital news sites, and their willingness to pay for the service. Pew found that only 14 percent of Americans had paid for a local news source, yet 71 percent thought that local news media are doing well financially.²⁷ Experts see a disconnect between Americans’ views on the financial health of local news and the fact that many local news outlets are struggling or have folded.

Signs of Hope and Possible Solutions

There are small signs of hope on the horizon for some local outlets and some success stories of more prominent media companies.

Responding to the pandemic, social media giants Facebook and Google announced emergency funding for local news. Facebook gave 25 million USD through its Facebook Journalism Project. “The news industry is working under extraordinary conditions to keep people informed during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when journalism is needed more than ever, ad revenues are declining,” a Facebook spokesperson said, promising that the social media company would also spend 75 million USD to buy newspaper ads.²⁸ Meanwhile, Google Inc. announced its own 100-million-USD journalism fund “to deliver urgent aid to thousands of small, medium, and local news publishers globally.” It is safe to say, it is not enough to save all local dailies and weeklies in small markets, but it will help some of them.²⁹

A project to strengthen media infrastructure for the future was announced by the Google News Initiative together with LION Publishers who launched a “boot camp” to address a growing need for an “ecosystem of support and opportunities for aspiring news entrepreneurs”.³⁰

Medill School's Tim Franklin sees a pivot to a reader revenue business model as an accelerating trend due to the pandemic. He points to a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford, UK, that showed that growing reader revenue through subscriptions is a top priority for media organizations. Franklin calls it “healthy for journalism and news consumers. It minimizes the reliance on page views or clicks”, possibly reducing the perceived need for increasing sensationalism on news pages. Franklin adds that news media “need to create a news report that people are willing to pay for”. He cites the Boston Globe and Minneapolis Star Tribune newspapers as examples. Both have built strong foundations of reader revenue.

One of the outliers and a true success story is the New York Times (NYT), which has built a robust subscription model during the past decade. According to Eileen Murphy,³¹ Senior Vice President of Corporate Communications, the Times had an average of 130 million U.S. monthly readers in the second quarter of 2020, during the height of the pandemic – 30 percent more than during the same period last year. What sets the Times apart from many other papers is the ability to turn readers into paying subscribers. The Times added 669,000 new digital subscriptions across their platforms. Murphy points to the detailed coverage of the COVID-19 crisis as a reason for the NYT's success. “Our ongoing investment in our newsroom has enabled our national desk to dispatch reporters across the nation to chronicle events on the ground as new pandemic hot spots emerged.”

The Medill School's Tim Franklin thinks along similar lines about quality journalism and quotes Christine Taylor, the Managing Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, “this is going to be the moment that fundamentally shifts how journalism is funded. In order to get people to subscribe, you have to be providing value, and I think that's where this is a moment of reckoning for us”.

“This is going to be the moment that fundamentally shifts how journalism is funded. In order to get people to subscribe, you have to be providing value, and I think that's where this is a moment of reckoning for us.”

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Imprint

Published by:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2021, Berlin

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Cover page image: © Kadmy/Adobe Stock

Plastic textures: © ArtistMef/Creative Market

Translation and editing: Rachel Hinterthan-Nizan

Design and typesetting: yellow too Pasiek Horntrich GbR

Produced with financial support from the Federal Republic of Germany.



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ISBN: 978-3-95721-857-5

As for so many other sectors, the COVID-19 pandemic has also left its marks on the media landscape world-wide. But has it really been a game-changer, or has it just accelerated and reinforced pre-existing trends? Has it only caused damage, or also offered new opportunities and separated the wheat from the chaff? Eleven experts and practitioners covering nine world regions and countries will explore these questions.

