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The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism

Introduction to special issue: Covering Covid-19: The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all spheres of society, including journalism. It has brought about dramatic changes in journalistic routines and working practices, as well as in audience behaviour. In this introduction to a special issue of *Digital Journalism* focused on the impact of the pandemic, we make the case that it should be seen as a *critical moment* for journalism – a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of past, present and future. This view of the coronavirus crisis as a critical moment can reveal multiple co-occurring, partially overlapping and, in some cases, also paradox developments: it can be (a) a turning point, (b) a transformation, (c) an amplifier, (d) a starting point or (e) destruction.

The articles included in the special issue reveal the multitude of profound effects the coronavirus crisis has had on journalism in a very short time span and elaborate on the potential upheaval this may bring in the future. Ultimately, the crisis represents an opportunity to rethink the meaning and practices of digital journalism. It invites journalism researchers to explore new and innovative methods, as well as the reassessment of existing categories, concepts and theories.

Keywords: Covid-19, coronavirus, digital journalism, journalism studies, news audiences, news production

Special issue:

Covering Covid-19: The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism

The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism

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The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all spheres of society, and journalism is no exception: From the outset of the pandemic, media organizations had to quickly restructure their work processes, as staff had to stay at home during times of lockdown or work restrictions. Online video conferences replaced team meetings, and journalists used business work platforms in dispersed networks instead of direct cooperation in the newsroom. Video interviews were partially done via Zoom instead of sending out teams or getting interviewees to a studio. Further, it became more difficult for journalists to access their sources, as the freedom of movement and the ability to meet was restricted in many countries. And indeed, even the critical observation of such governmental action was seriously hampered – either indirectly by the effects of virus-related general restrictions, or directly by restrictions on journalistic work during the pandemic, as some countries used the pandemic as an excuse to tighten control measures and limit journalistic leeway. Despite the global nature of the pandemic, not all of these effects occurred in the same way in all countries around the world: While in some countries, journalists’ ability to cover the news was compromised, in others, news organizations adapted quickly and even used the situation as a chance to adapt and modernize. At the same time, journalists were also compelled to dramatically change the *content* of their reporting – the stories they tell and the way they are framed (see Valenzuela et al. in this special issue). As the pandemic and its dramatic consequences for the everyday lives of their readers came to dominate public debate, the news-seeking behavior of audiences was transformed, as they sought to negotiate the tension between the need to stay informed about the unfolding crisis and the need to protect mental health amidst the onslaught of terrifying developments (see Van Aelst et al.; De Bruin et al., in this special issue).

The enormous and sudden change in societies – and journalism – around the globe, paired with uneven and confusing developments within and between nations, has also had an impact on corresponding research: Very much like its object, journalism research was struggling with a multitude of divergent effects, some paralyzing ongoing research efforts, but others opening new venues and necessities for analysis. As researchers across fields have noted, the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on academic caregivers, who are disproportionately women. As Ahn and her colleagues (2021) noted, “the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light our precarious position and the lack of structural and institutional responses to cope with crises.” Faced with the closure of schools and childcare facilities, women have been “expected to take on the bulk of childrearing and maintain their academic prowess” (Lawless, 2021).

Shaped by these and other structural inequalities, the field nonetheless reacted quickly, and within a short time, the first white papers and research efforts surfaced – often done in lockdown and with no funding, but fuelled by the conviction that scientific evidence and insight is a necessity in such a crisis. This special issue of *Digital Journalism* captures this spirit: Based on a call for papers that received nearly two hundred submissions, we have collected original research from around the world which sheds light on how journalistic production, texts and audiences have been shaped by the challenges of the pandemic. In making our selections, we prioritised contributions which (1) are based on original and rigorous empirical research, (2) advance our conceptual knowledge of digital journalism, and (3) collectively reflect the global breadth and diversity of scholarship and practice in digital journalism. Further, we asked an external expert to comment on the special issue, to give it more context, ask the critical questions we might have overlooked and connect dots that may have been invisible to the special editors. We are very grateful that fellow communication scholar and digital media researcher Eun-Ju Lee accepted our invitation (see Lee in this special issue). This is the first of two special issues of *Digital Journalism* tapping into this rich body of emerging research, with a second issue to appear in early 2022.

The pandemic as a critical moment for journalism

The transformations wrought by the pandemic have not occurred in a vacuum: They have taken place against the backdrop of broader economic, political and technological developments affecting the world, and within this, journalism. These include, in terms of technology, already-existing long-term shifts towards online working and mobile reporting, and the growing importance of a shifting range of social media platforms for encountering and sharing news. In terms of political life, it encompasses the increasing polarisation of politics and the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders across the world. In economic terms, the pandemic has caused further woes for journalism, exacerbated by a short-term collapse in advertising revenues as a result of the pandemic (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund., 2020, Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco & Boelle, 2021). These economic challenges have affected the news industry unevenly, with local media harder hit and many forced to shut down, reaffirming long-standing questions about the sustainability of the business model of journalism.

In that sense, the developments in (digital) journalism cannot be adequately analyzed without a socio-historical understanding of broader economic, political and technological contexts. We propose that the coronavirus pandemic is a *critical moment* for journalism – a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of past, present and future (see Laws, 2020).¹ This also means that the transformations we observe during the pandemic are not just isolated events that can be understood through surface-level description. Instead, understanding the larger contexts is essential. Many of the changes ushered in by the pandemic are decisive, based on antecedents, and potentially with lasting effects well beyond the pandemic itself. And in many cases, the pandemic made visible what was already happening – but often invisible – before.

¹ For the related concept of „critical incidents in journalism“, see the homonymous book by Tandoc et al. (2021). In contrast to this concept, which also encompasses events tied to specific nations and regions, we understand the coronavirus situation as one unique moment of paradigmatic change, due to its severe and global nature.

We understand a critical moment as defined breakpoint, where some processes and developments come to a halt, and some essential aspects, issues, practices, actors and interactions become observable, including ones that may have been previously overlooked (e.g. Khan, 2013). Thus, the pandemic offers an opportunity for much-needed reflection. This view of the coronavirus crisis as a critical moment can reveal multiple co-occurring, partially overlapping and, in some cases, also paradox developments: it can be (a) a turning point, (b) a transformation, (c) an amplifier, (d) a starting point or (e) destruction. Logically, there is also the option of straightforward continuation, but given the severity of the pandemic impact on a global scale, this is unlikely (at least for journalism in general).

As a *turning point*, the crisis may serve as a change in direction of ongoing developments, or as a full reversal of strategies based on a reconsideration in light of the altered situation. Indeed, some news organizations took the crisis as a reason to abandon previous processes or objectives. The significant rise in online news consumption and the issues of (physical) print during the pandemic may have propelled decisions in favor of innovative and new online ventures—cases of the struggling traditional press were near-global. Further, scholars noted the necessity for new organizational and economic solutions particularly at the local level, where the crisis hit particularly hard (see for example Olsen, Pickard & Westlund 2020). These struggles and changes in journalism often went hand in hand with *transformation* processes: News organizations used the pandemic to change the composition of staff or responsibilities, push towards more ‘virtual’ cooperation and home office work (see Garcia-Aviles in this issue), or strengthen their online outlets in favor of the print ones. In some cases the pandemic served as an *amplifier* or *accelerator* for processes that had already started well before the pandemic – for example, when it was used as a pretense for staff reductions or already planned alterations of working conditions (e.g. Dawson et al., 2021). Across news organizations, some of these changes have been made permanent. For example, working from home has now become the default in many major news organizations (Mayhew, 2020). Also, some governments used the crisis as a tool to further restrict access to information or limit the freedom of movement for professional journalists (and not always based on reasons of protecting public health), as Lambrini Papadopoulou and Theodora Maniou show in their article for this special issue. And in some places, extremist attacks on journalists grew considerably, either in the form of online hate or physical threats during field reporting (Selva, 2021).

However, the crisis was also perceived by some as a *starting point* for something new: the pandemic opened up opportunities for some forms of special interest journalism, it spawned new journalistic projects and start-ups, and gave journalists new skills, tools and information sources. In a rapidly changing news environment, the ability to understand and explain scientific research took on an unprecedented importance (Danzon-Chambaud, 2021; Makri, 2021). For example, as shown in contributions by Pentzold, Fechner & Zuber, and Wu to this special issue, the pandemic brought about the rise to prominence of data journalism as a tool for explaining the crisis to audiences while maintaining journalistic autonomy and authority. As Pentzold and colleagues argue, the use of data visualizations allowed journalists to serve as knowledge brokers while communicating the uncertainty associated with the broad spectrum of outlooks. At the same time, Wu shows that data can never be viewed as neutral. Instead, it tends to be disseminated from the top down – often by governments – and is thus shaped by power and social relations.

The birth of something new often meant the *destruction* of something old, though: Indeed, the coronavirus crisis also destroyed the economic basis of some journalistic ventures (due to the temporary collapse of the advertising market) or had a serious impact on supply chains or distribution channels. Early on in the pandemic, the Guardian saw “critical reporting under threat” and feared a “‘media extinction event’ in developing countries” (Ahmed, 2020), but issues triggered by economic struggles were a global phenomenon (see for example Schiffrin, Clifford & Tumiatti 2021; EJO 2021). Whether this fatally damaged the information system in some countries or was a case of “creative destruction” (Schlesinger & Doyle 2015) that triggered restructuring processes can only be assessed in the long run. Indeed, Reporters without Borders noted, with the release of the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, that we are “entering a decisive decade for journalism, exacerbated by coronavirus” (Reporters without Borders 2020).

As noted above, a *critical moment* is not only a reason for description and categorization – it’s also an opportunity for a reflection whether the field *needs* change in order to innovate and adapt to a new post-pandemic reality. To set the stage for such reflection, we need solid empirical findings and a deeper theoretical exploration of what happened to journalism and social systems across the globe during the crisis. The studies in this special issue are meant to be a starting point: They exemplify the complex, sometimes seemingly contradictory developments from various perspectives, offering rich insight and inspiration for further work and theoretization.

A critical moment as signifier of parallel and paradox developments

Here, we make the case that journalism has been shaped in distinctive ways. While some of these transformations reflect a temporary crisis response, others are likely to have a lasting impact. In the realm of production practices, the shift to online working has removed journalists away from work “on the ground” as news organizations were compelled to adopt remote working and virtual collaboration (see Garcia-Aviles’ and Mare & Santos’ articles for this special issue). This, in turn, made them more dependent than ever on elite sources, as shown in Claudia Mellado and her colleagues’ cross-national content analysis. In their article, they demonstrate the vital role of the state in constructing pandemic news, even if the distribution of news sources was both dynamic and shifting according to the nature of the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic has generated new challenges amidst rising tension over press freedom, with media freedom watchdogs warning about the dangers of suppression by authoritarian governments, and the pandemic being widely used as a pretense for the suppression of critical voices (Papadopoulou & Maniou in this special issue). The consequences of such suppression have not been felt evenly around the world, and research published in these special issues also shows the distinctive articulation in non-democratic contexts such as China. At the same time, journalists have developed new practices for asserting their epistemic authority, including the use of data journalism (Wu in this special issue). Overall, then the pandemic has brought to the fore questions about how journalists can maintain their authority in a crisis situation, in the face of assaults from multiple directions (Carlson, 2017; Perreault & Perrault, 2021)

With respect to the *content* of news, research has shown that mainstream news organisations were compelled to rely heavily on politicians as sources, albeit with the growing (and often counter-balancing) presence of public health and medical experts (Mellado et al). Although news organisations saw a huge rise in audience engagement, the pandemic has also confirmed the move to social media as an information source

Finally, research on news audiences demonstrates that the pandemic had a dramatic impact on news consumption. Van Aelst and his colleagues, in their article for this special issue, report on the results of a two-wave panel study across 17 countries. Their study shows an overall rise in news use, but mainly for easily available media types that provide immediate coverage at a time of crisis and a stronger need for orientation. This resulted in higher consumption of TV news as well as social media and online sources. There is some evidence of changes over the course of the pandemic in news consumption routines, with audience members maintaining a careful balancing act between in extensive news-seeking behaviour and news avoidance to protect their mental health (De Bruin in this issue, see also Kormelink Klein Gunnewiek, 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). At the same time, the pandemic has given rise to frantic audience participation in online forums and social media, directed both at information-seeking, sharing, and managing mental health (Pedersen & Burnett, 2021). As social media have gained increasing importance as a news source, it is, however, important to keep in mind that we cannot make any straightforward assumptions about the effects of social media posts, as shown by Valenzuela and colleagues' article for this special issue. But the growth of social media has raised the spectre of "dark participation" (Quandt 2018), facilitated by the emergence of "dark platforms" such as 8kun and Gab, which have played a key role in the dissemination of conspiracy theories and mis- or disinformation about issues ranging from the origins of the pandemic to the safety of vaccinations (Zeng & Schäfer in this special issue). These "dark platforms" constitute a parallel information ecosystem dominated by fringe political actors and low-credibility sources, as Zeng and Schäfer demonstrate, and the spread of deceptive information there is much higher than in traditional journalistic media and even self-proclaimed 'alternative' news media on major social media platforms (see Evanenga et al. 2020; Boberg et al. 2020).

A critical moment as an opportunity for scholarly reflection

This short overview of articles and topics in this special issue has revealed the multitude of profound effects the coronavirus crisis has had on journalism in a very short time span. The studies gathered here further elaborate on the potential upheaval this may bring in the future – however, some of the transformations are only just becoming visible, and the long term effects can be barely surmised. While some may consider the coronavirus crisis a cataclysmic event for journalism, it also offers a chance for reflection and reconsideration. As we have argued here, we can understand this as a *critical moment*. As such, the crisis represents an opportunity to rethink the meaning and practices of digital journalism. More than anything, the pandemic has vindicated the importance of journalism as a social institution, for societies and citizens across the world. In doing so, it has highlighted areas of resilience and vulnerability, showing that journalism can never be insulated from external pressures. Instead, journalism is essential and therefore, at least to some extent, needs to be protected from such pressures to guarantee the functioning of democratic societies. Given some

monumental challenges for humanity (with climate change, limited food and resources, ongoing refugee and migration crises just being the most notable ones), it is important to understand this pandemic crisis as a wake-up call for a renewed interest in fostering, protecting and innovating digital journalism. Some criticism of its performance as a critical, independent voice notwithstanding, it has proven to be a trustable, fast and far-reaching source of current information in many cases – a source that needs to be strong and impartial, in face of these future challenges.

Against this background, the coronavirus crisis may not only be a critical moment for (digital) journalism, but also for journalism research: It may be a turning point, require a transformation, amplify existing developments, it may be a starting point for something new, maybe even a source of creative destruction. Indeed, new and innovative methods – as showcased by some of the studies in this special issue – are necessary to fully analyze the partially paradox and transformative developments happening in such a short time and on such a global scale. And what this research uncovers will most likely also require a reassessment and rethinking of existing categories, concepts and theories. In short, journalism research must up the ante in terms of methods and theory to keep up with the speed and magnitude of change.

This special issue and its articles represent an early attempt to contribute to this crucial reorientation process – and given the high interest that followed the call for papers (with nearly two hundred submissions) and the excellent submissions received by the journal, we are convinced that other significant works will follow, deepening the insights gathered here. If the initial enthusiasm is an indicator for subsequent research activity in the field beyond this critical moment in time, we may not need to worry about innovative research and new ideas for the future of digital journalism – and potentially, that may also help digital journalism in the challenges and crises to come.

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