



This is a repository copy of *Challenges and opportunities for journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 communication ecology*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/191395/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Price, L.T. and Antonova, V. (2022) Challenges and opportunities for journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 communication ecology. *Journalism Practice*, 18 (1). pp. 119-136. ISSN 1751-2786

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2118154>

Reuse

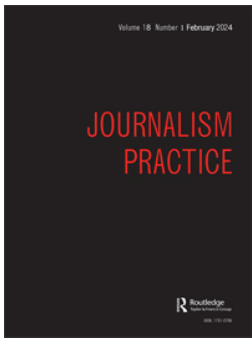
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



Challenges and Opportunities for Journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 Communication Ecology

Lada Trifonova Price & Vesislava Antonova

To cite this article: Lada Trifonova Price & Vesislava Antonova (2024) Challenges and Opportunities for Journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 Communication Ecology, Journalism Practice, 18:1, 119-136, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2022.2118154](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2118154)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2118154>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Sep 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3009



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

Challenges and Opportunities for Journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 Communication Ecology

Lada Trifonova Price^a and Vesislava Antonova^b

^aJournalism Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK; ^bMedia and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia, Bulgaria

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, such as Bulgaria. Studies on former Eastern bloc countries have become few and far between recently so this research aims to fill this gap by examining 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 encountered new limits to their daily practice in reporting on a topic of significant public importance.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; pandemic; communication ecology; Bulgaria; fragile democracy; press freedom; journalism; independent media

Introduction

With its onset in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic showed journalism's great value to societies but also its vulnerabilities (Olsen 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 struggled, and journalism faced 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 shut-downs, curbs on free expression and access to information, and limits on public participation and protest became increasingly common in many countries throughout

CONTACT Lada Trifonova Price  l.t.price@sheffield.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the world under the guise of governments' handling of the pandemic (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020; Radcliffe 2021). 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, X). Yet, there is strong concern that the state of exception has become the new normal. In the context of such restrictions, the pandemic 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 saw increased competition from on-demand services, facing uncertainty and reduced advertising income. The impact of COVID-19 resonated through the entire audio-visual sector because it related to the business structure of TV production (Túñez-López, Vaz-Álvarez, and Fieiras-Ceide 2020). The pandemic exacerbated and accelerated weaknesses that have long existed within the communication ecology and as Perreault and Perreault (2021, 976) note "journalists exist as a part of an ecology in which their work influences and is influenced by the environment that surrounds it". COVID-19 "hammered" 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 shut-down, more than 200 regional and community newspapers announced they could no longer keep their presses running due to the unprecedented crisis (Hess and Waller 2021).

There is a large 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 did the coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions impact journalism practice in Bulgaria and how did journalists and independent media organisations respond and adapt to the crisis? We start by examining research on the impact of the pandemic on media and journalism practice, new challenges to press freedom, and how media organisations across the world responded to a public health crisis of such magnitude. While many theories were considered, the frameworks of news media's role during crises and the COVID-19 communication ecology (e.g., Olsen and Westlund 2020; Perreault and Perreault 2021) were found to be foundational theories which grounded the study and allowed an opportunity to discuss broader issues that relate to the environment in which Bulgarian journalists work. At the time of the study Bulgaria was ranked 111th in the Reporters Without Borders annual Press Freedom Index (2020), the lowest position in the European Union for a third consecutive year. Much of the media in the country was financed by people with political and economic ties to the former Borisov government, which was in power until spring 2021 (EJN, 2020; Trifonova Price, 2019). The former prime minister has been accused of corruption on numerous occasions but has always denied any wrongdoing (RFE/RL, 2022). Media capture by state and private interests had effectively eliminated the freedom of traditional media, and to some extent online media too, stifling independent journalism. The media was largely divided in two camps—pro-government and anti-government while trust in journalism and public communication had slipped to all times low (Newman et al. 2020; EJN 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 2022). 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. This article adds to the limited body of work on Bulgaria and it builds on existing studies focusing on the media landscape and challenges to journalism practice in a country that has struggled continuously since it embarked on the path to democracy in the early 1990s (e.g., Slavtcheva-Petkova 2016; Trifonova Price 2018; 2019; 2021; 2022). More broadly, it contributes to a better understanding of the media systems, environments and journalism culture during transition periods (e.g., Votlmer 2013; Głowacki, Epp, and Balčytienė 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki 2015; Stetka 2015). The media in former communist states have experienced turbulent changes and various crises during the past three decades and have been subjected to “extreme violations of media independence and disregard for journalists’ rights to bring accountability into public life” (Trifonova Price 2021, 496). We wanted to find out if the pandemic added further to these challenges.

COVID-19 and Its Impact on Media Organisations Worldwide

Studies unequivocally suggest 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 face a difficult future. Advertising income collapsed—in some instances down by 50–75% (Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020)—partly because of companies reducing their advertising budgets and social media’s dominance of online advertising. The pandemic was “crushing the advertising business that plays such a vital role in funding news production” (Olsen and Westlund 2020, 673). Local and independent journalism was particularly badly affected in many countries worldwide, including those in the former communist bloc (Article 19 2020; EJO 2021). For instance, in Georgia there was no financial support for independent media; in Latvia media 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 argued that claims for news media facing an “extinction event” were 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 2021, 5).

Media Role in Crises and Press Freedom Under Threat

The concept of communication ecology serves as a good way of understanding broadly how information is distributed and accessed but disaster communication ecology has its

own unique characteristics. Journalism practice during a crisis might be different to practice in normal conditions in “an environment where new norms and practices can be established and tried out, and perhaps innovated” (Perreault and Perreault 2021, 978). The pandemic reinforced the crucial information dissemination function of the media as the public sought accurate and credible news sources about COVID-19. During crises, news media, especially on local level, becomes even more important in supplying information that can contribute directly to citizens’ potential for self-protection and safety as it has been shown during previous emergencies. Olsen et al. (2020, 674), for example, argue that journalism is a public good because of the broader benefits it brings to society. Local media acts as a “social glue” that binds communities together and in that sense the media is not just a profit-oriented enterprise but a “key part of democracy’s infrastructure that is under attack from the coronavirus”. The COVID-19 pandemic has been invariably described by scholars as “generation defining” (Radcliffe 2021, 12), a “monstrous threat to humanity” (Zinn 2020, 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. Media reporting often 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 were the restrictions imposed on journalism to scale down their activities. When it comes to press freedom, the virus became a “pathogen of repression” (McKew, 2020, X). Threats to press freedom have 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 when the study was conducted 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, Bell, and Brown 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 increasing 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 towards the end of 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). Eighteen countries 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 was dubbed as “infodemic” (WHO 2020)—some accurate, some false which makes it harder for people to find reliable and trustworthy sources. The “infodemic” brought significant challenges for journalists to combat misinformation, government propaganda, and distinguish between fact and fiction (Radcliffe 2021). Posetti and Bontcheva (2021, 2) 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”. Studies have established that with its onset, the coronavirus emergency 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 but looked for ways to mitigate the forces pressuring their work (Perreault and Perreault 2021).

Impact of COVID-19 and Innovation—Opportunities, Change and Development

The pandemic 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 and Westlund 2020, 676). Along with the challenges presented by the spread of mis and disinformation, demand for truthful and comprehensive reporting grew 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, Vaz-Álvarez, Fieiras-Ceide 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 reported a comeback to legacy media, especially to television, and citizens who were 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-centred 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, 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, 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 changed the routines of journalists who 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, 12). The impact of the pandemic was offset to some extent by the "incorporation of domestic scenarios" (Túñez-López et al. 2020, 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. This is a feature of crisis or disaster communication ecology where journalists might engage people online more often than normal and citizens can share information about the crisis (Perreault and Perreault, 2021).

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 (2021, 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 had to adapt their content, introduce new formats, make wage cuts but there were no official closures of national outlets in the first or subsequent waves. However, survival and financial security of the media was dependent on handouts from owners who often supported the Borisov 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 independent 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; Arias-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 (Newman et al. 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 media 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 (e.g., Trifonova Price, 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016) and the literature indicates that it is independent 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; the researchers' expert knowledge of and familiarity with the themes to be investigated; and the context of the research. 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, 32). We obtained full consent from participants and ensured that all answers were kept confidential and anonymised in our results.¹

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 was 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, 2016) that most of the media was owned by local

businessmen with close links to the government at the time the pandemic emerged and the outlets they owned were 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 was 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 40–50% 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 reevaluated their marketing strategies in response to the restrictions leaving media without much-needed revenue. Our interviewees pointed out that the Bulgarian advertising market was subject to similar problems that affect the media, namely concentrated ownership in the hands of two large media companies, owned by local oligarchs.² The market was skewed in favour of these “big players”—agencies that managed to secure substantial state advertising from the government and placed adverts only in certain friendly media outlets that are not critical of officials. Media advertising was 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 Reuters Digital News Report (Antonov 2021) confirmed. However, when it comes to the regional media, the situation was 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, were not 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 stated 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 noted 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, only worsened the already poor communication between

the authorities and the media. Several journalists who were actively involved in news production noted 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 Banskó 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 were slow and questions often ignored, which made their jobs very difficult. Reporters had to rely on their personal contacts with local councillors to get answers to important questions. The situation was 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 indicated 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 was seen as part of the journalism profession on a daily basis, especially for those who were often on the air. Journalists with more experience tended to have better coping mechanisms but some said 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 was some scope of optimism among interviewees. Many acknowledged that this was 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 forced some media organisations to reduce their teams, and the quality of their journalism 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 were 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 were 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 noted 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, 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. In normative theory, media and journalism are essential for democracy but in times of upheaval they become a vital source of verified and accurate information for local and national communities (Olsen et al., 2020). The pandemic 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 made their situation even more precarious. Despite the fact that the problems Bulgarian

media and journalists faced were very similar to others' across the world, their unique context and circumstances still played 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 struggled to survive in difficult conditions, hoping for a revival of their advertising revenue, having to rely on external support from foundations and worrying about their future. In that sense, it is clear that independent outlets faced, if not an "extinction event", a very challenging situation. The crisis caused by the pandemic 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 were 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 learned from previous crises such as the financial crisis in 2008/9, and that to some extent helped them in navigating the most recent one. Among the most important lessons for independent media from the pandemic 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. While it's easy to recommend high quality journalism, this is the type of reporting that requires significant investment in time, staff and resources from cash strapped outlets. Considering the challenging political and economic media landscape in Bulgaria, the constraints to investigative journalism and a declining number of independent media, one way to address this is for higher education institutions in the country to invest in high quality journalism training and education for newcomers to the field, while the journalist community can make active steps to unite in demanding fair pay from their employers with the return of more robust advertising incomes.

In response to the crisis, scholars have also 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, 2021). *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 et al., 2020, 676). That type of work is much needed in fragile democracies such as Bulgaria and stakeholders such as the European Union, the OSCE or the European Federation of Journalists can fund and support independent

media and publishers directly in a transparent and fair manner while bypassing the model of government/state advertising to friendly outlets. This funding 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 and rely on government handouts instead of pursuing their democratic obligations to societies.

Despite some worrying developments, the volume of news in independent media increased dramatically and so did readers' interest which follows a pattern noted in countries across the world and is a feature of crisis communication ecology. 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. From their accounts, it is also clear that, similar to journalists in other countries, journalists positioned themselves as in responsible but also vulnerable position (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). 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. Early signs of post-COVID recovery are good news for independent media in Bulgaria as they look for ways to survive, innovate and grow after the pandemic. The pandemic aside, the prospect of practicing journalism outside a crisis situation would certainly appeal to many.

Despite its limitations, our paper serves as a foundation and 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. As a result of this initial exploration, we have embarked on a study aiming to map out the post-COVID media landscape and journalism practice in four Southern European countries where press freedom is constantly attacked by governments, media owners and is under severe financial pressures.

Notes

1. 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).

2. 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 an 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).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Allsop, Jon. 2020. "The Media Industry's Preexisting Conditions." *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/layoffs_buzzfeed_quartz_vice.php.
- Antonov, Stefan. 2021. "Bulgaria." *Digital News Report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/bulgaria>.
- Arias-Robles, Félix, and Pilar López. 2020. "Driving the Closest Information. Local Data Journalism in the UK." *Journalism Practice* 15: 1–13. doi:10.1080/17512786.2020.1749109.
- Article 19. 2020. The Global Expression Report 2019/2020. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GxR2019-20report.pdf>.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 2011. *Media and Communication Research Methods. An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Casero-Ripolles, Andreu. 2020. "Impact of Covid-19 on the Media System. Communicative and Democratic Consequences of News Consumption During the Outbreak." *Profesional De La Información* 29: 2. doi:10.3145/epi.2020.mar.23.
- Cimino, Francesca, Hartmann Florence, Besson Léa, and Speck Dominik. 2020. *Covid-19 Crisis PSM Audience Performance*. Geneva: EBU. <https://www.ebu.ch/publications/research/membersonly/report/covid-19-crisis-psm-audience-performance>.
- Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Dobek-Ostrowska, Bogusława, and Michał Głowacki. 2015. *Democracy and Media in Central and Eastern Europe 25 Years On*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- EJN (Ethical Journalism Network). 2020. Annual Report. https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EJN-Annual-Report_final-2.pdf.
- EJO (European Journalism Observatory). 2021. The Economic Impact of Covid-19 on European Media in 2020. <https://en.ejo.ch/media-economics/the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-on-european-media-in-2020>.
- Głowacki, Michał, Lauk Epp, and Auksė Balčytienė. 2014. *Journalism That Matters: Views from Central and Eastern Europe*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Hess, Kirsty, and Lisa Jane Waller. 2021. "Local Newspapers and Coronavirus: Conceptualising Connections, Comparisons and Cures." *Media International Australia* 178 (1): 21–35.
- International Press Institute. 2021. Media Freedom Violation Tracker. <https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-monitoring/>.
- Jenkins, Joy, and Rasmus Nielsen. 2020. "Preservation and Evolution: Local Newspapers as Ambidextrous Organizations." *Journalism* 21 (4): 472–488. doi:10.1177/1464884919886421.
- Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.
- López-García, Xosé, Carmen Costa-Sánchez, and Ángel Vizoso. 2021. "Journalistic Fact-Checking of Information in Pandemic: Stakeholders, Hoaxes, and Strategies to Fight Disinformation During the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain." *International Journal of Environmental Reseach and Public Health* 18: 2–15. doi:10.3390/ijerph1803122.

- Mckew, Quinn. 2020. *The Global Expression Report 2019/2020. The State of Freedom of Expression Around the World*. Article 19 2020. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GxR2019-20report.pdf>.
- Media Connections. 2021. Media Landscape Bulgaria H1 2021 Report. <http://mediacconnection.bg/report/view/88>.
- Nee, Rebecca C., and Arthur D Santana. 2021. "Podcasting the Pandemic: Exploring Storytelling Formats and Shifting Journalistic Norms in News Podcasts Related to the Coronavirus." *Journalism Practice*. doi:10.1080/17512786.2021.1882874.
- Newman, Nic. 2021. "Executive Summary and Key Findings of the 2021 Report." *Digital News Report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/dnr-executive-summary>.
- Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Anne Schulz, Simge Andi, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2020. Reuters Institute Digital News Report. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf.
- Olsen, Pickard, and Westlund. 2020. "Communal News Work: COVID-19 Calls for Collective Funding of Journalism." *Digital Journalism* 8 (5): 673–680. doi:10.1080/21670811.2020.1763186.
- Perreault, Mildred F., and Gregory P Perreault. 2021. "Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting." *American Behavioral Scientist* 65 (7): 976–991.
- Pew Research Centre. 2020. Local News Is Playing an Important Role for Americans During COVID-19 Outbreak. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/02/local-news-is-playing-an-important-role-for-americans-during-covid-19-outbreak/>.
- Philp, Rowan. 2020. Journalist Deaths from COVID-19 Rise Seven-Fold; Nearly 500 Dead Worldwide. <https://gijn.org/2020/11/17/journalist-deaths-from-covid-19-rise-seven-fold-nearly-500-dead-worldwide/>.
- Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Peter Brown. 2020. Journalism & the Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts Report. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.
- Posetti, Julie, and Kalina Bontcheva. 2021. Disinfodemic. Deciphering COVID-19 Disinformation. Policy Brief 1. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf.
- Posetti, Julie, Maynard Shabbir Nabeelah, Bontcheva Diana, Aboulez Kalina, and Nermine. 2021. "The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists." *Research Discussion Paper*. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>.
- Prince, Todd. 2021. "U.S. Places Sanctions On Bulgarian Power Broker, Gambling Tycoon, Citing Influence Peddling." *Radio Free Europe*. August 3. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-sanctions-us-peeovski-boshkov-zhelyazkov-corruption/31287870.html>.
- Radcliffe, Damian. 2021. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Journalism in Emerging Economies and the Global South." *Report for the Thomson Reuters Foundation*. http://covid-report.trust.org/?fbclid=IwAR0sPs1GNznrBBIMGV4vvn1swLJuL4onMrQVi_p7ARPKZiIU6tKNgxsKPM.
- Radio Free Europe Bulgarian Service. 2022. Former Bulgarian Prime Minister Detained in EU Corruption Investigations. March 17, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-borisov-prime-minister-detained-corruption/31758417.html>.
- Reporters Without Borders. 2020. Annual Press Freedom Index. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2020>.
- Repucci, Sarah, and Amy Slipowitz. 2020. "Democracy Under Lockdown. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom." *Special Report for Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>.
- Selva, Meera. 2020. *Fighting Words: Journalism Under Assault in Central and Eastern Europe*. Reuters Institute Report 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/MSelva-Journalism_Under_Assault_FINAL_0.pdf.
- Slavtcheva-Petkova, Vera. 2016. "We Are Not Fools": Online News Commentators' Perceptions of Real and Ideal Journalism." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21 (1): 68–87. doi:10.1177/1940161215612203.

- Stetka, Vaclav. 2015. "The Rise of Oligarchs as Media Owners." In *Media and Politics in New Democracies. Europe in a Comparative Perspective*, edited by J. Zielonka, 85–98. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trifonova Price, Lada. 2018. "'Bear in Mind... and do not Bite the Hand That Feeds You'. Institutionalized Self-Censorship and Its Impact on Journalistic Practice in Post Communist Countries—The Case of Bulgaria." In *Critical Perspectives on Journalistic Beliefs and Actions*, edited by E. Freedman, R. S. Goodman, and E. Steyn. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315161099.
- Trifonova Price, Lada. 2019. "Post-communist Media and the Impact of Democratization in Bulgaria and Romania." In *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*, edited by E. Polonska and C. Beckett, 305–330. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trifonova Price, Lada. 2021. "Ethical Codes in Post-Communist Countries: The Case of Bulgaria and Romania." In *Routledge Companion to Journalism Ethics*, edited by L. Price, K. Sanders, and W. N. Wyatt, 496–503. London: Routledge.
- Trifonova Price, L. 2022. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Continued Struggle of Media and Journalism in Bulgaria's Media System." In *In 6+1 Proposals for the Future of Journalism*, edited by C. Dagoula and S. Iordanodou, 90–104. Bristol: Intellect.
- Túñez-López, Miguel, Martín Vaz-Álvarez, and César Fieiras-Ceide. 2020. "Covid-19 and Public Service Media: Impact of the Pandemic on Public Television in Europe." *El profesional de la información* 29 (5): e290518. doi:10.3145/epi.2020.sep.18.
- UNESCO. 2020. Journalism Under Fire: UNESCO Raises Alarm Over Surge of Attacks on Media Workers Covering Protests. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1072262>.
- Votlmer, Katrin. 2013. *The Media in Transitional Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wenzel, Andrea D., and Letrell Crittenden. 2021. "Collaborating in a Pandemic: Adapting Local News Infrastructure to Meet Information Needs." *Journalism Practice* 1–19. doi:10.1080/17512786.2021.1910986.
- World Health Organisation (WHO). 2020. Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviours and Mitigating the Harm From Misinformation and Disinformation. <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>.
- Zinn, J. O. 2020. "'A Monstrous Threat': How a State of Exception Turns into a 'New Normal'." *Journal of Risk Research* 23 (7-8): 1083–1091. doi:10.1080/13669877.2020.1758194.