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Title: Challenges and opportunities for journalism during COVID-19 in fragile democracies – the case of Bulgaria

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic brought immense challenges to journalists worldwide, including new threats to media freedom, journalism safety and practice. The impact of the pandemic on journalism is yet to be fully understood and examined but this paper contributes to the field by focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on the media in countries with democratic deficits. A case in point is Bulgaria, ranked 112th in the annual Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index (2021), the lowest position in the European Union for a fourth consecutive year. Media capture by state and private interests has effectively eliminated the freedom of traditional media, while at the same time stifling independent journalism. The study examined how the coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions have impacted journalism practice in Bulgaria and how journalists, and independent media organisations responded and adapted to the pressures in 2020. Our findings from semi structured interviews with media practitioners show that it is the independent media that has borne the brunt of the crisis. In addition to existing challenges to press freedom, many Bulgarian journalists have encountered new limits to their daily practice in reporting on a topic of significant public importance.

Introduction

With its onset in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has shown journalism's great value to societies but also its vulnerabilities (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020). COVID-19 brought a unique set of challenges to journalists worldwide, including new threats to media freedom, journalism safety and practice. Over half of the world's population – around 3.9 billion people – lives in countries where the right to freedom and expression and information is severely undermined and routinely violated (McKew, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on

journalism is yet to be fully understood and examined but recent studies indicate that the media are struggling, and journalism faces an “extinction event” due to “an unprecedented convergence of threats” (Posetti, Bell and Brown, 2020). Many of these threats emerged from swiftly adopted emergency measures that imposed restrictions via legislation or other mechanisms. Government digital surveillance, internet shutdowns, curbs on free expression and access to information, and limits on public participation and protest have become increasingly common in many countries throughout the world under the guise of governments’ handling of the pandemic (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020; Radcliffe, 2020). According to a comprehensive report by Article 19, at the end of 2020, 90 countries had declared state of emergency, bringing in exceptional legislative measures enabling restrictions on rights and freedoms: “There have been more than 220 measures and policies globally which restrict expression, assembly, and information, with evidence that elections are also falling prey to manipulation under the guise of public health protections” (McKew, 2020, p. X). Yet, there is strong concern that the state of exception has become the new normal. In the context of such restrictions, the pandemic has also exposed media worldwide, and more specifically in Europe, to considerable losses of advertising revenue and income from special events, drop in print circulation, redundancies, closure of news outlets and changes to journalistic routines (EJO, 2021). Public service media have also seen increased competition from on-demand services, facing uncertainty and reduced advertising income. The impact of COVID-19 has resonated through the entire audio-visual sector because it relates to the business structure of TV production (Túñez-López et al., 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated weaknesses that have long existed within the communication ecology (Perreault and Perreault, 2021); “hammering” the media worldwide, particularly on local level, bringing cuts, layoffs, furlough and salary reductions (Allsop, 2020). In Australia for example, within weeks of the national shutdown, more than 200 regional and community newspapers announced they could no longer keep their presses running due to the unprecedented crisis (Hess and Waller, 2020).

These challenges have been particularly visible and significant in countries with democratic deficits such as Bulgaria, ranked 112th in the latest annual Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index – the lowest position in the Europe for a fourth consecutive year (RWB, 2021). The majority of media outlets in Bulgaria are owned and sponsored by local oligarchs with links to the government. Much of the media is financed by people with political and economic ties to the government (EJN, 2020; Trifonova Price, 2019). Media capture by state

and private interests has effectively eliminated the freedom of traditional media, and to some extent online media too, stifling independent journalism. The media is largely divided in two camps – pro-government and anti-government while trust in journalism and public communication has slipped to all times low (Newman et. al., 2020; EJM, 2020). Bulgaria's press freedom was under serious attack before the pandemic with widespread self-censorship among journalists, threats and intimidation against media workers, SLAPP cases involving individual journalists and publishers, and a significant increase of online abuse against critical and outspoken journalists (Trifonova Price, forthcoming). With the spread of the virus, like several other authorities, the Bulgarian government introduced emergency preventive measures aimed at containing the virus. While labelled as "temporary", many restrictions – such as cancelling live events and press conferences and limiting access to information – remained in place throughout consecutive "waves" of the virus, thus becoming a challenge to continued media reporting on the pandemic.

There is a gap in research on how the pandemic has affected media and journalism in countries with fragile democracies such as those from the former Soviet bloc. This article will bridge this gap by addressing the research question: How has the coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions impacted journalism practice in Bulgaria and how have journalists and independent media organisations responded and adapted to the crisis? It first looks at emerging research on the impact of the pandemic on media and journalism practice, new broader challenges to press freedom, and how media organisations across the world have responded to a public health crisis of such magnitude. It then focuses on the methods of the study before presenting findings and conclusions.

COVID-19 and its impact on media organisations worldwide

Financial challenges

Studies are unequivocal in suggesting that due to rising levels of disinformation and misinformation, crisis of trust, and major disruption caused by the COVID-19 health crisis, journalism and news media are facing a difficult future. Advertising income has collapsed – in some instances down by 50-75% (Posetti et al., 2020) – partly because of companies reducing their advertising budgets and social media's dominance of online advertising. The pandemic is "crushing the advertising business that plays such a vital role in funding news

production” (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020, p. 673). Local and independent journalism is particularly badly affected in many countries worldwide, including those in the former communist bloc (Article 19, 2021; EJO, 2021). For instance, in Georgia there has been no financial support for independent media; in Latvia media have responded to the crisis with cuts to journalists’ jobs and reduction of staff salaries as well as refusing to commission freelancers; in Poland some media outlets imposed a six-month 20% cut in wages of staff while others laid off 10% of its staff (EJO, 2021). While some scholars argue that claims for news media facing an “extinction event” are exaggerated, journalism has undoubtedly experienced very challenging economic situation throughout the pandemic with freelancers particularly affected. Simultaneously the virus was weaponised by governments to suppress free speech and “used by malign forces as an opportunity to disrupt, sabotage and hamper the free flow of trusted, independent information” (Zappulla, 2020 cited in Radcliffe, 2020, p.5).

Media freedom under threat

The COVID–19 pandemic has been invariably described by scholars as “generation defining” (Radcliffe, 2020, p. 12), a “monstrous threat to humanity” (Zinn, 2020, p.1083) and one of the greatest challenges to societies since the Second World War because governments imposed major restrictions to people’s freedoms. In times of crisis, governments often look for ways of giving themselves exceptional powers to deal with emergencies, such as terror attacks or natural disasters. During crises, news media, especially on local level, supplies information that can contribute directly to citizens’ potential for self-protection and safety as it has been shown during previous emergencies (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020). At the same time media reporting amplifies risk consciousness, giving legitimacy to governments to implement extraordinary measures, while diverting the attention from political negligence and deeper societal issues and inequalities (Zinn, 2020).

One of the consequences of the pandemic has been the restrictions imposed on journalism to scale down their activities. When it comes to press freedom, the virus has become a “pathogen of repression” (Mc Kew, 2020, p. X). Threats to press freedom have so far been classified into five broad areas: “a misuse of emergency legislation, a clampdown on ‘unpatriotic’ reporting, restrictions on travel and press passes, abuse of misinformation laws, and an attack on whistleblowers” (Selva, 2020). In 2020 threats ranged from barriers in access to data and information, pressure from governments to limit the scope of reporting and

travel bans, to more severe punitive legislation and risks to their physical and psychological safety. For example, a survey of 1400 journalists from 125 countries demonstrated a worrying 70% of respondents who rated the psychological and emotional impact of dealing with the pandemic as the most challenging aspect of their jobs (Posetti et al., 2020). In many countries, journalists were classified as key workers (e.g. United Kingdom) because news on the virus became a very valuable resource for citizens. Despite this, journalists everywhere were increasingly targeted for their reporting, facing wide-ranging abuses, detention and even getting killed (UNESCO, 2020). In the early stages of the pandemic there was lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and training on how to report safely as many journalists visited hospitals and medical facilities to interview doctors, and other medical professionals, leading to nearly 500 deaths of journalists from COVID-19 worldwide as of November 15, 2020 (Philp, 2020). Emboldened by political leaders' hostile rhetoric, ordinary citizens engaged in prolific online abuse of journalists and especially female journalists, dubbed the "shadow pandemic" of violence against women (Posetti et al., 2021).

By June 2021, the International Press Institute (IPI) had recorded 473 media freedom violations for all regions in the world since the start of the pandemic (IPI, 2021). 18 countries have passed "fake news" regulations during COVID-19, allowing for a range of measures that reduce the ability of journalists to cover the health crisis. While their purpose was to limit the spread and reach of falsehoods, they could be manipulated to limit critical reporting. The overabundance of information on the disease has also been dubbed as "infodemic" (WHO, 2020) – some accurate, some false which makes it harder for people to find reliable and trustworthy sources. The "infodemic" has brought significant challenges for journalists to combat misinformation, government propaganda, and distinguish between fact and fiction (Radcliffe, 2020). Bontcheva and Posetti (2021) propose the term "disinfodemic" in relation to disinformation on COVID-19, which aims to create confusion about medical science; it is more dangerous and more deadly than disinformation on other topics and has an "immediate impact on every person on the planet, and upon whole societies" (p.2). Studies have established that with its onset, the coronavirus emergency has led to a significant intensification in mis- and disinformation on social networks and messaging apps. To counter that, there was a rise in fact-checking of content by journalists and fact-checking platforms. Evidence suggests that fact-checking processes have emerged and renewed, and continue to be necessary (López-García, Costa-Sánchez and Vizoso, 2021). There is an agreement in the emerging scholarship on the impact of COVID-19 on journalism practice: journalists

experienced a lot of difficulties in their reporting and looked for ways to mitigate the forces pressuring their work as they sought to reverse the flow of misinformation (Perreault and Perreault, 2021).

Impact of COVID-19 and innovation – opportunities, change and development

The pandemic has highlighted the necessity for citizens everywhere to be able to access, and act on, accurate information from pluralistic and diverse media sources (McKew, 2020). During a crisis “news becomes a “need to have” service—for those who previously perceived it as a “nice to have” service” and in the US many publishers tend to drop their paywalls leading to de-commodification of news coverage of the virus” (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020, p. 676). Along with the challenges presented by the spread of mis and dis information, demand for truthful and comprehensive reporting has grown significantly. There was noticeable rise in traffic to mobile apps and news sites around the world. Media consumption throughout the world increased spectacularly in the early stages, mostly in legacy and online TV on pay-per-view platforms (Túñez-López et. al., 2020). “The pandemic has shown the value of accurate and reliable information at a time when lives are at stake. In many countries we see audiences turning to trusted brands and ascribing a greater confidence in the media in general”. (Newman, 2021)

According to a report from the European Broadcasting Union (Cimino et al., 2020), audience data from 18 European markets showed that increased number of people were turning to public service media for reliable, real-time news and information. For example, the scope of some public service media evening news doubled in the peak of the crisis (March 2020) while audience viewing was up 14% on average. Younger viewers who had previously abandoned conventional TV were also tuning in more, with daily viewing of the evening bulletins up 20% amongst that age group although viewing grew in all age groups. The US followed a similar pattern where TV evening news increased its audience by 42% compared to the year before. Researchers have reported a comeback to legacy media, especially to television, and citizens who are normally hard to reach reconnected with news. This has to some extent reduced inequalities in news consumption among citizens (Casero-Ripolles, 2020).

Many media organisations around the globe aimed to play a constructive role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and meet their audience's information needs using innovative approaches. This was key for their economic and physical survival – being proactive and innovative becomes a way of coping with the lack of consistent and clear information (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). For example, local media in the US was a major source for COVID-19 news (Pew Research Centre, 2020) so local outlets searched for ways to serve their communities especially those historically marginalised groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Wenzell and Crittenden, 2021). In the city of Philadelphia this was visible in several community-centered projects and infrastructure that facilitated collaboration between local news teams and the people they aimed to represent. This work also challenged some dominant journalism norms and exposed the local projects' partners, including traditional and larger news outlets, to "approaches that fall outside dominant interpretations of a journalist's role." (Wenzell and Crittenden, 2021, p. 15). Other studies have found that news podcasts about the coronavirus, for example, showed "a clear departure in the use of traditional, objective storytelling techniques, primarily in the use of first-person voice, as well as subjectivity" (Nee and Santana, 2021, p.15). The pandemic brought an abundance of coronavirus podcasts which became a weekly and daily feature of popular sites, such as the online platform Vox, and CNN, The New York Times, NPR and ABC hosting podcasts such as CNN's Coronavirus: Fact vs. Fiction, with Dr. Sanjay Gupta, ABC's CoronaCast and NPR's Coronavirus Daily (Nee and Santana, 2021).

In relation to daily journalism practice, there is emerging evidence that the crisis has changed the routines of journalists who have had to quickly adapt to new schedules, master remote production tools, experiment with new formats for generating content, and adopt new responsibilities that were not part of their daily lives before the pandemic. In that sense "the coronavirus has acted as an agent of change, as it has forced the media to adopt measures that months ago seemed distant and even unfeasible." (Túñez-López et al., 2020, p.12). The impact of the pandemic has been offset to some extent by the "incorporation of domestic scenarios" (Túñez-López et al., 2020, p.2) which saw journalists and guests broadcast from improvised sets in their living rooms. While broadcast quality was reduced and there was a drop in technical standards, practicing remote journalism helped to mitigate the networks' collapse and increased audiences' involvement as co-creators of content for programming.

Digital capabilities also expanded in the attempt to meet audiences' needs and respond to demand. Overall, there is an agreement by researchers that the changes to journalism practice that were brought by the pandemic go beyond a temporary readjustment and are likely to endure. It is notable that in many examples innovative practices have included combining of resources, increasing cooperation between media organisations (new or legacy) and citizens, drawing on each other's ideas and experience to sustain survival and serve the needs of communities across the world. Yet, innovative practices and flexibility are overshadowed by the challenges and limited resources of journalism pre-COVID-19. The health crisis served as a reminder that the problems are real and have been destroying the process of journalism in many different ways (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). According to Hess and Waller (2020, p.21), "there is no doubt the COVID-19 crisis has widened existing, deep cracks in the news media industry".

With regards to Bulgaria, some limited evidence suggests that the media seems to have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic better than media in other countries. By the end of 2020 advertising revenue had recovered to 2019 levels. The majority of media have had to adapt their content, introduce new formats, make wage cuts but there were no official closures of national outlets in the first wave. However, survival and financial security of the media was dependent on hand-outs from owners who often support the government, influential politicians, or local oligarchs, or a combination of all three (Antonov, 2021). Our findings present a more detailed picture of the impact of the pandemic on journalism and press freedom in Bulgaria.

Methodology

In order to address our research question, we wanted to examine first-hand accounts of Bulgarian media workers who were "on the frontline" during the pandemic in 2020 and during the first lockdown. Interviews can provide scholars with information that cannot gain by observation or another way (Berger, 2011). Semi-structured qualitative interviews particularly were deemed as the most appropriate method for data collection for this study as they have a higher degree of flexibility, give an opportunity for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection and explanation granting us an opportunity explore the interviewees' experiences and perceptions. Semi structured interviews allow researchers to

collect descriptions of the life world of the participants with respect of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). They allow researchers to prepare an interview schedule, give scope for follow-up questions while also maintaining the casual quality of unstructured interviews. It's a very common method in media and communication studies and it has been used widely by researchers (e.g. Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020; Robles and Lopez, 2020). Meaning is rooted in culture and that is why it is reasonable to study the Bulgarian pandemic media environment through meticulous exploration of the perceptions and interpretations of journalists and publishers regarding the impact of the pandemic on their media organisations and their everyday practices.

Using purposive sampling as a strategy, we compiled a sample made up of 17 Bulgarian publishers and journalists from 11 national and regional media, interviewed online in April 2020, picked specifically on the grounds of their relevance to our research aims. In order to get a fuller picture of the impact of COVID-19 on journalism practice, our sample had to be diverse, including four independent publishers, five reporters, six editors, one deputy editor and one presenter from some of the main national media outlets in the country but also from regional newsrooms. We interviewed practitioners from the two national public service broadcasters (Bulgarian National Radio and Bulgarian National TV), one of the main private TV channels (bTV), weekly newspapers and magazines (Capital, Sega, Club Z), an online news site (Mediapool) and four regional online media (Utro Ruse, Sevlievo Online, RadiAn.bg, Zov News). The private TV broadcaster is among the top performers in the country with second highest weekly reach among media in Bulgaria (Media Connection, 2021). bTV news, part of BTV Media Group sees weekly use of 62% offline and 41% online. Bulgarian National Radio and TV boast the most trust in its output among brands at 72% and 70%. Capital and Sega are two quality publications with good reach to audiences while Club Z attracts a small but loyal audience for its quality content. The regional and the local press fares well with trust among audiences (55% trust a regional or local media) and has a 15% reach offline (Digital News Report, 2021). Several of the participants are key decision makers in the media sphere who were considered likely to provide very valuable data and insight. One of the limitations of our research is interviewing only independent publishers and journalists, and journalists who work in the national broadcasters. However, the situation with owner-dependent media and journalism in Bulgaria has been examined previously and the literature indicates that it is independent media outlets that often bear the brunt of political, economic and other crises. The interview questions were based on the issues and

evidence from previous studies that discuss challenges to the Bulgarian media environment (e.g. Trifonova Price, 2019); the researchers' expert knowledge of and familiarity with the themes to be investigated; and the context of the researchⁱ. This ensured high level of sensitivity which means "being able to pick on relevant issues, events and happenings in data...being able to present the view of the participants...and to see the issues and problems from the perspective of the participants" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 32). We obtained full consent from participants and ensured that all answers were kept confidential and anonymised in our resultsⁱⁱ.

Our findings are structured in two main themes that reflect our research objectives: 1) Impact, including financial impact on media organisations due to the pandemic; impact on daily/routine newsroom practices such as access to information and sources, means of reporting and personal wellbeing; and 2) Newsroom responses to the crisis and adjustment such as new formats and content due to increased demand from audiences for news and information on the pandemic.

Findings

Impact of the pandemic on media organisations

All interviewees unanimously point out that the Bulgarian media were in crisis before the pandemic, but the crisis has been exacerbated even further when lockdown restrictions were imposed in 2020. Depending on their position and responsibilities, our participants shared their experience and observations on different aspects of journalism practice and media management during the early stages of COVID-19.

Financial impact

Firstly, from the publishers' perspectives, the economic crisis brought by the pandemic has affected the media in Bulgaria in a similar ways to many others around the world. The emerging body of work on the impact of the pandemic shows that most media were dealt a severe blow by the state of emergency introduced in countries globally and by the drop in advertising revenue. However, in the specific Bulgarian context, pre-existing issues that plagued the media before COVID-19 have also played a significant role in the way media

were affected. For example, it is well documented (e.g. Trifonova Price, 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017) that most of the media is owned by local businessmen with close links to the government and the outlets they own are reliant of sponsorship and handouts rather than on commercial advertising, usually serving the interest of the owners and their close political and business associates. Only a few independent media exist in the country, and their survival has been threatened even further during the pandemic as the majority of our interviewees note. This quote from a publisher illustrates this view well:

“The paradox is that the media who have taken the biggest hit from the crisis are those, who can be counted on the fingers of one hand, who rely on the market and advertising. The rest of the media exist on the principle of fixed subsidies. They are not worried about market turbulence and their fate depends on the financial situation and intentions of their sponsor.” (P1)

The outlets whose business model is based on income from advertising, organising events and conferences that were prohibited by emergency measures introduced in 2020 faced a significant economic challenge, according to publishers. All noted that their advertising revenue has been decimated by the crisis and shrunk at least 40 to 50% in the first month of lockdown in 2020. For example, some customers withdrew ads completely, other re-directed their advertising budgets to charity projects or revaluated their marketing strategies in response to the restrictions leaving media without much needed revenue. Our interviewees pointed out that the Bulgarian advertising market is subject to similar problems that affect the media, namely concentrated ownership in the hands of two large media companies, owned by local oligarchsⁱⁱⁱ. The market is skewed in favour of these “big players” – agencies that manage to secure substantial state advertising from the government and place adverts only in certain friendly media outlets that are not critical of officials. Media advertising is often procured through these agencies or “media shops” acting as “intermediaries” between the state and the media which brings its own issues as this publisher observes:

“The other significant problem, in my opinion, is the intermediaries – advertising companies and media shops – which in the form of “discounts” usually receive more than half of the amount for advertising that goes to a media. Due to the media market being dominated by two oligarchs working as one, the media in our country failed to

create a single platform for offering and buying advertising that would save from intermediaries and multiply the benefits for the media.” (P2)

Those participants with responsibilities of running media outlets expected their advertising income and contracts to recover gradually as businesses recover from the pandemic and restart their regular activities for media with national coverage. This appears to be an accurate prognosis as the latest Digital News Report (2021) confirms. However, when it comes to the regional media, the situation is acknowledged as far more challenging for publishers. For instance, one regional publisher listed a number of local outlets that have had to close down or go on “indefinite vacation” so that they don’t have to say the word bankruptcy. Their own print edition was running with reduced circulation and less pages. While print sales have not disappeared yet, these have been reduced and are not bringing much income. Regional and local media don’t have access to national advertising, ad agencies do not include them in large scale campaigns leaving them with a small pool of local advertisers with a limited budget as these local publishers illustrate:

“We were swimming against the tide before the pandemic and now we are swimming against a waterfall if I can put it that way. The lifting of the state of emergency will not automatically allow the local media to recover after the damage they suffered, those who survive that is. It will be a long process, with a much worse scenario than the 2008 crisis.” (P3)

“It is very difficult to talk about advertising during quarantine, it is almost impossible. Our media is in the risk category. The independent media, those that are not part of Peevski's group, for example, are the most endangered. Certainly, even if some publications do not go bankrupt, there will be a reduction of the teams. I cannot be optimistic in this situation.” (P4)

It should be noted that before the pandemic, several independent media in Bulgaria normally relied on of financial support from foundations, namely international NGOs, in order to preserve their editorial independence and this has provided a lifeline and some stability during the crisis, according to two of our publishers. According to interviewees, the public service media, the Bulgarian National Radio and Bulgarian National Television, have not

been affected directly and significantly by budget cuts since they have always been and continue to be funded by the government budget.

Newsroom practice impact

The lockdown and restrictions that were imposed by the Bulgarian authorities on 13 March 2020 in response to the threat of coronavirus impacted the media immediately, according to all interviewees. Without exceptions their media moved to remote working with a switch to “home offices” and the introduction of shifts for rotating small teams to allow for social distancing and new cleaning protocols. Everyone states that their newsrooms became virtual literally overnight and relied mostly on digital technology for communicating and production (e.g. Viber, Zoom and Skype interviews) just like many other media across the world. This publisher explains it well:

“We realised that the crisis was serious in early March as many of our journalists who cover health issues sounded the alarm and warned us that the crisis should not be underestimated. This was a few weeks before the state of emergency was imposed. With that we allowed for remote working, purchased masks for essential office staff or those who had to attend official briefings, and we asked vulnerable staff members to work from home. Our teams worked with Google chat and for the first time in its history, our newspaper was produced remotely.” (P1)

However, while working from home provided some benefits to staff and kept employees safe from the virus, several publishers and journalists note a disruption in the nature of usual professional practice and routines. The complete lack of face-to-face communication between reporters and interviewees/sources, the travel ban, disappearance of live and impromptu discussions that are at the heart of the journalism newsroom, have not only impacted normal newsroom practice but also team spirit as this interviewee states:

“Communicating from a distance presented challenges to the editorial team and some difficulties in balancing tasks. We lost the opportunities for creative brainstorming sessions that sometimes happen spontaneously in the newsroom when there is close contact.” (P2)

The announcement of lockdown and the closure of the institutions, as well as limits to the press conferences they give, have only worsened the already poor communication between the authorities and the media. Several journalists who were actively involved in news production note more problematic issues, for example with reporting from the vital daily government briefing during the height of the health crisis. There was often not enough time for questions or reporters who were on duty that day, and who don't normally cover health issues, did not have sufficient knowledge to ask informed questions. Live broadcasts could also be challenging as explained by this interviewee:

“One of the main sources of information for our journalists is the regular briefing on COVID-19, but when bTV broadcasts it live, it is very difficult to verify the information with alternative sources and third parties. Unlike studio interviews, from which viewers receive information and comments through the host's questions, during a briefing the public accepts the truth as announced by the speakers. Sometimes, however, when we check the facts, the truth turns out to be different – but we can only say it later. An example of this is the accusation during a briefing that GPs in Bansko are covering up patients with coronavirus, which was later refuted” (J1).

For others, the limited contact with their usual sources and the information becoming centralised from the national emergency headquarters presented difficulties in finding alternative sources of information that challenged official statements, and getting hold of clear and accessible statistics on the virus as this reporter notes: “Many doctors and nurses and other medical experts refuse interviews or the data they provide is unusable due to anonymity and our inability to confirm it” (J7).

Several journalists mentioned that for them it was very difficult to remain level-headed, calm, balanced and objective in the face of mass panic and “hysteria” on the one hand and dismissal/disregard of the virus on the other. A more significant impact and disruption was noted for investigative journalism that requires more in-depth work and access to information that authorities were not willing to provide easily. In some instances, journalists had to wait for weeks for information they needed for a story and were often met with refusals justified by the emergency measures as illustrated by this quote:

“Many press centres refuse to provide experts or even refuse to communicate with journalists. Some important topics outside of coronavirus become impossible to develop further. Others saw the crisis as an opportunity and convenience to pass on their information only through press releases, which turned the media into appendages, branches of PR agencies” (J6).

Local journalists noted that responses from authorities are slow and questions often ignored, which makes their jobs very difficult. Reporters have to rely on their personal contacts with local councillors to get answers to important questions. The situation is even more challenging for media who are perceived as “critical” or “hostile” by local councils: “it’s become a tradition in our city not to work with critical journalists and to refuse to answer our questions even on matters of significant public interest to our readers. We even tend to avoid Freedom of Information requests as they are very slow or don’t come back at all.” (J12)

Professional and personal impact

Our interviewees indicate that many journalists were affected by the state of emergency on a professional but also on a personal level. Editors and reporters noted increased levels of stress during what they deemed as continuous state of emergency and disaster reporting, with increase in workloads and long shifts, which took its toll on their emotional and physical wellbeing. Empty corridors at work, worried colleagues, lack of usual routines and reporting “from the frontline” have all contributed to this as these quotes illustrate:

“For most people, the work is probably three times more in the number of articles produced. Our busiest part of the team has been working for almost a month without a single day off, often for more than 10 hours a day.” (J3).

“Everyone was surprised to find that working from the couch is much more stressful and time consuming than working in the office.” (J4)

“I lack time for sleep during 12-hour shifts and heavy workload. We think not only about our work, which is stressful enough, but also about how to protect ourselves and not get infected. Because we are constantly plugged into a negative information flow, we are even more mentally burdened than ordinary people. Personally, when I’m not

at work I stick to the rules but not being able to walk outside makes the situation worse. So I'm both worried and anxious." (J8)

Stress is seen as part of the journalism profession on a daily basis, especially for those who are often on the air. Journalists with more experience tend to have better coping mechanisms but some say they cannot afford to complain: "People do not realise that the media is also at the forefront so that the public can be informed, but that is part of our job." (J7) Yet, despite the challenges all interviewees demonstrated a remarkable level of commitment and dedication to their work to inform the public on all aspects of COVID-19 and see this as their main responsibility as these statements show:

"In this situation, the responsibility of journalists is even greater. At the moment, viewers, who are also isolated, expect and rely much more on the information we provide them with." (J9)

"Journalists must insist on getting the answers that people need and must not tolerate an attitude from a speaker or interviewee that belittles their work. Now, more than ever, the work of journalists is crucial to society." (J1)

"We must do careful verification of information and have an awareness that what we write has a huge impact on the people around us, and hence on the world in which we live." (J3)

"People call the newsroom with hundreds of questions. We put these questions to experts who can answer, we try and help when help is needed and we need to intervene because we are journalists, but above all human beings." (J7)

As well as fulfilling their public service duties all of our interviews indicate that newsrooms had to adapt quickly and rise to the challenges of the pandemic.

Newsroom responses to the crisis

Despite the desperate need for income from advertising for private and independent media, most interviewees note that they refused to compromise their principles and jeopardise the

trust of their readers. For example, they did not bow to demands from some advertisers not to mark content as “paid” and to continue clearly separating marketing from editorial content. There is some scope of optimism among interviewees. Many acknowledge that this is not the first serious crisis that the Bulgarian media have had to weather. The climate in which most private, and to some extent public broadcasters, operate has been very challenging in the past two decades. Being quick to adapt is essential for survival, according to most of our interviewees. Yet, the additional squeeze on resources because of the pandemic has forced some media organizations to reduce their teams, and the quality of their journalism has suffered. Due to limited financial resources, many were forced to give up profiled and specialist reporters and relied on interns and journalists who could cover many different topics which harmed the quality of their journalism. As for the outlets that do not operate under market principles and depend on sponsorship from owners, such concerns are not seen as significant if funding is dished out in return for serving the interest and agenda of their sponsors, according to several participants. Their existence is highly dependent on the whims of their sponsors and if they are deemed to be of use to serve.

Many news organisations had to introduce new COVID-19 programming, formats and content due to increased public demand for information. Journalists from the TV channels noted that their news sites had three times more users compared to the same period in 2019. Among the new content are exclusive pages and guides on the virus online with constant updates on infections in the country and worldwide; Q and A with health experts and doctors about the virus and the business and economic measures introduced by the government; coronavirus podcasts; an email newsletter that condensed and summarised the important news of the day and the latest meaningful updates from the government crisis centre and daily press conferences.

On another positive note, some of our interviewees note tripling of their readership, increased engagement between readers and journalists showing that in times of crisis audiences search for and access news and information they can trust:

“We have had a double growth of digital subscriptions for one of our titles. There are people who understand that quality information has value, just like food or Microsoft office subscriptions, for example. We thank the readers who vote with their money for the information we give them.” (P1)

The significant increase in the volume of articles and other news content is noted by all participants as a promising development in independent outlets and PSM, especially articles based on original and real-time reporting. This is in contrast to a tactic to attract clicks and advertising used by some sponsored websites and newspapers in publishing unverified information from the internet, copying and pasting press releases and acting as a “cheap imitation of journalism”, according to one local publisher. Instead of conferences and special events, some media introduced webinars, which became very popular among audiences.

Discussion and conclusion

In the “Covid-19 communication ecology” (Perreault and Perreault, 2021, p.977) scholars have argued that journalists play a big role as a resource of information for the public within the ecology while also balancing personal challenges of the crisis. The pandemic has dealt publishers a massive blow, as illustrated by previous studies and our findings. In Bulgaria, where press freedom and independent media were in crisis before the pandemic the fall of income from advertising has made their situation even more precarious. Despite the fact that the problems Bulgarian media and journalists face are very similar to others’ across the world, their unique context and circumstances still plays a role. This is illustrated by the overwhelming view that media who depend on owners and sponsors have escaped the pandemic almost unscathed while independent, critical outlets who dare to challenge the authorities have paid a higher price and are struggling to survive in difficult conditions, hoping for a revival of their ad revenue, having to rely on external support from foundations and worrying about their future. In that sense it is clear that independent outlets are facing, if not a “extinction event” but a very challenging situation. The crisis caused by the pandemic has forced them to exist with much tighter if non-existent budgets. The pandemic impacted on all Bulgarian media but especially those who relied on reaching readers only through printed copies sold at kiosks. Those are the media who have generally been slow to develop sustainable digital strategies, have been forced to start developing them during a pandemic, in a very short time and with scarce financial resources. While there are signs of recovery in the advertising spending in the TV market despite the so called Covid-19 “third wave” (e.g. TV spending increased by 68% in 2021 compared to 2020 (Media Connections, 2021)), these fragile shoots of recovery are yet to translate into a consistent growth. It is clear that publishers and journalists have learned from previous crises such as the financial crisis in

2008/9, and that to some extent has helped them in navigating the recent one. Among the most important lessons for independent media from that time is to try and keep the quality of journalism high, to quickly adapt their products to the demand of the readers and not be afraid to experiment and implement changes.

In response to the crisis scholars have called for new approaches that would financially sustain journalism. Recognition of news media as an essential service has given a strong justification for policy interventions to support local journalism but scholars must look beyond its normative role for more imaginative solutions (Hess and Waller, 2020).

Communal news work, for instance has been proposed by as a principle for funding journalism not just during the crisis but into the future. If national and local news is seen as an essential element of the infrastructure of democracy, a public service that does not fluctuate with the market, there is an argument that societies should share the burden of ensuring its survival. Communal news work involves but is not limited to paid subscriptions, donations, events, services and products, government support as well as stating support for publishers. In other words, a collective action by different stakeholders in directing funds to news publishers “based on the value it creates for society and not only on the basis of individual cost-benefit analyses by consumers or advertisers” (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund, 2020, p. 676). That type of work is much needed in fragile democracies such as Bulgaria. It should support the public-good function of journalism and practices for producing accurate and truthful news content that benefits citizens but is unlikely to happen if news publishers continue to serve the owners’ interests instead of pursuing their democratic obligations to societies.

Despite worrying developments, the volume of news in independent media has increased dramatically and so has readers’ interest which follows a pattern noted in countries across the world. Many of our participants reiterated that audiences were active in seeking information on the pandemic from sources they knew well and trusted which confirms that in times of crisis readers look for and access more quality journalism, opinion, analysis and trustworthy content. We find that in addition to existing challenges to press freedom, during the pandemic Bulgarian journalists encountered some new limits to attending and reporting live events, including delays from official institutions that provide vital information, and refusals from interviewees to take part in important current affairs programmes. However, despite the difficult conditions, we found many instances of innovative practices in engaging with

audiences eager for reliable, real-time news and information, including the introduction of new content and formats of journalism aimed at helping citizens and newsrooms weather the crisis. These practices include a range of new rubrics, interviews with experts, specialist podcasts about the pandemic, online charity events in support of vulnerable citizens, daily email newsletters to subscribers as well as dedicated spaces where readers can access “news without coronavirus”. While our interviews indicate further decline in media freedom that is likely to affect journalism and media business in Bulgaria in the future, we also find strong signs of resilience and determination from journalists and newsrooms to serve their audiences. Despite its limitations, our paper serves as a starting point to a further comparative exploration of the impact of the pandemic on journalism practice in countries with fragile democracies in Eastern Europe and further afield.

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ⁱ The researchers have closely and actively followed developments in the Bulgarian media landscape for over 30 years. One of the authors has worked as a journalist in the industry for over three decades, has recently been awarded a doctorate.

ⁱⁱ Quotes from participants are identified with a letter and number to preserve anonymity. For example, P1 stands for publisher 1 and J1, J2 etc. stands for journalist 1, 2 and so on. A breakdown of position of each interviewee is available upon request. The study received ethics committee approval from the University of National and World Economy (UNWE10/04032022)

ⁱⁱⁱ The media market has undergone some changes in the past year since the interviews were conducted. For example, a number of media outlets that belonged to the largest media owner in Bulgaria, Delyan Peevski were sold to United Group, a large telecoms and media provider in South East Europe. Peevski, a local oligarch and former MP at the centre of many political scandals, was blacklisted in 2021 by the US Department of Treasury under the Global Magnitsky Act aimed at combatting corruption (Prince. 2021).