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**Introduction:
Global perspectives on journalism and the coronavirus pandemic**

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has cast a shadow over the lives of everyone in the world during the past two years. It has brought about dramatic and sudden changes in the ways we live and work across all realms of society, including in journalism. In this introductory article, we contextualize the special issue on “Global perspectives on journalism and the coronavirus pandemic.”

The special issue reflects the rich global diversity of responses and experiences of journalism to the coronavirus pandemic. It encompasses contributions reflecting journalists’ and audiences’ experiences in Belgium, Eastern Europe, Germany, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK.

Taken together, the contributions published in this special issue demonstrate the resilience of journalism and its adaptability to change. Yet they also show that if the pandemic constituted a critical moment, it was one which amplified threats to journalism that were already present. But the pandemic also showed the continued importance of journalism, as news organisations furnished audiences with vital information and helped to facilitate cohesion and solidarity.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Covid-19, global, international, journalism, journalism practice, pandemic

Introduction: Global perspectives on journalism and the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has cast a shadow over the lives of everyone in the world during the past two years. It has brought about dramatic and sudden changes in the ways we live and work across all realms of society, including in journalism. As we have argued elsewhere, the pandemic could be viewed as a “critical moment” for journalism studies - a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of past, present and future (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). 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.

The specific nature of this critical moment varied widely across countries: Even if we have all lived through the pandemic, our experience has been shaped along geographic, political and economic fault lines. While, for example, East Asian countries responded rapidly with decisive measure to contain outbreaks, European countries took action at a slower pace even after it became clear that the virus was spreading at a devastating pace in Italy (e.g., de Bruin et al., 2020).

Likewise, the pandemic has made visible the fact that “richer nations and poorer nations differ in their vulnerabilities” (Appiah, 2021): Even if the direct health impact may have been greater in the Global North, the Global South suffered greater economic vulnerability, as their livelihoods were disrupted and millions went hungry. In the face of the collapse of fragile health systems, serious endemic diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV went untreated (Appiah, 2021). For example, although countries in the Global South were less likely to impose strict lockdowns, the consequences of the pandemic were no less severe, even if they articulated differently. These differences have borne an imprint on the experiences of journalists and their audiences. At the same time, the pandemic has also brought with it shared experiences, adaptations and transformations.

As a vital societal institution, journalism has played an essential role in providing audiences with reliable information (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund, 2020). Several of the papers document the rise in media consumption as the pandemic began to hit (e.g., Vermeer et al.). Some highlight the particular importance of mainstream media in the crisis, with daily televised government briefings becoming a daily ritual, rendering the pandemic a media event both nationally and globally (see contributions by Cushion et al., Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek; Mihelj, Kondor & Stetka).

Despite the importance of traditional media, the pandemic has also unfolded against the backdrop of rampant misinformation, spreading rapidly through social media, including “dark” platforms (Bruns, Harcome & Harrington, 2020; Quandt, 2018; Zaracostas, 2020; Zeng & Schäfer, 2020). The wide spread of misinformation has been facilitated by a climate of intense and increasing political polarisation, often linked to and coinciding with attacks on societal institutions, including media (Motta, Stecula, & Farhart, 2020; see also Mihelj, Kondor & Stetka in this issue). Mainstream media have been a particular target of attacks amongst anti-lockdown activists, with protesters holding up placards and distributing flyers

and stickers claiming that “The Media is the Virus” (e.g., Smith, 2021). The pandemic has been used by to justify crackdowns on journalistic freedoms in both authoritarian states and Western democracies in an attempt to silence critical voices (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2020).

Journalists were also challenged to rapidly acquire a range of new skills and knowledge, navigating a rapidly changing landscape of scientific research and health communication (Makri, 2021). In addition to the tools of remote working and reporting, this included acquiring the skills of data journalism - learning how to present complex quantitative data in visually engaging and comprehensible ways (Pentzold & Fechner, 2020; Wu, 2020). At the same time, scientific and medical knowledge became politicised in and of itself, shaped by political and media systems, as well as national and global responses to the pandemic (see Litvinenko, Borissova and Smolyarova in this issue).

Journalists were required to negotiate tensions between sharing important information from official sources and holding the powerful to account. Doing so became more challenging as social distancing and lockdowns made it difficult for journalists to access their sources as it reduced opportunities for interaction and, conversely, increased the control exercised by sources through selective responses to e-mails, texts and messages (see Vobic and Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson’s contribution; Santos & Mare, 2021). As Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson summarised it, ““The lack of physical contact between journalists and their official sources transformed into a practice that allowed untested and unchallenged information” (Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson, 2021).

The pandemic also led to a distinctive “crisis mode” of journalism which brought with it a responsibility to cultivate solidarity and cohesion (Viehmann, Ziegele & Quiring article for this special issue; see also Wahl-Jorgensen, forthcoming). Among the Slovenian television journalists interviewed for Vobic’s article in this special issue, the pandemic required a careful balancing of journalistic roles. While journalists were committed to serving as watchdogs on the powerful, the pandemic also called for them to “facilitative” and “collaborative” roles, informed by the distinctive history of journalism in Slovenia, but also mirroring patterns found elsewhere.

Against this backdrop of a global crisis necessitating rapid change in practices, this special issue reflects the rich global diversity of responses and experiences of journalism to the coronavirus pandemic. The special issue encompasses contributions reflecting journalists’ and audiences’ experiences in Belgium, Eastern Europe, Germany, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK. While these contributions do not allow us to make generalising claims about the experiences of journalists and their audiences everywhere, the diversity of national contexts, as well as the varied theoretical and methodological approaches drawn upon in this special issue add up to a rich picture of how journalism, its texts and audiences have responded to and been shaped by the pandemic.

It shows that the response has also been inflected by distinctive political systems, contexts and the trajectories of the pandemic. For example, for the Dutch citizens studied by Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek in their contribution to this special issue, the pandemic

initially seemed “far away,” before it (fairly rapidly) became a shocking and proximate reality. And while many nation states imposed significant restrictions on movement and activities, these varied across the world. As Appelgren notes in her article, due to the relative lack of official restrictions in Sweden, “decision-making and restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus had to occur at an organizational level,” leaving the responsibility for containing transmission in the hands of individual managers and companies.

Political systems also shaped the ability of journalists to hold authorities to account and report on the pandemic. In Litvinenko, Borissova and Smolyarova’s article on the experience of Russian science journalists, they show how science journalism came under political pressure, particularly in reporting on vaccines and COVID-19 statistics. Drawing on interviews with journalists representing both state-supporting and independent media outlets, they found that journalists felt that they were restricted by both editorial guidelines, by the accessibility and self-censorship of sources, and by their own self-censorship. Similarly, based on their large-scale interview and diary study of audience experiences across the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia, Mihelj, Kondor and Stetka show that the pandemic “was an unpredictable, open-ended, and exhausting media event with high potential for divisiveness and polarization, especially in contexts marked by low levels of media freedom, declining democratic standards, and elite-led politicization of the crisis.”

Despite the distinctive circumstances created by national contexts, however, several themes emerge across the board. First of all, for journalists, like other professionals, the pandemic required a reorganisation of work, while maintaining standard practices under trying circumstances. In the case of journalism, it led to the emergence of remote working and “virtual newsrooms” (Garcia-Aviles, 2021). As Appelgren (2022) shows in her study of Swedish media managers during the pandemic, managers rapidly adapted to remote working, aided by the high degree of autonomy characteristic of the journalistic profession. Nonetheless, they continued to face a challenge in relation to fostering and maintaining positive journalistic cultures built on creativity and professional authority.

Libert, Le Cam and Domingo’s survey of the experiences of French-speaking journalists in Belgium demonstrates that journalists were compelled to dramatically change their working practices and frequently felt isolated and precarious as a result. As one of their respondents put it: “Journalism is a contact profession, and contact is precisely what we need to avoid.” This special issue also includes two articles that focus on the distinctive experiences of television journalists, in Indonesia (Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson) and Slovenia (Vobic). These articles show that in the case of television, conceptions of professionalism and journalistic authority shaped the response of news organisations to the pandemic. In the case of the Indonesian broadcaster studied by Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson, journalists continued to rely on place-based markers of journalistic authority. This included the use of studio facilities and live broadcasting, presenting its own challenges around social distancing, safety and other logistics in production settings.

The shock of the pandemic had a profound impact not just on journalistic practices, but also on audience behaviour in the context of an urgent “need for orientation” (Van Aelst et al., 2021). Several contributions to this special issue focus on just that. Audiences created novel news routines (Broersma & Swart), as their behaviours changed over time with the waxing and waning of the pandemic and a shift from an urgent need for orientation to profound pandemic fatigue. Based on two waves of in-depth interviews with Dutch audience members, Broersma and Swart found an initial surge in news consumption, which quickly evaporated and was replaced by “corona news fatigue” and news overload. While this pattern was in evidence across interviewees, Broersma & Swart discerned five distinctive groupings of news users “whose news habits each demonstrate a different response to the COVID-19 pandemic: news avoiders, followers turned avoiders, stable news users, frequent news users and news junkies.” Their research thus demonstrates that news consumption cannot be understood as a static variable, but rather as a habit shaped by affective, social and contextual cues. News consumption, of course, does not take place in a vacuum. Habits and behaviours are also shaped by personal experiences and social networks. The young Dutch news users studied by Groot Kormelink and van Ginnewiek took a “critical-but-pragmatic” approach to the news, using it to determine the impact of new measures on their lives. While “they questioned the veracity of some news, they chose to follow measures to curtail the virus.”

The UK audiences studied by Cushion and his colleagues relied heavily on television news for trusted information, and showed a high level of awareness and recognition of fake news and misinformation. While broadcasters provided useful information about how the pandemic unfolded in a national context, they offered less clarity about how the pandemic lockdown and response in the UK compared to the broader international picture. At the same time, in a survey-based study of German audiences, Viehmann, Ziegele and Quiring showed that consumption of news from public service broadcasters and other established media outlets appeared to strengthen social cohesion, while alternative and partisan news websites “caused a less constructive and more dramatized impression of the public discourse.”

Taken together, the contributions published in this special issue demonstrate the resilience of journalism and its adaptability to change. Yet they also show that if the pandemic constituted a critical moment, it was one which amplified threats to journalism that were already present. But the pandemic also showed the continued importance of journalism, as news organisations furnished audiences with vital information and helped to facilitate cohesion and solidarity.

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