

HOW DID THE PANDEMIC AFFECT THE RESIZING OF TELEVISION NEWSROOMS IN ALBANIA?

Pranvera SKANA

*Lecturer, Department of Political and Legal Sciences
at "Aleksandër Moisiu" University, Durrës
skanapranvera2021@gmail.com*

Abstract

The pandemic has brought a great surprise by transforming many dimensions of our lives, but it has undoubtedly also found the entire media industry unprepared. It has led to the paralysis of every political and economic activity, as well as of media systems, not only in Albania, but did not spare the information corporations all over the world. The immediate challenges faced by the media, particularly the traditional ones, were the collapse of information, job losses, decline in advertising, reduction of staff and budgets, biased information, decreased access to resources. In this article we aim to prepare a qualitative analysis, of how Covid-19 has re-dimensioned the editorial staff of information television in terms of organization and operation of daily basis of the journalist's work. In the following, we have taken in consideration in our study three newsrooms of news televisions, such as: Syri Tv, Euronews and News 24. The methodology is based on qualitative interviews of the three relevant chief editors of the aforementioned media, such as: Bledian Koka, Anta Muçaku and Anila Jole. The survey of 23 journalists working in these newsrooms also provides quantitative data, concluding that today's editorships bring many "innovations" and organizational "changes", that had not previously been embraced by classic TV editors, before the Covid 19.

Keywords: Mobile journalism, infodemic, fake news, information overloaded, misinformation.

Introduction

Nowadays, the topic of Covid-19 appears distant and, at the same time, overly discussed, but its resulting impact and challenges, particularly with regard to the organization of media, still persist. Although television is viewed as a traditional form of media, it is still considered to be mass media in Albania, especially on prime time. In light of this, this article aims to underscore the organizational and practice changes that have taken place following the pandemic with regard to the journalism conveyed in the Albanian news and journalist's work. The extent to which such changes have been embraced by all newsrooms and have become a regular work routine. Visual media still preserves a form of traditionalism in terms of its operation, but the pandemic naturally imposed and facilitated the use of alternative interviewing methods (via Skype or others) that did not require direct contact with the interviewees.¹ Some of the smartphone journalistic trends that were gaining momentum before COVID were accelerated during the pandemic. This means greater autonomy for reporters, but also more pressure and responsibility, more ways to broadcast live and greater audience involvement in the news cycle.² As regards their work, journalists state that, presently, being quick in receiving and delivering information using technology does not suffice. Accuracy is paramount and the journalist has to go beyond what is visible and accessible to all, as well as establish a trusting relationship with the audience. Unfortunately, this poses a challenge for modern media and is primarily related to the widespread use of

¹ Koka, Bledian, Syri TV's Chief Editor, personal interview, 25 October 2023.

² Mahon, James, How the Covid pandemic, changed digital journalism? <https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-pandemic-changed-digital-journalism-172039>

<https://doi.org/10.62792/ut.jus.v12.i21-22.p2765>

technology and its implementation across all forms of media, and not just the pandemic.³ UNESCO's 'After the pandemic, building back a stronger media' (2022)⁴ report establishes the need to study media companies and their practices, as well as the economic factors, regulations and policies that inhibit or strengthen media viability, all with the aim of pinpointing exactly what can be done to make media even stronger. When asked whether doing journalism currently is easier or better, EuroNews Albania's Chief Editor Antoneta Muçaku replied that "It is undoubtedly easier. I am not entirely confident whether the journalism of today is better, but it certainly is easier. It is no longer necessary for an operator to carry a camera or for a journalist to carry a typical microphone. With just a kit, journalists can perform every necessary action themselves without the assistance of an operator or a heavy camera."⁵

Literature review

In addition to the massive technological revolution affecting the media industry over the past decade, Covid-19 was another factor that gave rise to new challenges requiring innovative approaches in the information world. What I no longer believe: that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and for the work of journalists to remain relevant to people's lives. For what is journalism? How does it respond to social, cultural, political, and technological transformations, and how does it stay true to its own ideals? What makes good—as in meaningful, contributing to the common good, autonomous, informative and inspiring—newswork possible?⁶ Post-pandemic, many journalists are expected to focus on mobile journalism and develop new skills in smartphone technologies and deal with new technical and editorial challenges. In some cases, this has put older journalists under increasing pressure to get to grips with new technologies Broadcasters have capitalised on user-generated content throughout COVID – video interviews on phones, tablets and laptops became the norm, as once-passive news consumers became producers.⁷ With fewer specific roles and multi-skilling key to surviving in the industry, many reporters find themselves becoming videographers, editors and social media producers all rolled into one. So much more is now being asked of broadcast and digital journalists, but with that has come greater freedom to source and create stories. Fewer editors, videographers, lighting and sound technicians mean journalists are more in control of the way they weave and distribute their news⁸. News organisations have had to change their thinking about the importance of the physical newsroom. Almost overnight, we've witnessed dramatic changes to workflows, including online editorial conferences, remote editing, and virtual brainstorming. TV shows have been presented from home, while newspapers have been produced with not a single journalist in the office. Newsrooms have been forced to rely more heavily on digital collaboration tools like Zoom, Teams, and Slack to support remote working practices.⁹ The post-Covid world will look very different for media organisations and there are five key trends set to stay, including digital transitions and flexible working arrangements.¹⁰ The new

³ Muçaku, Antoneta, EuroNews Albania's Chief Editor, personal interview, 28 October 2023.

⁴ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380807/PDF/380807eng.pdf.multi>

⁵ Muçaku, Antoneta, EuroNews Albania's Chief Editor, personal interview, 28 October 2023.

⁶ Deuze, Mark, (2019) What journalism is (Not), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119857202>

⁷ Mahon, James, How Covid pandemic, changed digital journalism? <https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-pandemic-changed-digital-journalism-172039>

⁸ Mahon, James, How Covid pandemic, changed digital journalism? <https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-pandemic-changed-digital-journalism-172039>

⁹ Lopez Eloisana, Changing newsrooms 2020: addressing diversity and nurturing talent at a time of unprecedented change <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/changing-newsrooms-2020-addressing-diversity-and-nurturing-talent-time-unprecedented-change>

¹⁰ Hale, Sadie, <https://www.fipp.com/news/five-ways-covid-19-has-changed-media-for-good/>

Innovation in Media World Report (2021)¹¹ features post-Covid world of work, identified five major areas where they expect changes to last;

1. *Hybrid working conditions*- While this change has many upsides, productivity of home workers is down 40 per cent, and publishers shouldn't rush to do away with their offices altogether. "The office won't disappear,". "Some journalism just cannot be done from home. Meeting sources, going to events, door-stepping politicians: this is what creates journalism worth paying for."¹² A hybrid model therefore seems the most likely and desirable arrangement for the future.
2. *Digital dominates*- The migration of readers from print to digital has happened in a decisive, universal way. Also, ad revenue is being eroded by reader revenue, creating big opportunities for subscriptions and memberships.
3. *Social media shows its (ugly) face*- During the pandemic, a live threat that causes a lot of stress, people have developed a habit to visit news sites directly each day. This has been a big boost for trustworthy news sources over social media, which is full of misinformation. 4 A boost for quality journalism- The next big change the authors call "the Netflix moment", and it describes the increasing global recognition that quality news and information is worth paying for. The record rise in digital subscriptions globally speaks to this, and consumer magazines as well as news media are cashing in with memberships, clubs, and perks for loyal readers. 5 Culture change- The final shift is less tangible, but no less impactful. The mindsets of media bosses have changed irrevocably under the immediate pressure of pandemic conditions. "In previous years, we witnessed so much holding back; so much reluctance from CEOs to embrace digital transformation and culture change,"¹³

Methodology

Firstly, in the interviews conducted with the heads of three prominent news media, namely EuroNews Albania, News 24, and Syri TV, Chief Editors Antoneta Muçaku, Anila Jole, and Bledian Koka explained how Covid-19 has changed the culture of journalism and the new features that arose from the pandemic situation.

Secondly, the survey of 23 journalists, primarily field reporters. A total of 15 women and 9 men completed a survey with 10 close-ended and semi-closed questions, in order to provide a percentage-based overview of how their routines have changed after Covid, which features they have adopted, and what are the main challenges they face with regard to their qualification needs.

Thirdly, the theoretic approach comprising both domestic and foreign articles.

Results and discussion

Following the pandemic, many journalists in Albania have been focusing on new ways of doing journalism through 'mobile journalism', by developing new skills in smartphone technology use and overcoming the new technical and editorial challenges. Numerous

¹¹ <https://www.fipp.com/resource/innovation-in-media-2021-world-report-webinar-slides/>

¹² John Wilpers, Senior Director and Juan Señor, President at Innovation Media Consulting drew on 12 months of research plus their extensive media consulting experience to present their findings. Their [presentation](#), always one of the most eagerly anticipated sessions at the annual [Digital Innovators' Summit \(DIS\)](#) in Berlin (2021), was held online this year as part of the virtual, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9VDLVu1Gjw>

¹³ <https://www.fipp.com/news/five-ways-covid-19-has-changed-media-for-good>

researchers have demonstrated that, after Covid, media worldwide have adopted a ‘hybrid’ model of newsrooms, which has been implemented at different scales in different countries. In our country, the pandemic period imposed a radical change on newsroom activity, pushing newsroom staff toward alternative means of communication. WhatsApp became the main channel of communication for Albanian newsrooms. According to EuroNews Albania’s Chief Editor Antoneta Muçaku, prior to Covid, the newsroom was lively and full of staff running around and working hard, but it all changed during the pandemic¹⁴. The greatest threats to information during the pandemic were fake news and laypeople commenting on the pandemic. The pandemic heightened the awareness of journalists and media directors, making them more cautious with regard to information selection and official-source referencing in relation to issues that have a direct impact on the lives and peace of mind of the audience¹⁵. Since technology’s integration into our work, remote access to news was made available, at first through messages, photos, or short video interviews. The pandemic experience further strengthened this means of access. However, the traditional method is still the primary form of media.¹⁶ Skype calls prior to the pandemic were almost unacceptable and not fit for television. Because it was impossible to invite guests into the studio, Skype became the only viable means of communication. It was necessary at the time, but it has now become a regular aspect of our job and a Skype call or interview is not only fit for television, but can sometimes be far more valuable and dynamic than studio interviews.¹⁷ According to the National Union of Journalists in Great Britain¹⁸, the shift of journalistic work remotely, via Zoom interviews, and the editing of information through mobile apps favored younger information editors during the COVID crisis, while older and less tech savvy reporters were marginalized. The Union assisted such reporters in their efforts to overcome this gap, by providing training to both remote and in-office staff to become acquainted with the new information production and editing skills required during the pandemic. Now, let’s take a look at how this development has taken place in our country. According to the survey conducted with 23 field reporters for purposes of the present article, it results that:

*Approximately 69% of respondents confirm that their work routine changed after the pandemic.

*92% of them state that it is easier and faster to do journalism nowadays compared with the pre-pandemic period, leading to greater time efficiency and productivity.

*63% do not agree that journalism is currently better, emphasizing the importance of direct contact with sources and in-depth interviews

*88% state that their relations with sources have changed; it’s actually the latter who often prefer Skype interviews instead of studio interviews.

*75% show a declining trend with respect to the reliability of journalism, as they consider it superficial journalism.

*81% believe that journalism at present requires more depth, more research, and greater verification.

*97% view the adaptation with new digital skills as a necessity

*77% received or will receive training about digital skills

¹⁴ Muçaku, Antoneta, EuroNews Albania’s Chief Editor, personal interview, 28 October 2023.

¹⁵ Koka, Bledian, Syri TV’s Chief Editor, personal interview, 25 October 2023

¹⁶ Jole, Anila, News 24’s Chief Editor, personal interview, 25 October 2023

¹⁷ Muçaku, Antoneta, EuroNews Albania’s Chief Editor, personal interview, 28 October 2023

¹⁸ <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us>.

Conclusions

Newsrooms have changed since the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they still make efforts to preserve the classic form of organization after Covid. Syri TV's Chief Editor Bledian Koka says that the division of tasks during newsroom meetings, the efforts to establish direct contact with sources, and the work to verify and produce reliable news constitute the three pillars still maintained despite the pandemic-related challenges, which shifted the work activity online. The adjustment to hybrid newsrooms by embracing new efficient forms, such as Skype interviews, a previously unpreferred method, etc., led to the irreversible use of mobile journalism, an overlooked trend that Albanian journalists are gradually turning toward. The age group of field reporters is relatively young; hence, digital skills are no novelty to them, but more senior journalists display a need for digital training, as the only method to remain relevant in the information market.

References

- [1] Deuze, Mark, (2019) What journalism is (Not), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119857202>
- [2] Hale, Sadie, <https://www.fipp.com/news/five-ways-covid-19-has-changed-media-for-good/>
- [3] Jole, Anila, News 24's Chief Editor, personal interview, 25 October 2023
- [4] Koka, Bledian, Syri TV's Chief Editor, personal interview, 25 October 2023
- [5] Lopez Eloisana, Changing newsrooms 2020: addressing diversity and nurturing talent at a time of unprecedented change <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/changing-newsrooms-2020-addressing-diversity-and-nurturing-talent-time-unprecedented-change>
- [6] Mahon, James, How Covid pandemic, changed digital journalism? <https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-pandemic-changed-digital-journalism-172039>
- [7] Muçaku, Antoneta, EuroNews Albania's Chief Editor, personal interview, 28 October 2023
- [8] <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380807/PDF/380807eng.pdf.multi>
- [9] <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-causes-and-consequences-of-covid-19-misperceptions-understanding-the-role-of-news-and-social-media/>
- [10] <https://www.reporter.al/2020/03/30/kriza-e-koronavirusit-trondit-edhe-industrine-e-medias-ne-shqiperi/>
- [11] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5>.
- [12] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2589750020303150>
- [13] <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/4/1879/htm> <https://www.fipp.com/resource/innovation-in-media-2021-world-report-webinar-slides/>
- [14] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9VDLVu1Gjw>
- [15] <https://theconversation.com/how-the-covid-pandemic-changed-digital-journalism-172039>
- [16] <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021> <https://prsay.prsa.org/2020/11/12/how-has-the-pandemic-changed-journalism-i-asked-a-new-york-times-reporter/>
- [17] <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/our-podcast-how-2020-changed-journalism>