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Citation for final published version:

Quandt, Thorsten and Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin 2022. The Coronavirus pandemic and the transformation of (digital) journalism. *Digital Journalism* 10 (6) , pp. 923-929.

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2090018>

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The Coronavirus pandemic and the transformation of (digital) journalism

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When the first cases of an unknown virus disease were reported from the city of Wuhan in China, journalists from around the globe mostly treated it as a potentially worrying, but remote story, often somewhat hidden in the foreign news sections of the respective outlets. What seemed to be a relatively insignificant and controlled event far away, developed into a worldwide issue at breathtaking speed. The global pandemic not only became a central topic of journalistic coverage (Quandt & Boberg 2020), but it affected journalism itself: in its work and production routines, its news distribution and technology use, and even in its economic foundations and societal role. In that sense, the pandemic was different from other crises, as its impact was direct - the object of the coverage became tangible and transformative for journalists as it did for everyone else. The traditional journalistic position of the detached, distanced and objective observer of “news from nowhere” (Epstein, 1972) became untenable, as all members of society – including journalists themselves – were directly affected by the “trauma on our doorstep” (Jukes, Fowler-Watt and Rees, in this special issue). As a result, journalists became co-represent witnesses to an unfolding and unprecedented crisis (Wahl-Jorgensen, forthcoming). As we have noted elsewhere, the Coronavirus pandemic therefore represented a critical moment for digital journalism (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen 2021).

Here, we draw on the contributions to this special issue to make the case that the upheaval wrought by the pandemic ushered in transformations in the practices, texts and audiences of digital journalism, shaped by technological, social, political and economic responses and adaptations. However, even as these changes may have appeared sudden and dramatic, they did not come out of nowhere or emerge in isolation, but were instead enabled and accelerated by the condition of crisis.

Two years into the pandemic, it has become apparent that some impacts on societies around the globe were profound and may have brought about lasting changes. In many countries, daily lives changed dramatically over the course of these two years. During the peak phases, social distancing measures and lockdowns, mask wearing, working from home, video conferencing and online education became the norm in many places. The adaptation to “in-between” and “post-peak phases” with what were sometimes unclear regulations was also a source of personal stress and tension. On a societal level, there was a massive economic impact, rising unemployment in many countries, social tension and political turmoil. And there was a death toll that grew into the millions.

Media and journalism – as part of societies – were not immune to the consequences of the pandemic. First, news and information flows were an integral component of the pandemic and its development over time, particularly in terms of understanding it as a social phenomenon, beyond medical and virological aspects. Indeed, the spread of a virus also depends on the behavior and interaction of its host population. In contemporary societies, behaviors, values and norms are profoundly shaped by communication, channelled through both traditional and digital/social media. The WHO’s early warning about an ‘infodemic’ (WHO 2020), or a parallel ‘infection’ of societies with harmful misinformation and a quasi-viral spread of such messages via the Internet, is tied to this social understanding of a pandemic.

Indeed, alternative news sources and their interplay with mainstream media played a key role in the development of the pandemic, and their partially antagonistic coverage was subject to public debate (Boberg et al. 2020) that was, again, reflected in these media. In many countries, this led to a more general discussion of the role and status of journalism vis-à-vis alternative media sources in the pandemic and beyond.

Taken together, this long-term development can be understood as a transformative process for journalism. There are multiple factors contributing to this transformation, and naturally, the pandemic crisis itself is a decisive one. As we know from previous research, crises change the functioning and routines of journalism (Lund & Olsson 2016; Nord & Strömbäck 2006; Riegert & Olsson 2007), at least in parts and for the duration of the crisis. Such a switch to a 'crisis mode' of journalism is typically time-limited and takes the form of a professional reaction to unexpected or atypical events. Subsequently, journalism usually reverts to its previous state, unaffected by the events itself. As noted above, the pandemic was different from other crises: it had a direct and immediate impact on journalists themselves, their work routines, economic and technological resources, media as institutions and the societal and political environment. This is, of course, also true for other crises that endanger a given society (i.e. a war or a natural disaster). But in the case of the pandemic, the consequences were truly global and unique.

However, the changes wrought by the pandemic did not occur in isolation, but rather represented both a culmination and acceleration of existing processes of change that had already been in train for some time. One of these other factors is the increased centrality of digitization and online communication: Social media channels became essential for information-gathering, crowd-sourcing and dissemination, online video conferences were used instead of live and in person interviews and meetings, and online production tools were used to work remotely. Without these tools, coping both with social distancing rules and the demands of journalistic work would have been extremely difficult. So, both on a societal level and in journalism, digitization and online communication opened new ways of securing the vital functioning of journalism, as well as society as a whole. The pandemic meant that technological solutions were rapidly introduced and adopted at scale – so the crisis not only served as an accelerator and amplifier, but also as an enabler for change.

Beyond the adoption of technological tools, the pandemic also served as an accelerator for broader developments that were already ongoing in journalism before the pandemic. These include the long-term and steady decline of print newspapers (along with other 'traditional' news channels), restructuring processes in media companies, altered skills requirements and job descriptions in journalism, changes in audiences and their expectations, new competition by 'alternative' media, and new approaches to journalistic coverage. But it also entailed external factors associated with the uncertainties and re-orientation of journalism in dynamic markets, increasingly polarized societies and a globalized world. Not all of these developments were present or amplified in nations around the globe. But *grosso modo*, the pandemic cast a light on already shifting or precarious situations in journalism.

The research in the current issue portrays some of these transformation processes, although most of the research took place during the first year of the pandemic (which is also indicative of the immediate and massive impact the pandemic had). Some are just hinted at, or just emerging, others are obvious.

Multiple articles focus on the changes in work processes, and how journalists adapted to the new situation. Based on semi-structured interviews, Jukes, Fowler-Watt and Rees (2021, in this issue) explore the emotional stress and trauma eleven UK-based journalists experienced during the pandemic. While digital tools allowed the journalists to continue their work, do research, and interview sources, it also introduced new issues – in particular, due to permanent accessibility and the inability to ‘switch off’ from work. The negative effects of being “always on” have been discussed in other contexts prior to the pandemic (Vorderer, Krämer & Schneider 2016), but were amplified during the pandemic. Also, the need for social distancing led to emotionally demanding situations even when ‘in person’ interviews were possible (with notable restrictions). As journalists were “living the story,” the emotional labor of covering the pandemic became the most challenging part of their work.

Similarly, Ndlovu and Sibanda (2021, in this issue) interviewed twenty-one journalists in Zimbabwe. Their work portrays a growing reliance on digital tools, video conferences and virtual sources, but also highlights challenges of covering the pandemic due to a lack of preparation for the crisis. In line with the findings from UK, the researchers found signs of emotional distress, resulting from the danger of infection and even death when reporting from the ‘frontlines’ of the crisis.

An interview study from China identifies similar themes, indicating elements of shared experiences among journalists around the globe. Through 32 semi-structured interviews with local journalists, Zhang and Wang (2022, in this issue) also found signs of mental stress and difficulties. Some of the interviewed journalists had to deal with difficult and changing sourcing practices during the pandemic, as well as platform swinging. As they further note, some of the journalists and the media organizations they worked for did not react adequately or were lagging behind in their responses to the challenges of the pandemic (an effect they identify as ‘hysteresis’).

However, under the difficult circumstances, issues in adaption and response are not surprising – like other members of society, journalists were compelled to deal with challenges for which they had never been prepared. While journalists have historically been expected to remain objective and distanced (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), the pandemic brought their emotional work and reactions to the forefront, rendering visible what has previously been concealed.

Some of the tension and stress was not only due to the problems of working under the conditions of a pandemic, but also tied to negative or even hostile audience reactions. Segments of the audience were not satisfied with the performance of journalism as a societal institution – either because they felt they were not well informed, or even disinformed by mainstream media. A content analysis and survey study by Masullo, Jennings and Stroud (2021, in this issue) found signs of ‘crisis coverage gap’, or a divide between the public interest and what was covered by journalism - in this case, local news. As they note, the media over-delivered on economic and business news, while the public was hoping for more fact checks and useful information (like grocery store opening times). In their content analysis of four threads of user discussions on UK’s parenting site “Mumsnet”, Pedersen and Burnett (2021, in this issue) found signs of hostility towards mainstream news sources, with some users suggesting a collusion of media and government. Such claims circulated more broadly, and

contributed to a movement directed against governmental anti-Covid restrictions and regulations on the one hand, and against the political elite and institutionalized ‘mainstream’ media on the other. The growing distrust in journalism, its performance and independence, at least in some parts of the public, also lead to emotional and sometimes even hateful reactions against journalists themselves.

The growing emotionalization of journalism during the crisis, paired with distrust societal institutions in general and journalism in specific, is also reflected in the current special issue.

In their content analysis of user responses to online news coverage in Austria, Eisele and colleagues (2021, in this issue) identified increasing emotionality among online commenters. In particular, they found strongly emotional responses directed at government and political actors. Interestingly, they also found signs of a ‘rally around the flag’ effect, or a move towards government positions, in some commenters’ responses. This observation contrasts with the growing distrust in institutions discussed above, signalling the complexities in public debate during the pandemic.

Indeed, the seemingly contradictory findings regarding audience positions may hint at growing polarization in some democracies during the pandemic. Such polarization is reflected in divisions between groups supporting or opposing governmental action, and in sync with this, trusting or distrusting mainstream journalism as an institution covering and supporting such action (Quandt et al. 2020).

Distrust in mainstream media is frequently correlated with the use of ‘alternative news media’ (Holt, Figenschou & Frischlich 2019). Such alternative news media often oppose the coverage of institutionalized journalism by principle (for the coronavirus crisis, see Boberg et al. 2020 and Quandt et al. 2020). There are notable consequences of such patterns of audience behavior: As Stander and colleagues show in a massive survey experiment in six countries (2021, in this issue), the use of alternative and tabloid media contributes to a stronger agreement with disinformation. Their study also reveals that neutrally presented disinformation is more likely to be accepted by the average user. This is certainly worrying, especially in light of the findings by Bruns, Hurcome and Harrington (2021, in this issue). In their large-scale analysis of online article data (from fringe to mainstream media), they revealed that conspiracy theories also found their way into the news. Indeed, the manipulative actors who try to spread conspiracies actively try to attract media attention (Marwick & Lewis 2017) – knowing that the presentation of their ideas in journalistic news media not only raises attention but may also bestow upon the message some of the credibility of the host medium. While this does not imply that media necessarily supported these conspiracies in their coverage, it raises uneasy questions around the potential desirability of limiting the range of voices in plural publics in the interest of responsible reporting.

This, in turn, links to the debate on press freedom during the pandemic – a topic also explored by Palmer (2021, in this issue). With the help of a multimodal discourse analysis of web stories and tweets of three institutions (International Press Institute, Reporters Sans Frontières, Committee to Protect Journalists), the study uncovers a fixation on government threats in their messages – omitting other threats to journalism, for example by corporations and audiences. Further, Palmer notes ethnocentrism in the messages of these institutions, which

uncritically implied that Western democracies were “freer” and better places during the pandemic.

Taken together, the findings of the current issue highlight multiple issues journalism had to contend with during the pandemic – issues that seem to contribute to a transformation process that may lead to permanent changes. Not all of these may be negative, however. The final study of the special issue ends it on a positive note: In their analysis of clickstream data and payment records of a newspaper in Arkansas, Kim, Wang and Malthouse (2021, in this issue) found that reading spiked at the beginning of the pandemic, and then decreased – to finally stabilize on a much higher level as compared to previous years. This reflects broader patterns of increased local news consumption in many western democracies (Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco & Boelle, 2021). Ultimately, it presents the possibility that the pandemic dramatized the vital importance of journalism as a societal institution. If that is a lasting effect, the post-Covid future of journalism might be brighter than expected.

However, as Folker Hanusch cautions in his commentary on this special issue, scholarly observers should not be carried away by the observation of transformation and change, “which may sometimes seem more fundamental than it actually is” (Hanusch 2022, in this issue). As mentioned in the beginning of this editorial, the coronavirus crisis contributed to a transformative process in journalism. This transformative process is not only tied to the pandemic, but occurs in response to other factors as well, and was already ongoing prior to the pandemic. The original research published in this special issue portray changes that can be seen as part of this transformation.

For (digital) journalism research, this implies a necessity to continue the work started in this issue and its two sister issues, *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), and *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6). While the common-place assertion “more research is needed” may sound like a truism, it is relevant here. The transformation of journalism is ongoing, and will continue well beyond the end of the pandemic.

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