Covering Covid-19: Critical, global perspectives

Special double issue
edited by John Mair
and Donald Matheson

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The International Journal
of Communication Ethics

Aims and scope

The commitment of the academic quarterly, *Ethical Space*, is to examine significant historical and emerging ethical issues in communication. Its guiding principles are:

- internationalism,
- independent integrity,
- respect for difference and diversity,
- interdisciplinarity,
- theoretical rigour,
- practitioner focus.

In an editorial in Vol. 3, Nos 2 and 3 of 2006, the joint editor, Donald Matheson, of Canterbury University, New Zealand, stresses that ethics can be defined narrowly, as a matter of duty or responsibility, or ethics can be defined broadly 'blurring into areas such as politics and social criticism'. *Ethical Space* stands essentially at the blurred end of the definitional range. Dr Matheson observes: 'As many commentators have pointed out, a discussion of ethics that is divorced from politics is immediately unable to talk about some of the most important factors in shaping communication and media practices.'

The journal, then, aims to provide a meeting point for media experts, scholars and practitioners who come from different disciplines. Moreover, one of its major strands is to problematise professionalism (for instance, by focusing on alternative, progressive media) and highlight many of its underlying myths.

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Papers should be submitted to the Editor via email. Full details on submission – along with detailed notes for authors – are available online: **www.ethical-space.co.uk**

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ethical space

The International Journal
of Communication Ethics

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Beyond fear: Reflections on Covid coverage by scholars and practitioners worldwide

Coronavirus is a worldwide pandemic – as of 18 October 2020 there were 39,774,852 cases of Covid-19 (in accordance with the applied case definitions and testing strategies in the affected countries) including 1,110,902 deaths worldwide. Few countries have escaped. This special, double issue of *Ethical Space* is global in its ambition; it has its origin in an international, Zoom-based conference 'Reporting the pandemic', in May 2020, jointly mounted with the European Journalism Observatory. In an hour, it aimed to analyse early media actions in response to the pandemic. May now seems an age ago as the 'second wave' brings more cases and more misery especially to Europe and the USA this autumn.

The immediate health cost of the pandemic is there for all to see. The longer-term health effects – undiagnosed and untreated serious illnesses and mental health deterioration – have yet to bear fruit. The economic effects – huge dents in GDPs and public borrowing amounts unseen outside world wars, mass poverty, unemployment, famine in many countries – are appalling and worsening every day. Moreover, governments across the globe have taken the opportunity to extend surveillance – and attack the media and civil liberties in general. Generations following this one will pay the price for the Great Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020-2021-2022?

This special issue brings together reflections from scholars and practitioners worldwide.

Journalism that serves the public
First, the *grande dame* of British television journalism – Dorothy Byrne, who for nigh on two decades has been the news and current affairs supremo at Channel Four. She is never afraid to speak her mind. In this piece she is very positive about how British journalism has risen to the Covid challenge. She thinks it has done so ethically and helped by a population hungry for reliable and true information. They returned to trusted 'legacy media' like the BBC and the broadsheet press in droves. In her view, they and specialist publications have served the public well.

John Mair

The European Journalism Observatory, co-sponsors of the conference, have pursued the cause of ethical journalism from their inception in 2004. Tina Bettels-Schwabbauer and Paula Kennedy, who co-ordinated the EJO in early 2020, contribute their insights on the pandemic coverage and on 'a journalist's relationship with and responsibility towards his or her audience and sources; journalists' duty to hold those in power to account and the necessity of media outlets themselves being accountable and deserving of trust'. And in an age riddled with disinformation and conspiracy theories, they argue a journalist's duty is 'to unmask those who would deceive the public and to raise general standards of media literacy'. This has come into sharp focus with the coronavirus crisis.

Italy was the bridgehead for the virus in continental Europe. Their intensive care units filled up first before the virus started rolling out northwards. Philip Di Salvo looks at the use by journalists of data in the pandemic. He examines the use and misuse of official data by journalists in that country and how they avoided being misled and, in turn, misleading the audiences they serve. The sheer volume of data released by governments and health bodies daily is baffling to even experts. The public is left to pick 'n mix what they can to fix their own mental pictures.

In parenthesis, official data in the UK is subject to much dispute as to its accuracy; some epidemiologists think there may be an under-estimate of up to 25,000 deaths not reported in the official figures; others argue the figures are grossly exaggerated and over-sensationalised. For instance, in the UK, the average age of Covid-19 victims is 82.4 years – actually several months longer than the average life expectancy.

Three Spanish scholars, Joan Pedro-Carañana, Tabe Bergman and Juan Antonio Carbonell-Asíns, offer a design for an innovative piece of comparative research looking at different media outlets in four countries (USA, UK, Spain and the Netherlands) and how media ownership and ideology affect what is reported.

Science, risk and misinformation
In the second major section of this book we look at what the science and the medicine tell us about this coronavirus. Little was known even among those who specialise in virology and epidemiology at the beginning of the pandemic. Science and medicine have had to play rapid 'catch up' in the last six months. The drop in admissions to ICUs and deaths in the UK is testimony to that.

But has journalism been found wanting? Brian Winston is an original thinker with a hinterland of wide reading. He says that by 'following the science' governments and journalists short-changed the public. There was no one 'science' of Covid-19 and there is now

much reported dispute within the scientific communities on causes, effects and remedies. Does journalism reflect those debates? Do journalists understand them? Winston thinks not.

Spain came soon after Italy as an early epicentre for pandemic – wave one and wave two. In her paper, 'Infoxication, infodemics and disinformation: The "disinfodemic" in the Covid-19 crisis', Cristina López García looks at the tsunami of disinformation faced by the Spanish people in the three areas of health, wealth and politics. The spread of social media – or 'anti-social media' as some, like me, have dubbed it – has meant that village gossip has become cyberspace cynicism with rumours and false rumours flying around.

Alex Connock, of the University of Oxford, is a sage when it comes to analysis of the negative effects of social media platforms. Outlandish 'theories' gain legs at the click of a keyboard. In the UK in 2020, the 'hypothesis' that mobile phone 5G masts were transmitting Covid-19 gained some traction, hard as it might be to believe. Masts were attacked and there was even an arson attempt on one.

In the 'world-beating' USA the conspiracies, real or imagined, were even more crazy (and even less credible). The anti-vaxxers and *soi-disant* 'libertarians' had a field day on Facebook. Connock wants the platform algorithms to be modified to weed out patent nonsense and for there to be a concerted campaign against it on mass platforms like YouTube, Instagram and Facebook

Finally, in this section, Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos urges national and world media to act with a sense of collective responsibility to 'grant people the opportunity to address their angst, uneasiness, uphold constructive dialogue and breed joint responsibility without nurturing the fears of the unknown and strangeness and turning almost unbearable risks into bearable ones'. In short, from a culture of fear to a culture of hope….

Further international perspectives on the challenges facing media
Covid-19 started in Wuhan, in China, before its worldwide tour of destruction. Zhan Zhang, in 'From local epidemic to world pandemic', looks at how the Chinese media reported it to its people. Initially there was an information vacuum generating fear and unpreparedness. At least one whistleblowing doctor in Wuhan was imprisoned. But the command structure of the CPC (Chinese Communist Party) realised that some information was better than none and pulled the levers of propaganda up and the need to take precautions to head off mass death. Donald Trump's 'War on China' rhetoric helped to unify the nation to fight the virus. Trust in state media came back – slowly.

John Mair

Iran has been an epicentre of Covid-19 but little news and even less analysis has emerged form that closed empire. Much of the rest of the Middle and Near East is much more open. In 'Arabic narratives: A study of Gulf Press coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic', Ahmed Mansoori and Muhammed Musa examine the content of the coverage in five Gulf countries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE) and find differences in the way their media approach and report the pandemic.

Africa has not been immune from the pandemic. In 'Balancing privacy and the right to information in Covid-19 reporting in Kenya', Levi Obonyo and Lydia Ouma Radoli look at how the vigorous Kenyan tabloid media managed (or not) to balance the public right to know with the individual's right to privacy. They come down on the side of the greater public good prevailing.

And in the final essay, Catriona Bonfiglioli looks for the tools available to journalists internationally to help them avoid creating misinformation or fake news. She concludes that the old journalistic tools of verification and fact-checking are still the best.

John Mair

- The editors hope all our readers are staying well during these strange times. The views expressed in this special double issue, as in all *Ethical Space* editions, are those of the writers and are not necessarily endorsed by the editors. From its outset, *Ethical Space* has encouraged critical debate providing an outlet for a vast range of competing ideas.

Dorothy Byrne

The pandemic brings out the ethical in journalism

Covid-19 reporting has not all been death and damnation. Dorothy Byrne, editor at large at Channel Four, accentuates the positives for British journalism.

Some wonderful things are happening in UK journalism during this pandemic and we who are interested in ethical journalism should celebrate them. So often, we write only the bad news. Of course, there is plenty of that, but many good things are happening.

The most heartening news is that in this emergency, the public is turning to trusted journalists for their information. A survey published on 9 April 2020 by the UK media regulator OFCOM found that average daily television news viewing was up by 92 per cent in March 2020 compared to March 2019. Young people are flocking back to television news; *Channel 4 News* has doubled its number of young viewers on many nights. Trust in television news is traditionally high in the UK, largely because it is regulated. Broadcasters are required to produce news which is fair, accurate and duly impartial and can get into serious trouble if they fail to do so.

In other words, UK news is obliged by regulation to uphold ethical standards. Of course, UK television news is not perfect but it is very good compared with many other countries. That public trust is today, as our nation faces its greatest crisis since World War Two, even higher than usual, with 83 per cent of people saying they trust the *BBC* and *Channel 4 News*, 82 per cent *ITV News* and 75 per cent *Sky News.*

Partial news
Some had been saying before Covid-19 that the UK system of broadcasting was outdated and we should move more towards the US system in which major broadcasters are allowed to be partial

Dorothy Byrne

and opinionated in their news. We have not heard that said much now. Also, some had been saying the so-called mainstream media was irrelevant. Well, it's not just relevant now; it is essential to the health and survival of the UK population. When the government and its leading scientific advisors need to get their messages across, they rely first and foremost on television journalists whose required ethical principles inspire public confidence.

How many deaths?

A journalist's first duty is to relay the truth. That means we have to challenge official information where necessary. It also means we have to be honest with the public about the limits of our own ability to find the truth. In covering Covid-19, we have had to explain to the public that the truth is not easy to discover and warn against necessarily believing apparently solid facts. On the most important aspect of this crisis, the number of deaths each day, journalists have rightly challenged official figures which were initially reported as representing the daily death toll but did not include those who died in care homes or in the community. Journalistic investigation uncovered disturbing evidence about high death rates in care homes; sometimes among residents who had not been tested for Covid-19 and were not, therefore, included in any figures. Investigative journalism also revealed information from some whistle-blowers who said that those recording causes of death had been discouraged from mentioning Covid-19 even when they believed the virus was the cause of death.

Care home collateral?

Journalists revealed that staff in care homes were not provided with suitable protective clothing and also that residents who had been admitted to hospital were being sent back to care homes where they were spreading the virus to other vulnerable elderly people. Significant percentages of residents in some homes were dying but this fact was not being reflected in official figures. This outstanding journalism across all media has changed the direction of government policy so that far more official attention is now being paid to the hundreds of thousands of vulnerable residents in our care homes. It is notable that some of the best journalism here came from newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, natural supporters of the Conservative Party. What we have seen in the UK is, on many occasions, journalists putting their ethical principles first; truth and the wellbeing of the population.

Journalists at the Conservative newspapers along with other journalists have also challenged government statements about the availability of PPE – the vital equipment health and care workers need to protect themselves against contracting Covid-19. Journalists have exposed again and again how doctors, nurses, cleaners, carers and others risked and lost their lives trying to save lives because they

did not have the right protective clothing. Again, their excellent and ethical reporting has informed and changed government policy. Journalists have worked extensively with whistle-blowers to reveal what was really happening at times when the public was being told equipment was available. One has to be careful about relying on anonymous whistle-blowers but the sheer quantity of people, especially hospital doctors and nurses, contacting journalists showed that there was a problem. Those medical staff reflected the view the public have of journalists during this crisis; they trusted them. Even though medical professionals had been warned that talking to journalists was not permitted, they gave information for the public good. As one example of this, Victoria Macdonald, of *Channel 4 News*, has been given key information about failings in health services across the country by leading figures in several major hospitals who believe that only if journalists reveal the truth will change be brought about.

The death knock?
Over many decades, I have criticised some journalists for preying on relatives of the dead. In this crisis, we have seen journalists helping the relatives of those who have died to express their anger when they have believed their loved one was subjected to unnecessary risk, working in hospitals or care homes without protective equipment, or was not given the treatment they needed. Journalists have exposed attempts by some health authorities to disseminate rules which would deny hospital admission to people over the age of 75 in care homes. Again, the government has been pressed into making statements valuing the lives of older, vulnerable people because of this good and ethical journalism.

I honestly believe that by holding government to account, excellent ethical journalism from across the media has contributed to improving the information available to the government and, thereby, helped guide its thinking. In my lifetime in journalism, I have never seen such direct contribution to the public good by journalists.

More specialists please
This crisis has also put into stark relief a key deficit in UK journalism; a lack of journalists with scientific training. Journalists have struggled, especially at the beginning, to put to the test official scientific claims. Challenging in so many other ways, they went along with the notion that there was only one accepted scientific view. They are now running to catch up, interviewing scientists and others who question the modelling on which our lockdown is based. I've spoken out before about the need for people with scientific training to enter journalism. This is an urgent need. When this critical period is over, we need major philanthropic organisations to provide bursaries and other funding to encourage top science

Dorothy Byrne   graduates to go into journalism. Government and every sphere of public life need more people with deep scientific understanding.

Journalism as public information and questioning too
Journalism has done great work too in helping people live through this nightmare. At Channel 4, we have prioritised making extra programmes to help people with practical problems like how to keep their houses free of the virus and cope if there is someone with Covid-19 in a house with a vulnerable person. Like journalists across all media, we worked to inform the public to try to stop the ridiculous panic buying. Every day, there are terrific spreads in newspapers giving people excellent advice on exercising at home, coping with the stress and learning new skills like cooking and crafts.

Journalists have rightly revealed to the UK public just how serious a threat Covid-19 represents. We have exposed difficult truths about the ways in which our health and care services are able to cope. We have questioned the science on which policy is based; probably insufficiently because we have lacked the scientific expertise. We have given practical advice on coping with the horror so suddenly laid upon the population. All those things were what ethical journalists should have done and I genuinely believe that the journalists of this country have, on the whole, risen to the challenge.

Truth is the best disinfectant?
Of course, there are mad conspiracy theories about Covid-19. That OFCOM research also revealed that 35 per cent of people had read that drinking more water helps flush the infection and 24 per cent had read that gurgling salt water or avoiding cold food or drink could help. They did not read that in mainstream media. Some 55 per cent of people ignored those false claims but 40 per cent said they found it hard to know what was true or false. It's a fine balance for journalists; by debunking rubbish do we purvey rubbish? I veer towards ignoring nonsense but I may not be right.

Big clap for journalism!
But there have been many heart-warming stories too and, in circumstances like this, I think that part of being an ethical journalist is helping people to live through this pandemic. The *CLAP FOR CARERS* is a wonderful concept; every Thursday night we stand at our doors and cheer, clap, bang, whistle for all the people who are saving our compatriots. This is supported massively by all media which highlight daily the heroism of medical staff and the kindness of those supporting their elderly neighbours. Tabloid newspaper journalists have also discovered that low-paid workers in care homes have great skills and they celebrate them. Journalists have suddenly noticed that we really need people who work in supermarkets so should value them. All at once, journalists who

wrote that we are divided have celebrated how we are united. And the most popular man in the whole country is Captain Tom Moore who at 99 has raised millions for NHS charities by walking round his garden on his Zimmer frame. Hey, at last journalists said the truth; that people in this country are terrific human beings who really care about each other.

So, let us live in hope that all this brilliant exemplification of ethical journalism will continue after this crisis. I will do all I can to make that dream come true.

- An earlier version of this appeared in the newsletter of the Ethical Journalism Network in April 2020

Tina Bettels-Schwabbauer
Paula Kennedy

Reporting on the pandemic: The ethical challenges faced by journalists

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented worldwide crisis that for journalists has thrown ethical issues into sharper relief than ever before, according to Tina Bettels-Schwabbauer and Paula Kennedy, of the European Journalism Observatory.

'I think journalists have to do what they've always done and that is to produce information that's accurate, fact-based, independent, unbiased and impartial and above all, information which is showing humanity, which takes account of people who are most vulnerable, the people who need to know the most, the people of our communities who need to be protected,' Aidan White, founder of the Ethical Journalism Network, stated in an interview for the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) in April 2020 when asked how journalists should cover the coronavirus pandemic (Abidi 2020).

Ever since it was founded in 2004, the European Journalism Observatory has made a point of highlighting the ethical challenges journalists are facing, whether as a result of time pressures, cost-cutting by media organisations, restrictions on press freedom or the dissemination of misinformation and suggesting ways in which they can be tackled. Media accountability is also central to EJO's mission, as media have a responsibility to their public to be balanced, fair, transparent, accurate and accountable.

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented worldwide crisis that for journalists has thrown ethical issues into sharper relief than ever before. In an article for EJO, German media scholar Florian Meißner (2020) suggests how journalists should respond to such an overwhelming disaster. Taking his cue from previous studies devoted to crisis reporting (e.g. Renn et al. 2007) he concludes that journalists have an obligation to meet the following challenges in particular:

- providing guidance by reporting comprehensively and accurately on the development of the crisis;
- giving information on public health risks without causing panic;
- educating about scientific knowledge and ignorance;
- informing people about necessary protective measures and behavioural adjustments;
- maintaining their watchdog function even at times of crisis.

Furthermore, Meißner adds, it is important for the coverage on the coronavirus crisis to provide 'a global perspective' as, like the climate crisis, it affects the entire world.

In March 2020, the European Journalism Observatory also launched a series examining how media across the globe – from Afghanistan to India to Tunisia – are covering the coronavirus pandemic. The analyses from media experts – scholars as well as practising journalists – highlight the challenges journalists and media have faced during the Covid-19 crisis. Most of them identify press freedom limitations imposed by governments and the enormous amount of mis- and disinformation circulating about the coronavirus as the most serious of these challenges.

The Covid-19 crisis has shown how vital it is for journalists to counter misinformation with rigorously researched and reliable information that is free of political bias. It has also demonstrated how difficult this has been in many countries around the globe, as many governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to install more authoritarian systems and limit freedom of the press. According to Bentzen and Smith (2020: 2), media freedom around the world 'was under serious threat even prior to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the crisis has further exposed systemic weaknesses in a number of countries, where governments and world leaders appear to have used the situation as an opportunity to implement a further crackdown on media freedom under the pretence of a concern for national security'. As Reporters Without Borders (2020) state, there is 'a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in the Index' in which the NGO evaluates annually the press freedom situation for journalists and the media in 180 countries.

Both China and Iran are among the ten countries with the lowest level of press freedom, and both governments have imposed severe restrictions on media coverage of Covid-19 outbreaks in their countries. In Europe, several governments, such as those of Hungary and Romania, used the coronavirus pandemic to pass new laws and decrees to undermine press freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2020; Freedom House 2020).

Tina Bettels-
Schwabbauer
Paula Kennedy

Referring to the huge quantity of misinformation about the coronavirus in circulation, Cristina Tardáguila, Associate Director of the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN), called Covid-19 'the biggest challenge fact-checkers have ever faced', as quoted by Eduardo Suarez (2020) in an article published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The World Health Organisation already announced in February that the new coronavirus pandemic was accompanied by an 'infodemic' of misinformation (WHO 2020).

According to an analysis from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the number of English-language fact-checks increased more than 900 per cent from January to March 2020 – since 'fact-checkers have limited resources and cannot check all problematic content, the total volume of different kinds of coronavirus misinformation has almost certainly grown even faster', the researchers note (Brennen et al. 2020). A list of websites in the US, UK, France, Italy and Germany publishing false stories about the coronavirus as monitored by NewsGuard, a company that provides credibility ratings for websites via a browser extension, points in the same direction. By mid-August 2020, NewsGuard had identified 308 websites in those five countries (NewsGuard 2020).

These topics emerge over and over again in our series of articles looking at the challenges faced by journalists reporting on the corona crisis in different parts of the world. The following is just a selection giving an idea of the ethical issues that journalists in different countries regularly have to grapple with when covering the corona story.

Europe

In Hungary, the arrival of the coronavirus highlighted the extent to which the government now controls all but a few independent media outlets. At the same time, it gave the ruling Fidesz party an excuse to further tighten its stranglehold over the media. As our Hungarian contributor Ágnes Urbán (2020) points out, in the early stages of the crisis, media in the government camp downplayed the seriousness of the situation, and it was left to independent media – with their far more modest resources – to do what they could to alert the population to the true nature of the virus. Meanwhile, right-wing commentators close to the government dismissed the crisis as a media invention. This placed an even greater responsibility on the shoulders of independent journalists to provide the public with accurate and fact-based information that would enable people to protect themselves. After government and pro-government media finally woke up to the seriousness of the crisis, they framed it largely as a problem stemming from migration – something that the Hungarian government regularly uses as a convenient scapegoat. Again, it was up to independent media to make the Hungarian public aware of issues such as a

defective testing regime and inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers. Pro-government media responded to such reports by accusing independent media of disseminating 'fake news'.

In March, the government made it a criminal offence to make public 'a false claim of fact or an actual fact in a distorted manner', thus effectively criminalising the publication of anything that does not fall within the government's own communications strategy with regard to the pandemic. As Urbán (2020) notes: 'If journalists write the truth, if they take their obligation to inform the public seriously, they may face up to five years in prison.' In other words, Hungarian journalists wishing to keep the public properly informed face a very stark ethical dilemma. The controversial emergency law, which the ruling party presented as allowing it to clamp down on 'scaremongering' over the pandemic, was revoked in June, but critics warn that the government could all too easily re-apply such measures in future (Tanacs and Huet 2020).

In Serbia too, the government has gone out of its way to control the flow of information and is hostile to independent media. At the end of March, a decree was adopted to ensure that journalists obtain their information directly from the government's pandemic crisis team and do not use 'unofficial' sources. It was not long before a journalist came into conflict with this decree, media expert Milica Stojanović (2020) notes in her analysis for the EJO. On 1 April, the journalist Ana Lalić published an article on the news website, Nova.rs, about the poor working conditions and lack of protective equipment for staff at a hospital in Novi Sad, the capital of the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina. A few hours after the article's appearance, the Vojvodina Health Secretariat made a criminal complaint and shortly after this Lalić was arrested. She was accused of causing panic and unrest. Following an international outcry and protests by the Council of Europe and international organisations working for media freedom, the government revoked the decree in early April. Although Lalić was released after a night in custody, the charges against her were not dropped until the end of April. This may be because, as an article on the Global Voices platform Advox (2020) points out, Serbia's criminal code already contained an article about inciting panic and unrest.

The Romanian government has also taken steps to ensure it retains tight control over the coronavirus narrative. The Ministry of the Interior was authorised to prevent access to online false information about the pandemic, which meant it could order the deletion or blocking of articles and entire websites. 'The spread of disinformation is undeniably a serious problem, both in the mainstream media and in niche publications, yet this experiment conducted by the Romanian state – in which a secret group

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Tina Bettels-Schwabbauer
Paula Kennedy

operating within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and made up of unknown individuals decides on the validity and truth of information – has done little to solve this problem,' says Romanian media expert Dumitrita Holdis (2020). 'It has, however, revealed how vulnerable our fundamental rights are under states of exception.'

Asia

As a result of the decades-long one-sided news coverage by the mainstream government-controlled Iranian media, there is a very low level of trust in these media, especially in times of crisis. The Iranian journalist Khosro Kalbasi (2020) describes how state media withheld information and spread conspiracy theories, for example, that the coronavirus is a US biological weapon or just 'Western propaganda'. Iranians took to social media to share information on social distancing and good personal hygiene practices while at the same time criticising the state-run media for failing to educate the public adequately on the risks of the pandemic.

However, the lack of impartial and credible sources means that misinformation is rife. Some Iranians have given credence to online misinformation telling them that drinking industrial-strength alcohol offers protection against infection – with predictably tragic results. Recourse to such 'remedies' has resulted in hundreds of deaths and numerous emergency hospital admissions, placing further strains on an already overstretched health service, Kalbasi (2020) notes.

The rise of misinformation is a phenomenon that media scholar Suruchi Mazumdar, from O. P. Jindal Global University, also observes in India: 'As coronavirus news coverage peaked from late March onwards, both mainstream news outlets and those expressing opinions on social media platforms such as Twitter followed the lead of Bharatiya Janata Party in wholeheartedly embracing nationalistic sentiments and disseminating misinformation creating the impression that India's Muslim minority was directly responsible for the spread of coronavirus in the country.' After the lockdown, the right-wing conservative government urged media to publish only 'positive' news and is also said to have used budget and advertising cuts, lawsuits, threats and attacks against critical journalists (Mazumdar 2020).

Africa

In Algeria, mass protests against the regime have dominated the country for more than a year. The military is increasingly cracking down and targeting critical journalists and media. Several news websites have been blocked, their newsrooms closed or journalists imprisoned. The arrest of journalist Ghaled Dareni caused an outcry – especially since the risk of getting infected with the coronavirus in the overcrowded prisons is high. In May, the Algerian government passed a law banning the dissemination of fake news. But as in

other countries, the real purpose of this was to silence independent journalism, Algeria media expert Caroline Lindekamp (2020) says.

Also, in Morocco, which ranks 133rd out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index, the media were already suppressed before the outbreak of the virus. In order to silence critical voices, the regime has acquired entire media enterprises and opposition journalists have been arrested. Journalists Aida Alami and Salaheddine Lemaizi (2020) report for EJO on restrictive press laws that were enacted during the corona crisis and led to journalists practising self-censorship.

While threats to media freedom and the infodemic are fairly universal challenges facing journalists everywhere, other issues have assumed a greater prominence in countries in the Global South. French scholar Michel Leroy (2020) describes the Covid-19 awareness programme launched by a non-profit media organisation in Central African Republic and the impact of the crisis on media development programmes there. The Kenyan journalism professor Levi Obonyo (2020) also stresses the importance of local media outlets providing essential information for the benefit of those who only speak local languages. This level of accessibility would ensure that journalists also reach the most isolated and vulnerable people in the community – something that Aidan White, in his interview with EJO, stressed as an essential part of ethical reporting on the coronavirus crisis.

EJO: Promoting journalistic ethics

For the past 16 years, the issue of journalistic ethics has been a particular focus of EJO's attention. The network as a whole regularly tackles the question of ethics and how this issue has an impact on so many areas of the media – a journalist's relationship with and responsibility towards his or her audience and sources; journalists' duty to hold those in power to account and the necessity of media outlets themselves being accountable and deserving of trust; and in an age riddled with disinformation and conspiracy theories, journalists' duty to unmask those who would deceive the public and to raise general standards of media literacy.

The coronavirus crisis has thrown all these aspects of the media into sharper focus than ever before, and for several months during the spring and summer of 2020 led EJO to devote itself almost exclusively to these topics, as many journalists were forced to confront ethical issues to an unprecedented degree. We hope that the breadth of our coverage during this period – going far beyond our usual remit – has helped to highlight the challenges faced by journalists the world over and to further our mission of building bridges between journalism cultures.

Tina Bettels-
Schwabbauer
Paula Kennedy

The European Journalism Observatory (EJO) is a network of 13 independent non-profit media research institutes in 11 countries (Albania, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom) which aims to form a bridge between journalism research and practice and to foster professionalism and press freedom. It observes media and journalism research, trends in the media industries, and best practices in journalism. It builds bridges between journalism cultures, particularly in Europe, its neighbouring countries and the US. Furthermore, it promotes professionalism in journalism by reducing the gap between communication sciences and media practice, and it reduces cultural barriers, providing accessible, multilingual media news and analysis to busy researchers and practitioners.

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Issues and limitations in data journalism covering the Covid-19 pandemic: The Italian case

Data played a major part in the journalistic coverage and understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic. Particularly in Italy, one of the countries most affected by the Coronavirus, health authorities released on a daily basis a huge amount of data in regards to the spread of the virus in the country. Based on interviews with Italian data journalists who covered the pandemic, this paper will discuss various issues and flaws related to the Italian data-driven coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the paper aims at discussing journalists' own perceptions of official data reliability, the effectiveness of data in explaining the contagion's progress in full and the most effective strategies to cover such data without spreading misguided or biased information to the public.

Key words: Covid-19, data journalism, Italy

Introduction: The 'datafied' pandemic and the quest for data-driven reporting

Data journalism and data-driven reporting played a major part in the journalistic coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic all over the world. International and national health institutions and governments have provided a large amount of data in regards to the spread of the pandemic, and media and social media spaces have been crowded with graphs and statistics illustrating the spread of the pandemic, the number of new cases and the death tolls, among other figures. It is safe to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has been the first in history to take place in the context of the 'datafied society', the result of 'datafication taking place at the core of our culture and social organization' (van Es and Schäfer 2017: 13). The abundance of data generated by the analysis of the disease on various levels, its impact on different aspects of social life, including health systems, economies and mobility, generated the need of data-driven narratives both from journalism and institutional communication.

According to Bruno (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has been the first major 'data-infomed' event in media history, making data journalism the core strategy for media coverage internationally. This was true also in Italy, the country at the core of this paper, where statistical notions such as 'pandemic curve', 'mortality rate', 'correlation' or 'variability' entered the public debates around the pandemic, becoming part of the journalistic jargon, although sometimes without adequate competence and literacy by the media themselves (Da Rold 2020). Moreover, the Italian Civil Protection Department's daily press briefings presenting official data about the pandemic became a routine event, setting the media agenda and their reporting choices in regards to the coronavirus. Despite the huge availability of daily updated data, the quality and comprehensiveness of such data has been widely critiqued in Italy and elsewhere for its own 'irregularity and inconsistency' (Taylor 2020: 2). In particular, the rationales and methodologies behind the collection of data about the number of active cases have been different from country to country, making meaningful cross-country comparisons difficult, particularly because of the different approaches to testing (Callaghan 2020).

In Italy, one of the most frequently debated issue, for instance, has been the comparability of official data between different areas of the country, since the Italian health system works on a decentralised and regional basis and regions can operate with some operational and organisational freedom (Bosco 2020). This was reflected also in the approach to testing, with regions adopting different strategies and, consequently producing very different data (Ravizza and Santucci 2020). In March, during the most severe phases of the Italian lockdown, one of the most popular articles circulating in Italy was 'Official data are an optical illusion' by Italian journalist Francesco Costa who claimed that, given their inconsistencies, official data were telling 'less and less' about the spread of the pandemic as it was spreading (Costa 2020). Despite these denounced accuracy issues, official figures have been inevitably looked at as significant indicators of the pandemic trends and as a basis for governmental action and policy making that showed signs of what has been called 'dataism' and 'unquestioning positivism' (Di Salvo and Milan 2020).

Yet, data has been the primary form in which the Covid-19 pandemic story has been told all over the world and, as prominent *Financial Times* data journalist John Burn-Murdoch said in an interview: 'This is the biggest story as a data journalist that I've ever encountered, this is just a story that when this comes into the news you just know, this is our story' (Forrest 2020). Data journalism, defined here as journalism based on data analysis and the presentation of such analysis (Coddington 2015), despite having being so central in the journalistic coverage of the pandemic and a routine practice

Philip Di Salvo in various journalistic cultures and markets, is still struggling to become a mainstream and widely adopted practice (Trinca 2017, Porlezza and Splendore 2019). Still, during the pandemic crisis, data journalism seems to have gained momentum also in Italy, as news outlets of different kinds rushed to publish (or report on) analysis of the official data, graphs and infographics, both online and in print. Thus, the aim of this article is to make sense of how Italian data journalists coped with the Covid-19 crisis and to shed light on their reporting practices, strategies and the constraints they had to face while covering the pandemic as it happened.

Data journalism in Italy: A forever nascent practice
It has been almost a decade since the 'quantitative turn' in journalism showed its first signs (Petre 2013; Coddington 2015) and data-driven reporting moved on from its own most pioneering phase to a more mainstream one. While data journalism is a reality and is being produced by journalistic institutions on a regular basis in most Western countries and newsrooms in London and New York, other areas are still behind in the development of data journalism as a routine practice (Wright et al. 2019). Despite growing interest from publishers and newsrooms in the past 10 years, Italian data journalism has not yet evolved into being a mainstream and routine form of reporting (Trinca 2017). Research about the evolution of data journalism in Italy has focused on the general low level of professionalisation of Italian journalism at large, as an aspect directly impacting on the growth of innovative journalistic practices, including data journalism (Splendore 2017: 44). For instance, comparative research conducted about journalism education in Europe has shown that data journalism is still little taught in Italian journalism curricula and training initiatives are mostly offered on an irregular basis or by activist organisations (Splendore et al. 2016).

In Italy, data journalism is mostly conducted by freelances who have gained data-driven reporting skills and expertise on their own or by in-house editors who are more open to digital innovation and to sub-contract data stories, but no dedicated data teams or newsrooms are available in the country, not even in the major news outlets in print, digital or broadcasting (Trinca 2017). The centrality of freelances in data-driven reporting is, in fact, a uniquely and peculiar Italian characteristic, and it is directly connected to various longstanding elements of Italian journalistic culture, such as the reluctance to innovation, economic uncertainty and a general elitist stance among Italian print media (Porlezza and Splendore 2019). Other reasons for this weak diffusion of data journalism in Italy have to be found in the political context of the country and its poor transparency: a proper FOI law, for instance, has been introduced in Italy only in late 2016, forcing journalists to fight 'rubber walls' within the public administration and to look for alternative data sourcing strategies, inevitably slowing down

anything 'data' for reporters and newsrooms (Porlezza 2018). Porlezza and Splendore, in their study into Italian data journalism's strengths and limitations, concluded that data journalism in Italy has been growing despite disadvantageous political and economic conditions, offering excellent and impactful outcomes and content in a highly disadvantageous environment and without meaningful and continuous support from news outlets, contrary to most European and Western countries (2019).

These conditions have also influenced the structural working networks of Italian data journalists who, especially those working the freelancing beat, had formed 'a highly interrelated network' by joining forces and creating various forms of collaboration and knowledge sharing (Porlezza and Splendore 2019: 10). Interestingly, some of the most active and well-regarded nodes of this network are represented by organisations that are located at the border of the Italian journalistic field and that offer some forms of hybridity between journalism and open data activism. These are, in particular, the Dataninja, Datajournalism.it and FormicaBlu collectives and agencies with which most Italian data journalists are affiliated (Porlezza and Splenore 2019). While prominent international English-speaking news outlets with an established tradition in data journalism (such as the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, the *Guardian* and *The New York Times*, among others) have immediately responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with full-scale data journalism content, the Italian response has been less structured and institutionalised given the circumstances described above. Thus, Italy offers a pretty unique and peculiar case study to understand how data journalism contributed to the reporting and understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Methodology
Following the approach of previous studies into data journalism in selected countries or regions (Appelgren and Nygren 2014; Fink and Andersen 2014; De Maeyer et al. 2015; Borges-Rey 2016; Porlezza and Splendore 2018 – among others) this exploratory paper is based on five in-depth interviews with the most engaged and active Italian data journalists who covered the Covid-19 pandemic and published data-driven stories about the coronavirus. The sample, although inevitably limited, offers a significant portrait of Italian data journalism, since it has been estimated that around only 20 Italian journalists work full-time on data stories (Porlezza and Splendore 2019) and not all of them have engaged with Covid-19-related coverage. Journalists included in the sample also represent a wide range of publications, spanning from national dailies (*Il Sole 24 Ore*[1]), local and regional dailies (*L'Eco di Bergamo*[2]), an independent collective of data experts or science communication agencies (Dataninja and Formica Blu) and freelances working for various news outlets, including the Italian *Wired*[3] and Rai Radio 3

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Scienza,[4] Interviewees were contacted via email in April 2020 and interviews took place over Skype, while Italy was still in complete lockdown.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature and lasted around 45 minutes.

Although names of journalists to be interviewed were already selected by the author and no snowball sampling was followed, the data journalists interviewed were suggesting each other as potential contacts, mentioning their work as particularly relevant for this research. Later, interviews were transcribed using the automated transcribing software Sonix.ai and double-checked manually by the author. Once transcribed, interviews have been analysed through an inductive 'thematic analysis' (Braun and Clarke 2012) aiming at highlighting recurring themes and issues mentioned by the interviewed journalists. 'Thematic analysis' is a common methodological approach for qualitative research in journalism studies based on interviews and has been recently applied also to papers with a similar approach into data journalism (Lewis and Al Nashmi 2019; Jamil 2019).

Results

Interviews showed a series of shared and recurrent macro-themes related to the Italian data-driven coverage of the pandemic. These reflect, on one side, issues in regards to sourcing and investigative/editorial strategies and, secondly, the ongoing structural limitations of the Italian journalistic field and their impact on the practice of data journalism. Overall, four major themes emerged from the interviews. These are: 1) 'data flaws' and critical views on the usefulness of the official figures; 2) the need to find different strategies and sources of data to effectively report on the pandemic; 3) lack of 'data literacy' among Italian journalists and their unpreparedness and diffused 'dataism'; 4) the impact of the structural limitations of the Italian market for data journalism.

1) 'Data flaws' and critical views on the usefulness of the Italian official figures and data

In regards to the first theme that emerged, Italian data journalists questioned the reliability and representativeness of the official data available about the death toll and spread of the pandemic in Italy. Data journalists also denounced and spotted various 'data flaws' in the official datasets that made meaningful comparative analyses based on these datasets extremely difficult. For instance, policies about Covid-19 testing changed over time and Italian regions implemented them differently, making the counting of Covid-19 'cases' confused. Finally, the supply chain of official data has sometimes worked in a dysfunctional way, according to the interviewed journalists, impacting on the quality and comparability

of the data over time. Il *Sole 24 Ore*'s Luca Salvioli, for instance, noted that:

> Data were arriving from hospitals and regions and the communication of the data took place mostly analogically or through obsolete systems. Each region had its own methodology. Moreover, the Civil Protection Department chose an unclear classification strategy for its own data and people were emailing us asking which data were the most relevant, those about people currently tested positive or those about total cases? For these reasons, our journalistic work has been way more difficult, but even more important. Numbers alone weren't enough: they had to be understood, explained, weighted and compared.

Isaia Invernizzi, a journalist at the daily *Eco di Bergamo,* also underlined that official data were ineffective in giving a clear picture of the pandemic's impact on the communities served by its own newspaper:

> I work for a local newspaper, so I immediately realised that there was a significant gap between what data were telling and what was actually happening here. The limitation was that we had the data, but the tracing behind them was not minute and it basically left behind lots of people. Consequently, the image of what was happening, according to the official data, was absolutely partial.

Elisabetta Tola from the science communication agency FormicaBlu also remarked on the problem of how effective the comparability of the official data was, especially those gathered at the regional level, often with little consistency:

> Let me admit this: the regional structure of the Italian health system gets very problematic in these extreme situations, now I think that at least the management of the data should be centralised. How could you compare the situation in Veneto, that made all the data available immediately with a great effort at transparency, with Lombardia, where lots of data were missing? Also, the two health systems are very different on the operational level.

2) The need to find different strategies and sources of data to effectively report on the pandemic

Because of these flaws and limitations in the official data available, Italian data journalists decided to look for different sources to effectively cover and report on the spread of the pandemic in Italy and to look beyond the official figures, finding alternative and more representative data. In particular, two journalists found different

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strategies and data that contributed sensibly to the understanding of the pandemic impact in Italy. *Eco di Bergamo*'s Isaia Invernizzi's work, in particular, made a huge impact, gaining visibility also internationally (*The Economist* 2020), and was frequently mentioned by the other interviewees as a point of reference. Invernizzi explains the strategy he followed to gather clearer data to explain the situation:

> We gathered data from all municipalities in the Bergamo province about deaths in January, February and March 2020 in order to compare them with those about the previous years. Mayors were calling us to let us know that, literally, lots of people were dying. They were asking us to do something. The province of Bergamo has 243 municipalities and 1.1 million inhabitants: it took a lot of work and a lot of time, because those databases didn't exist at that time and we had to go village by village and ask for the data. It was hard, but we have been able to effectively tell what was going on. Compared to the 2060 official Covid-19 deaths in the Bergamo province at the end of March, we found out 5700, 4800 of which were attributable to Covid-19.[5] In 2019, there had been only 900 deaths in the months of March in the whole Bergamo province. Thus, we had six times more deaths in the same period in 2020.

Others, instead, focused on 'microdata' about cities where nursing homes are located, in order to estimate cases and deaths in these critical facilities, starting from official testing data. Riccardo Saporiti, a freelance data journalist who contributes to *Wired* and *Sole 24 Ore*, has followed this strategy to get more specific in-depth insights about the spread of the pandemic:

> At a certain point Lombardia closed access to its data about testing. This data was about people who tested positive and, from it, it was possible to extract their age and municipality of residence. That was an important tool for understanding what was going on. For instance, by looking at that data I found out 30 nursing homes where there had been problems. We discovered a peak in testing with people over 75 years of age during Easter week. So I investigated which municipalities had over 20 people who tested positive and I cross-checked on local newspapers if there was any news about problems in nursing homes based there. And I found that, actually, there were. In statistics jargon, we call this data 'microdata' because for each analysed case it is possible to extract more aggregated information. This data should be handled with care, for privacy reasons, but by handling them correctly, it is possible to respect people's privacy and have more details about the overall situation.

3) Lack of 'data literacy' among Italian journalists and their unpreparedness and diffused 'dataism'

Interviewed Italian data journalists highlighted the general lack of skills and knowledge in the field of data science and statistics in Italian journalism as a problematic factor negatively influencing the information supply about the pandemic. Overall, Italian news outlets were unprepared to cope with the datafied side of the pandemic and demonstrated little understanding of data science, according to the interviews. This frequently led to the emergence of various forms of 'dataism' (Van Dijck 2014) by either journalists and public officials who reported official figures with little scrutiny and context or in poor examples of 'graph at any cost' data-driven reporting. According to Elisabetta Tola, for instance, data were used with too much positivism and in an opinionated, sometimes instrumentalised, way:

> In my view, there has been way too much data porn, and not only in Italy. Everybody jumped on the data, as if they were hooks, or as if they were completely objective. But they never are. Data can certainly make a situation clearer, if honesty, knowledge and prudence are applied in order to really understand what you're handling. My general impression, instead, is that frequently data have been used to justify someone's vision on the matter.

According to Tola, major Italian dailies also lacked proper data science skills and jumped into data-driven reporting superficially. While this was clearly visible in journalism, scientists also took part in this data-driven race, contributing to the overall confusion:

> *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica* have done a poor job at the beginning of the pandemic, starting the race to create maps at any cost. We even saw maps with the wrong scales or other major inaccuracies. We also saw the arrogance of using these numbers as the basis for political decision making and this terrified me. I think that many people don't actually know how to handle data and that they should be humbler. Later, engineers and statisticians also started producing charts about, for instance, predicting the peak of the pandemic. In my view, this stuff is deleterious. Part of this should be blamed on the scientific community too, since some scientists discovered it could be nice to be featured on a newspaper front page. What was lacking was an ethical approach to epidemiology and there has been too much armchair epidemiology.

Dataninja's Alessio Cimarelli also pointed to the structural and historical limited attention to science journalism by Italian media as a problematic aspect affecting the overall reporting of the pandemic:

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In general, many legacy news outlets have demonstrated themselves to be unprepared to cope with such a story. There have been exceptions, of course, and some more structured organisations performed better than others. The weak scientific competence of the sector players and the scarce presence of experienced scientific journalists in Italian newsrooms led to weak coverage of the epidemic, which was unable to explain it and to discuss how to cope with it. Some interesting voices emerged from the freelances, who have been able to offer an effective journalistic narrative.

4) The impact of the structural limitations of the Italian market for data journalism

All Italian data journalists who were interviewed underlined some paradigmatic and infrastructural issues that data journalism still faces in Italy, starting from its weak penetration among mainstream news outlets. This consequently also influenced how Italian data journalists covered the Covid-19 pandemic. Elisabetta Tola described the current situation of Italian data journalism in this way:

> Italian newspapers do not host proper data newsrooms. They shouldn't necessarily employ a full data newsroom, but newspapers need at least some people who can look for and understand data. With the exception of Isaia Invernizzi – who's employed by *Eco di Bergamo* – and a few others, most of all the other Italian data journalists are freelances. I don't expect the level of *The New York Times*, of course, but a relatively small Spanish newspaper such as *El Confidential* employs three data journalists completely focused on data-driven reporting. In Italy, instead, even Sky News outsources these skills. … When we launched the first data journalism training ten years ago, we thought data journalism would have taken root. Actually, what took root is a sort of pornographic mania of producing little maps, not actual data analysis. Also the most excellent Italian investigative reporters use different methods and there's little attention from the media.

Isaia Invernizzi, mentioned above, instead advocates for more support to data journalism from news outlets and publishers, denouncing how hard it can get for freelances to make it in the Italian market:

> At the end of the day, it is always the same 10 to 15 people. From now, I believe that many news outlets will realise that it is impossible to cover such a story without a proper data culture or without employing people who know what 'correlation' means and who are able to spot weaknesses in the data. … I also see lots of great colleagues who are freelances and need to put together 10 assignments to make a living. These people

should get more chances. Slowly, I think there will be more space. … I often see more quality in local newspapers, maybe there's more freedom there and consequently more space for experimenting with new things.

Luca Salvioli, who coordinates the data section of *Il Sole 24 Ore*, is aware that major news outlets should be more engaged with data reporting:

> There is definitely room for improvement, especially in major news outlets. *Il Sole 24 Ore* has the advantage to have been telling stories with numbers since forever. I believe that this new stronger awareness and spread of tools will be here to stay.

Alessio Cimarelli, instead, considers data journalism and culture as a fundamental asset for news outlets. In his view, the pandemic showed this in clear terms:

> Data journalism is only a label. It is more and more clear now how strong data literacy is important to understand and tell stories about the world. Data and digital skills make a better journalist and make a news outlet a better product, more useful, more impactful and more attractive for its own community of readers. Those who will understand this and will act accordingly will produce useful and marketable work. All the others will slowly be destined to irrelevance.

Other limitations for Italian data journalists are to be found in Italy's limited culture of transparency. During the pandemic, together with other administrative services, the FOI was suspended, depriving Italian journalists of a fundamental tool for their reporting (Carrer 2020). Riccardo Saporiti pointed explicitly to this problem as a negative sign in terms of transparency and accountability:

> The suspension of the FOI has also been a problem. I totally understand the circumstances, as people working in the offices were working remotely and, of course, no-one wanted to put these people at risk and I also understand the limitations posed by such an emergency. Still, this was not a positive sign. In such times, to have access to data is the best way to actually understand what is going on. This is true for journalists, of course, but also for those who have to take political decisions and also for the general public.

Discussion

As in other countries, Italian journalism had to cope with the datafied side of the Covid-19 pandemic. As emerged from the results of this paper, Italian data journalists responded to this call

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with enthusiasm, providing their skills and knowledge for reporting in a data-driven fashion the various amounts of data made available by public institutions. As one of the journalists said during the interviews, data has been the only 'tangible' way of putting the pandemic in the public eye and to show its devastating effects. Consequently, the data side of the reporting was also central in Italy, which was one of the first countries to be hit by Covid-19 and one of those that suffered the most severe consequences in terms of deaths and total cases.

Yet, Italian data journalists illustrate here a complex situation and an overall negative perspective on how they had to cover the story. From these interviews, various critical perspectives emerged on at least two different levels: a contingent one and systemic one. First, all journalists agreed in saying that, despite a huge effort from the governmental agencies involved, official figures provided by Italian health authorities were mostly unreliable and incomplete, preventing them from having the chance to work on comparable and precise data, causing major difficulties both in accessing and obtaining data and their own quality. Moreover, interviewees denounced a sometimes too passive attitude in regards to such data, that led to too superficial reporting on these figures and a baseless positivism towards data, especially from legacy and established national media. So, it is interesting to see how Italian data journalists reacted to this widespread 'dataism' attitude (Van Dijck 2014) and lack of scrutiny from major news outlets. In this context, Italian data journalists opted to look beyond the official data and investigate alternative sources and figures with the aim of finding out the real nature and magnitude of the pandemic.

This happened mostly thanks to the effort of local reporters, such as those of the *Eco di Bergamo* and freelances who started looking at other, more comprehensive sets of figures. This quest for alternative comparable data is a sign of a stronger data literacy and knowledge of data analysis. As emerged in these interviews too, there is still a lack of these skills in the Italian journalistic field: for this reason, most of the journalists interviewed here remarked on the profound differences between 'making graphs and maps' and actually providing sound in-depth statistical, data-driven analysis. Knowing how to handle data effectively and judge their own reliability and soundness have been considered fundamental skills for those who want to conduct data-driven investigations beyond what has been defined as 'data porn'.

That said, these results have to be seen in the overall context of Italian data journalism. This paper brings additional evidence to what previous studies into data journalism in Italy have shown (Trinca 2017, Porlezza and Splendore 2019), a point that is connected to the systemic level of this analysis. All journalists

interviewed here denounced various systemic limitations of the Italian journalistic field: lack of resources, aversion to innovation, and limited professionalisation. For data journalism in particular, this results in the absence of proper data newsrooms and in the overall very limited presence of data journalists sitting at news desks. This peculiar Italian state of affairs and lack of competence showed clearly its shortcomings in face of this 'datafied' pandemic and contributed to the various flaws that interviewees mentioned. Although data journalism is certainly gaining space in Italy, as confirmed also by the results of this paper, it is still considered as a specialised form of reporting, not as a routine journalistic practice. This was visible during the pandemic too, when only 'the same 10 to 15 people' – to quote one of the interviewees – produced data journalism out of the pandemic data. As Porlezza argues (2018), journalism is a central means to critically observe datafication and to showcase its problems. The pandemic, as a fully 'datafied' event, demonstrated this point with the enormous evidence in Italy, allowing, on one side, the very few Italian data journalists to find more space for their work, while, on the other, exacerbating the shortcomings of Italian journalism.

Results of this paper also offer an opportunity to reflect on the impact of data-driven reporting at large and its own capability of making sense of complex phenomena, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Surely, data journalism – including in Italy – has proven again to be a crucial asset for contemporary reporting and various international examples demonstrate its own effectiveness in this context. Yet, the Italian case also offers evidence of a potential risk: the existence of a 'data divide' which may have a profound impact on the quality of data-driven reporting and its service to the public. This emerges on at least two different levels: skills and the quality of data. Interviewees have here frequently denounced the poor quality of certain data-driven reporting or mere graphic-making provided by major news outlets. This reminds us that having official data and transforming it into graphs doesn't necessarily equate with producing actual data-driven reporting. Also, receiving official data without further inquiry or without challenging their content is a sign of weak journalistic scrutiny. We may call this attitude 'passive' reporting based on data.

Those journalists who, instead, challenged the figures provided by official authorities and looked for alternative takes and reporting strategies, performed a stronger, 'active' practice of data-driven reporting that involved clear investigative stances and attitudes. Looking beyond the peculiarities of the Italian examples, that divide between 'passive' and 'active' reporting may expose a long-term problem for data journalism at large. When performed without the proper skills, professionalisation and culture, data journalism may fail to fulfil its own premises of precision, accuracy, investigation and

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reduction of complexity. Actually, the Covid-19 pandemic showed clearly that it is too easy for news brands to fall for 'dataism' and 'data porn' over actual data-driven reporting. Thus, the long-term risk is a divide between substantial data-driven reporting and other – less reliable – forms of reporting passively based on data that may affect audiences in different contexts in a critical way. For Italy, in particular, whether the pandemic will be an effective real turning point for the spread of data journalism will be an interesting research question for further studies in this area.

Notes

[1] *Il Sole 24 Ore* is the leading Italian economics daily. With a daily circulation of 140,000 copies (ADS data, March 2020), it is the third most-read newspaper in the country

[2] *L'Eco di Bergamo* is the local newspaper of the city of Bergamo, Lombardy, with a daily circulation of 38,000 copies. The Bergamo province has been one of the most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with 12,347 cases (as of 14 May 2020)

[3] *Wired Italia* is the Italian version of US technology magazine *Wired*. *Wired Italia* is published by Condé Nast and is active online and in print as a seasonal magazine. The website, wired.it, attracts around 170,000 daily users (Audiweb data, May 2020)

[4] Radio 3 Scienza is the daily scientific news bulletin of Radio3, the culture and science-oriented radio channel of Italian public broadcaster RAI

[5] The story is available here, also in English: https://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/bergamo-citta/coronavirus-the-real-death-tool-4500-victims-in-one-month-in-the-province-of_1347414_11/

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Research design for a comparative analysis of the media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic

This paper presents the design of a comparative research project on the media reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first phase, the research will compare the contents of different types of media outlets based on their ownership structure and ideology (both traditional media and social networks) in four countries (USA, UK, Spain and the Netherlands). In the second phase, it will compare the results of media reporting between countries. The project is based on the theoretical perspectives of the pragmatics of the public sphere and the political economy of communication. A systematic method of content analysis has been designed to identify the problems that the media address in terms of the causes, management and consequences of the pandemic. In addition, the protocol of content analysis will allow studying the framing of these problems. The sampling procedure is also described in the paper.

Key words: political economy of communication, public sphere, content analysis, Covid-19

Introduction

Throughout 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has dominated the world's political and economic affairs. The health crisis and its egregious mishandling by Washington, resulting in an economic crisis unparalleled since the Great Depression, might well turn out to be a factor in transforming the current geopolitical power constellations. Avoidable or not, economic downturns, not just in the United States but in other countries as well, might have other serious, long-term consequences that are as of yet unknown. It is distinctly possible that chaos and upheaval are here to stay for the foreseeable future.

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All this, on top of the existing challenges that the world was already facing, notably the climate crisis and a surge of right-wing authoritarianism, underlines the salience of work done by media and communication scholars, in particular political economists of media (Bergman 2020). This study is based on the assumption that the most effective way to gain understanding of how the world, including the media, works is to analyse the structural relations that simultaneously establish limits to and possibilities for agency. Following a political economy of communication and a pragmatics of the public sphere approaches, while also applying a structured method of content analysis, the study expects to identify a strong correlation between the structures of media ownership and ideology, and the reporting on the pandemic.

This paper presents a research design that examines mis-representations related to the Covid-19 pandemic in news outlets with different ownership structures and from a wide ideological spectrum. It compares media in the same country and across four countries and, therefore, has significant international scope. Examining headlines makes it possible to survey large samples. Therefore, this study is more comprehensive than much of the emerging research on the virus and its media representation.

Research on communication and Covid-19 is often published in health-related journals and appears to confirm that the Covid-19 pandemic has spawned a wide array of misleading and false information, not only on social networks, but also in mainstream media, especially from a scientific point of view (Ahmed et al. 2020; Cuan-Baltazar et al. 2020; Ioannidis 2020; Khatri et al. 2020; Larson 2018, 2020; Nguyen and Catalan-Matamoros 2020; Rosenberg et al. 2020). Nguyen and Catalan-Matamoros even speak of 'the first true social-media infodemic' (2020: 323). Before Covid-19 struck, another medical expert already opined: 'The deluge of conflicting information, misinformation and manipulated information on social media should be recognised as a global public-health threat' (Larson 2018: 310). Moreover, the emerging scientific literature itself was not immune to exaggeration and disseminating misinformation (Ioannidis 2020).

With its main value lying in documenting the large extent to which information on Covid-19 online, especially social media, has proven to be unreliable, such research also has its limitations. Frequently, it calls out governments and individuals as bearing primary responsibility. One of the more sophisticated comments in this regard reads: 'This is a complicated landscape that is not just a matter of debunking a piece of misinformation. This is about relationships between publics and politicians, a lack of trust in the motives of governing powers and fears among leaders that the truth would spark public disorder and dissent' (Larson 2020: 306). And,

we would add, research also needs to consider the roles played by established and non-mainstream media, which often seed people's beliefs, and subsequent social media comments. Especially because in times of crisis, including the Covid-19 pandemic, 'legacy media' often are more consumed and trusted (Casero-Ripollés 2020: 9).

In short, much of the research referred to above lacks elaborate and sophisticated analyses based on democratic theory and political economy of media and ideology. In contrast, this paper is grounded in the perspective that a functioning democratic public sphere requires that social problems are sufficiently addressed in the media as controversies so that they become recognised as public problems requiring debates that result in countermeasures (Peñamarín 2016, 2017, 2020). Does such a process of successful mediatisation take place regarding the coronavirus crisis? Are the social problems that exacerbate the Covid-19 crisis sufficiently discussed in the media? Which social problems are discussed and how are they discussed or framed? Which types of media (in terms of ownership structure and ideology) present deeper, more comprehensive and useful information and perspectives? These questions drive the research presented in this paper.

General objective
Find out if important social problems related to the Covid-19 crisis are discussed as public problems in the public sphere, and how they are discussed. This objective involves analysing which social problems (topics/issues) are more discussed and which ones are less discussed in the media and on social networks, as well as which frames are dominant and which are subordinate.

Specific objectives
1. *Conduct a comparative analysis of six different types of national daily publications according to their ownership structure and ideology on a national level*
Based on an observation of the main media according to their ideology, the *ideal types* which have been identified are as follows:

    a) Non-corporate, strong left/socialist;
    b) Corporate, centre-left/liberal;
    c) Corporate, centre-right/conservative;
    d) Corporate, far right/ultra-conservative;
    e) Public media, centre/liberal;
    f) Corporate, social media.

This research is interested in covering the full range of types of media which comprise the mediatised public sphere in order to compare the information they provide and reach conclusions about their relative value for democracy. The research distinguishes between

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socialist, liberal, conservative and ultra-conservative media so as to address the main ideologies of modernity (Wallerstein 1995). It analyses the mainstream, corporate media as the most influential actors in disseminating news to the public. It also studies public and independent media as possible counteracting forces and the social network Twitter because it has become an important hub of socio-political debate in many countries.

Another important reason for including Twitter in the analysis is that, because it allows for anyone with internet connection and minimum technical skills to produce content, it is prone to the inclusion of all types of information, from fake news to critical-emancipatory perspectives. However, beyond this general acknowledgment, and taking account of the cultural proliferation of techno-utopian and techno-dystopian views, it is necessary to identify the actual visibility of the different views and assess their relative importance in the Twittersphere.

Even though other social networks, such as TikTok, have also been used to share virus-related contents, Twitter has been included in this study because it is relatively heavily focused on socio-political topics and involves more diverse participants, especially in terms of age (although younger people are still dominant). Moreover, text is more prominent on Twitter, which renders it more convenient for content analysis. Twitter is preferred to Facebook because it is considered the main social network for political debate, making sampling according to the criterion of relevance and data gathering easier.

The range of different media types that will be addressed will enable the comparative analysis of their virus-related contents. This research will, thus, allow us to determine whether similarities and differences in media reporting are influenced by the types of ownership and ideology.

The *ideal types* of media that have been established will be first analysed comparatively within each country that will be investigated. It is important to note that, of course, this categorisation might not apply to all countries being studied. The criterion to select the media outlets in countries where it does not apply is to cover the full spectrum of ownership and ideology in their specific context.

The reason why the only non-corporate ownership which has been selected is strong left/socialist is that, except for public media, all the other ideologies exist within powerful corporate media outlets. Liberal, conservative and ultra-conservative, non-corporate media do exist but are weak in comparison to their corporate counterparts. Corporate, socialist media do not exist for the obvious reason that it would mean shooting themselves in the foot: a corporation is

unlikely to defend socialist, i.e., non-corporate, ownership. Also, the reason why public media has been identified only as liberal is because this is the case in the countries being studied so far, but there is the option of adding the category public media/conservative when applicable.

The research will start by analysing the following countries and media outlets:

- USA: a) Democracy Now!; b) *The New York Times*;
  c) Fox News; d) Breitbart; e) PBS; f) Twitter.
- UK: a) openDemocracy; b) the *Guardian*; c) the *Sun*;
  d) Westmonster; e) BBC; f) Twitter.
- Spain: a) Rebelión; b) *El País*; c) *El Mundo*; d) *Okdiario*;
  e) TVE; f) Twitter.
- The Netherlands: a) N/A; b) *de Volkskrant*;
  c) *NRC Handelsblad*; d) *de Telegraaf* e) NPO; f) Twitter.

2. *Conduct comparative analyses of the media systems in several countries*
Once the analysis of the media in each country is conducted, the second phase will consist of comparative analyses between countries.

3. *Conduct a comparative analysis of different time frameworks for the same and different media outlets*
The third phase of the research will identify continuities and changes in coverage within and between media over time.

Hypotheses
1. *Hypotheses regarding variations in media structure and ideology*
1.1. The comparative analysis of media contents on the Covid-19 crisis is expected to show that media structures and ideologies have a strong influence in both the presence of social problems and the framing in news coverage. This influence prevents the transformation of social problems into controversial public problems sufficiently discussed in the media and, therefore, hinders the development of a truthfully democratic public sphere.

1.2. Corporate structure will bridge to a certain degree ideological differences between liberal and conservative media outlets, while non-corporate structure will facilitate the dissemination of alternative views that are usually secondary in corporate media.

1.3. It is expected that the presence of social problems (diversity of topics/issues) in the media will take the following order (excluding corporate, social media): 1. non-corporate, socialist; 2. public

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media, liberal; 3. corporate, liberal; 4. corporate, conservative; 5. corporate, strong conservative.

1.4. Mainstream media will tend to be more supportive of the government, while non-corporate media will tend to provide more critique. However, differences are expected depending on the national context.

Conservative and especially strong conservative media will tend to frame the information by blaming the government in countries governed by left forces and being less critical and more supportive of right-wing governments, without addressing institutional and structural problems/solutions, but instead demanding a return to normality or to a glorious past.

Socialist media will tend to frame the coverage in terms of a combined critique of the structural roots of the crisis and of the political opponents (at home and abroad), and the proposal of deep social and political transformations.

Public media, followed by liberal media, are expected to fall somewhere in between, but also with a noticeable disregard for structural problems/solutions and embracing moderate and corporate-friendly reforms (i.e., closer to conservative media). According to this prediction, socialist media will focus more on the causes and the alternative solutions (consequences) and less on the management than other types of media, which will tend to limit their attention to the management and the consequences of the pandemic.

1.5. There is more uncertainty with regards to the performance of social networks because of their participatory character, changing algorithmic biases and filter bubbles. However, based on previous research, one can expect a relative diversity in comparison to mainstream media within a majority of dominant discourses.

2. *Hypotheses regarding variations between countries*
2.1. It is worth noting that the four selected countries fall in the three different models of media systems as famously identified by Hallin and Mancini (2012), namely Liberal (UK, USA), Democratic Corporatist (Netherlands) and Polarised Pluralist (Spain). Nonetheless, little variation is expected between countries because the media in the West share similarities in terms of ownership structure and ideology. Differences between media being more oppositional or more supportive of national government will depend on the ideology of the government itself (see hypothesis 1.4).

3. *Hypotheses regarding variations in time*

3.1. Following the logic explained in hypothesis 1.4, the most important variations in time within and between media outlets are expected to take place when other political parties take on the role of government.

3.2. Variations might also take place when governments mismanage the Covid-19 crisis. In this event, media outlets which began being supportive of the government might adopt a more critical position by giving priority to health rather than to political allegiance.

Theoretical framework

The hypotheses are posited based on the perspectives of: the pragmatics of the public sphere; and the political economy of communication and ideological analysis.

1. *The pragmatics of the public sphere*

In the framework of the research project 'Public problems and controversies: Diversity and participation in the media sphere' (CSO2017-82109-R), the research group Semiotics, Communication and Culture is developing an understanding of the public sphere which allows it to move beyond Habermas's (1989 [1962]), conception (Peñamarín 2016, 2017, 2020; Fouce, Pecourt and Pedro-Carañana 2018; Fouce 2020).

If in the Habermasian perspective polemic dialogue has the objective of leading to consensus, other authors have emphasised the eminently conflictive character of the public sphere. Instead of the homogeneity that results from consensus, the role of a genuinely democratic public sphere would be to include the multiplicity of voices, which currently do not have a space in mainstream media. Far from the *ideal* public sphere proposed by Habermas, there is abundant evidence that society is crossed by many conflicts which are marginalised in mainstream debate (Herman and Chomsky 1989).

From the point of view of this research group, social conflict revolves around a diversity of issues (or topics). Issues are understood to arise from a common preoccupation when actors associate and mobilise to solve social problems which affect them and, thus, attempt to make those problems become public (by reaching wider parts of society which are indirectly, although to an important extent, affected).

In addition to the interaction among social actors, the transformation of social problems into public problems also requires interaction with the media. In this view, the existence of the public sphere requires the media to discuss social problems as controversies; only then can they become public problems. Controversies entail the inclusion of

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disagreeing, opposing and even incompatible interests, points of view and proposals. This necessarily involves the participation of voices which question the state of affairs and demand solutions to public powers.

The research project presented here aims to observe how controversies are generated or prevented in the public sphere. To this end, it identifies the issues that are discussed (becoming public problems) and those that are marginalised (remaining social problems) from today's mediated public sphere. Moreover, the analysis of issues also includes the study of how they are framed. It is important to take into account that the existing public sphere is fragmented. Mainstream media are dominant (central public sphere), but there are independent media and social networks which play a relevant role (peripheral and semi-peripheral public spheres). Often the three types of media are relatively disconnected from each other.

By following this approach, this research will be able to determine whether there is a democratic public sphere capable of making visible all the necessary voices that are affected by social problems arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. It is widely accepted that democracy needs the active participation of citizens. The role of the public sphere in this regard proves key to the health of democratic societies. Indeed, the public is not simply a receiver of what is done elsewhere, but a democratic force that emerges together with public problems. The emergence of a participatory public involves the development of an associative way of life which unfolds through shared experiences of problems and struggles for solutions.

This perspective of the public sphere is complemented in this research with the study of the causes of media coverage and treatment. As developed in the next sections, these causes can be identified through the political economy of communication.

2. *Political economy and ideology of communication*
This research project is informed by scholars from different geographical origins who have contributed to the development of the school of the political economy of communication (PEC). This perspective is grounded on historical materialism and investigates how power relations affect the production, distribution and consumption of media products over time and in different sites of conflict. As its name indicates, the main focus of this approach lies in the intersections between politics and economics, which are understood to establish limitations and provide possibilities for communicative production and media cultures and ideologies. In turn, PEC understands dialectically that cultures and ideologies also have an impact on political-economic relations. Its critical stand leads to the questioning of how the interrelations of the different social

and media structures hinder the potential for the development of democratic public spheres and, therefore, of democracy itself.

Much of the scholarship developed by this school has focused on media production and distribution by identifying the structures of ownership, the funding mechanisms, the geographical and sectoral expansion of marketisation and exchange value, and the role of the state in shaping media systems. In addition to analysing the role of capital and state, the PEC approach has also delved into the role of audiences, both as commodities which are sold to advertisers (Smythe 1977) and as agents who receive media contents actively and have a certain degree of impact on media production. Even though power relations are tilted towards the side of corporate owners and funders, these actors have to sell a product which their target audiences can find sufficiently appealing within the context of market competition.

As can be observed, PEC aims to provide dialectical analyses which consider forces and counter-forces, domination and resistance, within the context of power relations that affect them. This means that PEC does not aim to provide a mere critique of powerful actors, but also to identify contradictions and gaps in media systems that might lead to democratic transformations. Coinciding with the pragmatic approach to the public sphere, PEC understands that change is produced through praxis, the social action (including communication) that aims to combine ethical theories with practices of justice. Praxis takes place when a social majority engages in this theoretical-practical combination as a requisite for social and media transformation. Communication workers are undoubtedly key actors when discussing the possibilities of change. Although PEC scholarship has highlighted that journalists and other media producers have a subordinate role in the communication industry, it has also emphasised their importance as agents who can use the gaps in the media system to provide fundamental information for democratic societies (Herman and Chomsky 1989) and contribute to the class struggle.

Following this radical commitment to democracy, understood as citizen power, justice, equality and freedom, the PEC perspective advocates for the democratic control of the means of communicative production, especially by workers, communities, users and stakeholders according to cooperative models decided endogenously.

Even though hegemonic media in capitalist countries are controlled by corporations, there is also a significant number of independent media outlets whose role in the spread of use value cannot be underestimated. The value of information for readers in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic is of obvious importance. This is why the

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main part of the research project presented here will consist of a content analysis of the information provided by different types of media, including independent publications. It should be noted that scholarship on the PEC has often shunned the analysis of media content, but also that there are a number of important works which have provided in-depth studies connecting media structures to contents and ideology (Herman and Chomsky 1989).

This research project will set out the political economy context which enables understanding of the features of the media content on the Covid-19 crisis. To this end, researchers will focus on the general political economy of communication conditions in the respective nation state being studied and their relations with the global capitalist system, as well as addressing the specific media outlets which are objects of content analysis. This involves investigating the following structures:

- Ownership and funding.
- Media culture and ideology.
- Type of audiences and their ideology.
- Key independent forces (media outlets, journalists, social organisations...).

Method
Political economy analysis of media ownership and ideology
Carry out an analysis of each national media system with a focus on the outlets which have been chosen for analysis from the perspective of the political economy of communication and ideological analysis.

Samples
Representative samples of news items of each media outlet being studied will be gathered through the following procedure.

The first step will be to identify the universe (total number of articles) published on the Covid-19 pandemic per week. A systematic search on LexisNexis or national databases will be used in the first instance to identify the universe of articles dealing with the pandemic in each publication. If LexisNexis or national databases do not provide the material for identifying the universe, the search engine of each media outlet will be employed. Other options are searching in the section of each publication dedicated to the pandemic or using Google search engine (by using 'Custom range' to define the period and the 'site' function to search within the specific media outlet, eg., site: newyorktimes.com Covid). The procedure which provides the highest number of articles with regards to each media outlet will be chosen.

The keywords that will be searched are: 'Covid-19', Covid19, 'Covid 19', Covid, coronavirus, epidemic, pandemic, virus. The quickest searching option is to use the Boolean command OR to search for any of the keywords appearing in a news item. If this option is not available, a single search for 'Covid' will be conducted. Once the universe is identified, required sample size will be calculated according to the following formula:

$$Sample\ size = \frac{\frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2}}{1 + \left(\frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2 N}\right)}$$

With N the population size, e the margin of error and z the z-score. For this project the parameter p will be fixed to 0.5, margin of error to 0.05 and z to 1.96. This means that the sample size for each week will be calculated using a 95 per cent confidence interval and 5 per cent margin of error. The protocol of content analysis will be applied to each headline of each sample.

The gathering of the Twitter sample will use the following procedure.

The first step will be to use the platform https://www.trendinalia.com/ to find the first 25 Trending Topics (TTs) on a daily basis according to popularity and country. The second step will consist of the identification of the TTs related to the pandemic that appear in the top 25 TTs. Tweets from these TTs will be our universe. From it, the first five tweets according to the social network's function 'top' will be selected. The sample to be analysed will comprise two units of analysis: TTs and the first five Tweets. Analysis will be carried out on a weekly basis so all TTs about the pandemic will be studied and also a total of 35 tweets per week.

Sample unit: Each headline, TT and tweet of the sample.

Sample register: Each headline, TT and tweet that will be analysed.

Timeframe: Weekly from 15 February 2020 to 15 April 2020.

Method of content analysis
The study of the coverage of social problems in the different media outlets will be carried out by applying a systematic method of quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). The model of content analysis has been designed by incorporating framing analysis (Entman 1993) to identify the portrayal of the causes, the management and the consequences of the pandemic.

The protocol of content analysis presented next has been designed based on the theoretical tenets of the research. Following the

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public sphere perspective, this involves, firstly, the consideration of the topics/issues that the media might cover, which are included in the protocol's six broad categories referring to 'spheres' (political, economic …). Similarly, the protocol allows the registration of the sources of information, the affected subjects, and the winners of the pandemic in order to track the actors that are portrayed more or less prominently and how they are represented. The gravity that the unit of analysis confers to the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the emotions it conveys and the metaphors it includes are also in the protocol of analysis because they are key framing elements that provide meaning, judgement and interpretation to audiences. Finally, the scale (local, national, international) addressed in the unit of analysis is included for the identification of the level of ethnocentrism.

The variables and categories have been selected from the critical standpoint of the public sphere and the political economy of media perspectives. They involve a wide range of problems and actors that, based on these theoretical perspectives, are expected to be featured more or less prominently according to the structural constraints of media ownership and ideology. The research will thus enable us to explain omissions, emphases, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and prescriptions. As noted previously, the variations in the information on the pandemic is predicted to be explained by the property and ideological structure of media outlets.

The model of content analysis is applied to the headlines. The decision to analyse headlines is justified for three main reasons. 1) Headlines usually identify the key topic and set the frame of articles; 2) in today's saturated digital public sphere, headlines are more widely read than full articles; 3) it allows for the analysis of a bigger sample.

At least two coders will analyse each sample to assure intercoder reliability (Krippendorff 2004).

Design of content analysis

REGISTRATION INFORMATION	
Media outlet	1. DN! 2. PBS. 3. *NYT*. 4. Fox. 5. Breitbart. 6. Twitter…
Unit of analysis (Code)	
Title	
Type of media:	1. Non-corporate, socialist. 2. Public media, liberal. 3. Corporate, liberal. 4. Corporate, conservative, 5. Non-corporate, strong conservative. 6. Corporate, social network.
Date	

ANALYSIS (multi-option)	
A media outlet with a given STRUCTURE and IDEOLOGY provides a story on the Covid-19 pandemic by referring to:	
1. Temporal/ logical framework	1. Causes. 2. Management. 3. Consequences. 4. ND
2. ND sphere (no sphere involved)	
3. Political sphere	1. The government is responsible. 2. The government is approved of. 3. Another government is responsible. 4. Another government is approved of. 5. Political opposition in its own country is responsible. 6. Political opposition in its own country is approved of. 7. Political opposition in another country is responsible. 8. Political opposition in another country is approved of. 9. Political unity is proposed / political division is criticised. 10. Representative democracy. 11. Participatory democracy. 12. Authoritarianism, totalitarianism, fascism. 13. Political Conspiracy.
4. Economic sphere	1. Communism, state systems, communist economic elites. 2. Capitalism, market systems, neoliberalism, economic liberalism, economic elites, corporations, Big Pharma, labs, International institutions (UE, IMF…). 3. Democratic socialism, social transformation, anticapitalism, revolution. 4. Social democracy, Keynesianism, welfare state, reform. 5. Protectionism. 6. Workers. 7. Economic Conspiracy.
5. Healthcare sphere	1. Private health care and/or weak public health care. 2. Strong public healthcare and secondary private healthcare.
6. Environmental sphere	1. Conflictive relations with the environment. 2. Harmonious relations with the environment.
7. Public / Cultural sphere	1. Mainstream media, cultural industries, information, entertainment. 2. Information technologies, internet, social media. 3. Fake news, false statements, bias, manipulation. 4. Education. 5. Mentalities, consciousness, way of being, lifestyles, dialogue, communication.
8. Social sphere	1. Growth, Economy. 2. Health, equality (life, people). 3. Competition, individualism, Individual solutions, charity. 4. Cooperation, community, collective solidarity. 5. Freedom. 6. Security. 7. Open society. 8. Closed society (tighter control of borders, racism, nationalism). 9. Peace. 10. War. 11. Migration
9. Sources	1. Non-government experts, scientists, healthcare professionals. 2. Affected (health). 3. Own government. 4. Another government. 5. Political opposition in its own country. 6. Political opposition in another country. 7. Middle class. 8. Elites (WHO, World Bank, IMF, UE, UN, banks, corporations, celebrities, wealthy actors). 9. Vulnerable groups and activists (workers, elderly, children, women, poor, unemployed, prisoners, indigenous, social movements).
10. Those affected	1. People whose health has been affected (including infected and death count). 2. Healthcare professionals. 3. General population/'everyone'. 4. Middle class. 5. Vulnerable groups (workers, elderly, children, women, poor, unemployed, prisoners, indigenous, poor countries). 6. Elites (politicians, famous people, athletes, corporations, Wall Street, sports, the media, rich countries). 7. Animals.

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11. Winners	1. General population/'everyone'. 2. Elites. 3. Middle class. 4. Underprivileged.
12. Gravity	1. Serious or very serious. 2. Not serious or not very serious.
13. Emotions	1. Threat, fear. 2. Disgust, hatred, anger, rage. 3. Sadness. Hopelessness. 4. Safety, calmness. 5. Approval, love, sweetness, kindness. 6. Happiness, hope.
14. Metaphors	1. War. 2. Artistic. 3. Sports, games. 4. Fire
15. Scale	1. Local. 2. National. 3. International.
16. Comments	
The OWNERSHIP and IDEOLOGY of the media are predicted to explain variations in the REPORTING of the pandemic.	

Interpretation
The results of the content analysis will be interpreted according to the theoretical perspectives of the research.

Challenges of the research
This research understands that the way to make sense of situations of chaos, confusion and information overabundance is by looking at the political-economic and ideological structures that remain relatively stable over time and providing empirical corroboration of hypotheses. This approach enables the identification of correlations between the features (similarities and differences) of media content and the types of ownership and ideology. The method of content analysis permits investigation of *how* the media cover the pandemic, while the analysis of ownership and ideological structures provides explication of *why* they report it in such a way. Logically, the protocol of content analysis requires a design based on the theory supporting the research. This is a well-established approach which has been validated by a variety of investigations in the field of the political economy of communication and in other research based on content analysis. The theoretical perspective of the public sphere has been developed to make full sense of the implications of media treatment and structures for democracy.

The overabundance of information on Covid-19 during a long period of time poses challenges to data gathering because of the great number of contents that have been published. It should also be considered that mainstream media usually publish much more content than independent media. These challenges have been addressed with the development of flexible processes for the selection of representative samples of each media. An additional challenge arises because not all publications are included in the same databases (such as LexisNexis) and their own search engine might work in a different way and more or less effectively. These problems with the use of technologies mean that flexibility in the selection of the searching tool is favoured in order to identify

the highest possible number of relevant articles and gather the representative sample.

Another challenge is derived from the fact that ideologies are not easily defined and audiences do interpret the ideology of specific media differently. There is not sufficient space to develop a complete definition of each ideological category here, but it is helpful to note that the understanding developed in this research is based on the conceptualisation provided by Wallerstein (1995). It should also be noted that the categories which have been established are *ideal types*, meaning that obviously they are porous and that media outlets may combine different ideologies to various degrees.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a design for conducting a research project on the reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic that will compare the contents of different types of media outlets within specific countries as well as between countries. The research will follow a critical theoretical perspective which combines the pragmatics of the public sphere and the political economy of communication. This approach, together with the application of a quantitative content analysis method, will allow the identification of which topics (issues) are hegemonic and which ones are marginalised, how they are framed and the reasons that explain media reporting.

Scholars from different countries are participating in this research project, which remains open to further collaborations. The starting point of the main researchers is that, in a context of individualised and competitive academic production, knowledge is a collective and cooperative enterprise. Far from the logics of the rule of metrics and the fast-production culture of the *publish-or-perish* system, these researchers advocate for conducting deep, socially relevant studies which can be useful for citizens and democracy at an unprecedented historical period in which the fate of humanity is at stake.

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Brian Winston

'Find me a four-year-old child': Journalistic ethics in a time of plague

This article, based on the initial mainstream UK press coverage of the 2020 coronavirus crisis, suggests that journalism's usual 'black box' approach to science is ethically inadequate during a pandemic.

Statistics

In 1823, the mathematician Adolphe Quetelet quit his teaching position in Brussels to pursue, on a government grant, astronomical studies in Paris. There his wide curiosity led him to uncover in the crime statistics which the French state had been keeping since the Revolution 'a singular fact'. As the title of his treatise on the matter has it, there was, he discovered: *A propensity to commit crime at certain ages.*[1] The probabilities revealed by the numbers displayed 'a remarkable consistency' suggesting they had a positively oracular power:

> We might even predict annually how many individuals will stain their hands with the blood of their fellow-men, how many will be forgers, how many will deal in poison…[2]

For Quetelet, there was no end to the advantages uncovering the consistencies of probabilities across a variety of human behaviours had as a potential tool of social policy making:

> It seems to me that the theory of probabilities ought to serve as the basis for the study of all the science. … Chance, that mysterious, much abused word, should be considered only a veil for our ignorance; it is a phantom which exercises the most absolute empire over the common mind, accustomed to consider events only as isolated …[3]

Escaping from the entrapment of singular causes and effects allowed the probabilistic researcher to don the white-coated authority of the Newtonian scientist; but the 'sciences' that emerged as a result – sociology, anthropology, behaviourism etc, etc – are 'soft', without the paradigms, the rigorous experimental methods and the certainties that mark the 'hard' Newtonian disciplines – physics, chemistry *et al*.

We make little everyday distinction between the sciences and the social sciences. Outside of the betting shop, we tend (even journalists) to absorb probabilities unconsciously and the mathematics of probabilistics is otherwise a black-box. When we are told a policy is science-led, even journalists tend to take the matter as read. So, when confronted by the coronavirus in the early months of 2020, and a government in the UK claiming its strategy was to 'follow the science', that science was not seriously investigated. 'Follow the science' became a mantra, endlessly repeated by Prime Minister Johnson and his cabinet, accepted by the public (positive opinion polls indicated) and uninterrogated by journalists.

However, the science in question – because, at this stage, the virus was a variant new to medicine – was perforce essentially epidemiological:

> … the study of the distribution and determinants of health-related states or events in specified populations, and the application of this study to the control of health problems.[4]

In other words, probabilistic; ergo: soft. Moreover, the parroted phrase itself should have been suspect. As the Nobel prize-winning President of the Royal Society, Dr Venki Ramakrishnan, points out: 'There is often no such thing as following "the" science'; and that was certainly the case on this occasion.[5]

My point, though, is not to criticise press performance in the initial moments of crisis but to suggest it reflected a deeper problem here. The particular circumstances of the situation in the early months of 2020 vividly revealed the long-standing, deep-seated problem journalism has when dealing with 'science', however defined. The press, faced with the coronavirus, was (as usual), at its most comfortable reporting the human dimensions of the crisis. And it was also ready to speak truth to power, exposing repeated governmental failures and scandals. But speaking truth to the power of the science the politicians were claiming as the prime determinant of their actions – epidemiology – was a different matter. Even understanding that it was 'soft' and questionable was unnoticed.

As the political philosopher John Gray notes, this failure was not just of the moment:

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There is a reason why ministers have harped on about 'following the science'. In Britain only science has retained any authority. Scientists have no greater competence in questions of ethics and politics than anyone else; but there is no longer any common body of values to which political leaders can defer when trying to legitimate their policies.[6]

So, while Her Majesty's Government, in effect, dithered between the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March and the decision to lock the country down on 23 March, the journalists mounted no effective challenge to its insistence that its guiding light, which could not be avoided or questioned, was: 'FOLLOW THE SCIENCE'. The press even dismissively reported whistle-blowing epidemiologists vigorously questioning the government's reasoning on 16 March in terms of the scientific personalities involved, rather than with any serious analysis of the evidence.

And there was nobody else to do this. Johnson had a huge majority in the House of Commons, and the lockdown legislation – The Coronavirus Act, 2020[7] – was assented to, after minimal scrutiny, on 25 March. The parliament, in the opinion of Lady Hale, the ex-president of the UK Supreme Court, simply did nothing but 'surrender control to the government at a crucial time'.[8] There is now an argument as to how great a factor in the high British mortality rate – the worst in Western Europe – this delay occasioned; but, without question, it offered the press a uniquely vivid opportunity to demonstrate its primary ethical function in a democratic society – to act as the guardian of the guardians. Instead, its failure illuminates the dangers when it does not do this.

Mysteries
The first cases of Covid-19 occurred in mid-November 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan.[9] On 19 December, the Hong Kong Anglophone press ran a story of a 'mystery pneumonia' which was infecting dozens in Wuhan.[10] By the second week of January 2020, the 'mystery' had been solved for the press by the WHO declaring the sickness a respiratory disease of a sort identified in 2002 as a coronavirus infection. That outbreak was classed as an epidemic and designated Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (aka: SARS-CoV-1); and it was determined that it had been transmitted to humans from bats. No cure beyond isolation was found and by 2004 when infections abated 774 of 8,098 people infected in 26 countries had died.[11]

An inferential frame, to apply Erving Goffman's general concept of mind-set factors which predetermine how we (journalists included) understand any occurrence, was thus to hand for use in covering events in Wuhan.[12] The disease was a new version of a coronavirus – Covid-19. Once more it had been first detected in China and it

was transmitted – once more – zoonotically, this time originating in the Wuhan 'wet market' selling exotic animals as food. The event thus doubly echoed Western journalism's reporting frames. Not only was Covid-19 a variant on SARS-CoV-1 (to the point where it was designated SARS-CoV-2); it also involved China.

China has long been identified in the Western press as the source of curious foods from, at the latest, the arrival in Europe of the luxurious and mysterious drink 'tea' in the early 17th century. Increasing familiarity with Chinese realities led, by the 19th century, to a received British understanding of 'the indiscriminate voracity with which [the Chinese] swallowed all offal and trash'.[13] The origin of the disease in such alien culinary practices as well as the first SARS's modest death toll, makes the tone of the initial coverage of Covid-19 understandable. The Wuhan outbreak, for all the 'newness' of the virus, was unexceptional. It was about as interesting journalistically as a – to quote the classic Fleet Street jocular inside-page foreign news headline – 'Small earthquake in Chile: Not many dead'.[14]

But Covid-19, it very soon became apparent, was exceptionally infectious, and throughout January, 2020 unprecedented measures, 'locking down' millions, were put in place by the Chinese government. Several countries, most successfully South Korea, began extensive testing, tracing and isolating (TTI) as well. But, not least because air travel had been increasing exponentially, doubling between SARS and Covid-19,[15] the disease was, nevertheless, spreading rapidly. The first major European outbreak was in Italy. By late February its medical facilities were becoming swamped.

In contrast, by the end of January, as the first returnees to the UK from Wuhan were being tested, the British public was being advised (by *BBC OnLine*, for instance) to follow NHS (National Health Service) guidelines and wash their hands, use tissues not handkerchiefs and avoid touching the face.

> But there are no known cases in the UK, [Hancock [the health secretary] said, which was 'well prepared' to deal with an outbreak…[16]

Repeated official reassurances were accepted not least because no concentrated Italian-style outbreaks occurred. So little notice of the first deaths was taken that there is now an argument as to the identity of UK 'patient zero'.[17] In these first weeks, the media were completely gulled.

On 8 March, a national lockdown was put in place by the Italian government. Three days later, the WHO declared a Covid-19 pandemic (which it had never done with SARS-CoV-1) and, within

days, many countries followed the Italians with more extensive local or national lockdowns. But not all – Sweden, for one … and the 'well prepared and well equipped' UK was another.

Theory
The day after the WHO's 11 March announcement, the British, totally ignoring the lockdown model but 'following the science', abandoned testing for the virus and the tracing of contacts. The Johnson regime, despite chaotic scenes of overwhelmed medical facilities in Italy and elsewhere, decided that what 'far off' countries 'of which we know little' (as an insouciant Prime Minister once put it in another deadly situation)[18] were doing was irrelevant. His policy was – in effect – to do nothing. Well, not quite nothing. According to him: 'The best thing we can all do is wash our hands.'

But given that here was a novel killer virus of unparalleled infectivity with no known cure and no protective vaccines, there was one glaring question on 12 March (and thereafter): what possible science could justify such inaction? …. And it was not asked.

Clearly, as hard medical science was at a total loss at this point beyond trying to keep patients alive (ultimately, because no existing medications worked, by artificial ventilation), the only 'science' in play was epidemiological and the concept legitimating the UK official response was its herd immunity theory. That had arisen before World War I from veterinary experience of controlling epidemics among farm herd animals. It had been applied to human disease outbreaks since the 1920s. But with infections such as Covid-19 which have no vaccines or therapeutics and where even post-infection immunity had (and has) yet to be conclusively demonstrated, according to the *Lancet*: 'any proposed approach to achieve herd immunity through natural infection is not only highly unethical, but also unachievable'.[19]

The virus itself was being subjected to serious, comprehensive examination but containing the threat required, in the absence of actionable scientific knowledge, common sense. To suppose, as the British government appeared to, that a range of options from lockdown to inaction (aka: herd immunity) was on the table, did not exhibit this. The political dilemma was that, unchecked, a large number of people, several hundred thousand perhaps, would die. On the other hand, checking the virus in the absence of medical treatment, required measures of social control that would just as certainly wreak havoc on the economy.

The clincher for the government in determining strategy was that, at this point, Covid-19 fatalities were primarily among the elderly and some powerful voices at the heart of Boris Johnson's government were, apparently, sanguine about that. The chief advisor, Dominic

Cummings, was reported as outlining the government's 'strategy at the end of February as "herd immunity, protect the economy and if that means some pensioners die, too bad"'.[20] Such callousness, smacking as it did of 'ageist [as it were] cleansing', could not be blatantly admitted. But herd immunity, however relevant to the situation or not, was a 'follow the science' fig leaf. It anchored a no-cost strategy protecting capitalism with the added benefit of potentially removing an economically unproductive section of the population – the aged. Not for nothing has a recent tell-all memoir from a member of the ruling elite to which Cummings belongs described him as 'stark raving mad'.[21]

But in the face of 'the science', the press – like those surrounding Cummings – was silent. Only one voice was left to point out the deadly fatuousness of the government's position, the voice of science itself, Dr Ramakrishnan:

> The public will feel misled if ministers use 'the science' as a prop to create a false sense of security and certainty only to change tack later. … Considering science advice is not the same as simply 'following the science'.[22]

Science
Eleven days after opting for inaction, on 23 March, the government changed its mind and imposed a national lockdown. It had been called out – not by the press but by events.

On 16 March, the state-funded Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis at London's Imperial College of Science, which had, of course, been monitoring the situation since January, published *Report 9 - Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID-19 mortality and healthcare demand*. It starkly outlined the possible cost of herd immunity when so little was actually known about the virus's behaviour: 500,000 UK deaths. Even with 'mitigation' (e.g. lockdown) the epidemiological evidence suggested 250,000 fatalities and an overwhelmed health service: 'Suppression [i.e. full lockdown] is the only viable strategy at this time.' [23]

Neil Ferguson, the lead author of the report, was a member of the little-known advisory group which had given the government a go-ahead with herd immunity. But he never said the obvious, that: herd immunity was not science; it was wish-fulfilment privileging the economy over all else.

When Ferguson broke cover, the government finally panicked and imposed the lockdown. But, despite the *de facto* admission of error that the U-turn on the 23rd clearly signalled (concomitantly re-enforced by belated 'furious' denials of Cummings' pitilessness), the

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press – certainly the titles that backed the government – framed the story around Ferguson's status as an epidemiologist.[24] Rubbishing the man was the focus (and was made easy by his breaking the rules of the lockdown). Bedazzled by science, the viability of the theory was unexamined and rows about it were framed as schismatic differences of scientific opinions of equal value. But they were not. Applying herd immunity to the pandemic was (and is) basically – to use a term unknown to science – rubbish.

Sweden

Nevertheless, herd immunity theory has been hurled, an unopened black box, at any who queried 'The Science' that Johnson, Cummings and co were foisting on the public. Sweden, the only other country to opt for the theory and do little otherwise to contain the disease was held as a clincher for their position. The *Daily Telegraph,* for example, was still claiming Johnson had been right and was wrong to change tack by headlining 'Sweden's success' in August 2020.[25] But one does not need the acuity of a Quetelet to ask: what success was that? Sweden's death rate – in a country with a population density a tenth of the UK's – was four times that of Denmark (restrictions: 13 March) and eight times that of Norway (restrictions: 12 March).

But the real clincher is that, if the UK press was not in general beglamoured by science (even the soft varieties), common sense would have allowed it to play its guardianship role. As it is, its silence means it too bears some ethical responsibility for the excess British deaths registered in the first six months of the pandemic – some 53,000 over the usual number an Adolphe Quetelet would have expected. What percentage of this can be attributed to Covid-19 is disputed but what cannot be questioned in that there is a correlation between mortality and social regulation.

By the end of January 2020, we knew that here was a disease with no known cure whose charateristics, beyond its infectivity, we did not understand. Nor did we know what its long term effects were. And we had no drugs to blunt its proven ability to kill. Never mind science, the only thing that made (makes) sense was (is) test, trace and isolate – which we gave up on just as other nations were locking down. The dreadful irony is that, in this case, the press had no need of being clear-eyed about epidemiology or anything thing else. All it had to do was follow the example of Rufus T. Firefly – Groucho Marx – as the President of Freedonia in *Duck Soup:*

> Why a four-year-old child could understand this…

> Run out and find me a four-year-old child![26]

Notes

1 This article is an updated version of a presentation given in the ESRC Seminar Series 'Widening Ethnic Diversity in the News Media Workforce' at the Pierian Centre, St Paul's, Bristol, on Wednesday, 30 June 2010

2 *Big fat Gypsy weddings* (Channel 4) is a British documentary series about the lives of Roma Gypsies and Irish Travellers first broadcast in February 2010 as a one-off programme titled *My big fat Gypsy weddings*. A series of five episodes were then screened from January 2011. A second series was aired in February 2012

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2 Quetelet, Adolphe (1835) *Sur l'homme et le développement des ses faulés, ou, Essay de physiques sociale*, Paris, Bachelier. Republished in English: *A treatise on man and the development of his faculties* (R. Knox, trans., T. Smibert, ed.) (2013 [1842]), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press pp 6-7

3 Quetelet, Adolphe (1828). *Instructions populaires sur le calcul des probabilités*, Brussels, Tarlibre and Hayez. Available online at https://archive.org/stream/ instructionspop00quetgoog/instructionspop00quetgoog_djvu.txt. Quetelet was also responsible for the concept of the body mass index (BMI) which was known as the Quetelet Index until 1972

4 *Dictionary of epidemiology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, fourth edition p. 61. Available online at https://www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/lesson1/ section1.htm

5 Ramakrishnan, Venki (2020) Following the science, *Blog*, Royal Society, 18 May. Available online at https://royalsociety.org/blog/2020/05/following-the-science/

6 Gray, John (2020) State of the nation, *New Statesman*, 10 July p. 26

7 The Coronavirus Act, UK Public General Acts, 2020 c.7

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Note on the contributor

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Infoxication, infodemics and disinformation: The disinfodemic in the Covid-19 crisis in Spain

These days, the world is facing a multifaceted challenge. UN and WHO are warning of not only a virus pandemic but also a disinformation pandemic, an infodemic. The severity and extent of the health crisis are increasing citizen interest, as well as the production and dissemination of content related to the virus. Spain is one of the countries most affected by Covid-19 in Europe. Apart from the virus's damage and its consequent economic and social crisis, Spanish citizens are suffering from multiple disinformation campaigns. This paper analyses the context in which these attacks take place, the communication strategies and the format types used by their authors and the interests behind these attacks. Specifically, the research is focused on three main areas: health (an opportunity for pseudoscience), politics (the struggle for storytelling) and economy (the pandemic as a business). This research has been carried out in three phases: selecting the cases of disinformation that have achieved the most media visibility; analysing the strategies and formats they have used; and identifying the authors and their goals. Recent reports from official organisations (such as the European Commission, WHO or UN), media studies and universities (such as Reuters Institute and Oxford University) and data verification agencies are used for this purpose.

Key words: disinformation, infodemics, coronavirus, pandemic, Covid-19

Introduction
The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented situation for contemporary society that is transforming us in many different aspects. One of them is the way we produce and consume information, strongly influenced in recent years by the digital environment. In this context, three processes occur consecutively and feed back into each other: infoxication, infodemics and disinformation. The strong interest in the pandemic has led to

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information overload (infoxication) that prevents calm reflection on the quality of sources and the news reliability. Media, citizens and other organisations share false content, which spreads rapidly causing infodemics and feeding disinformation (on purpose) or misinformation (unintentionally).

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, disinformation was already considered a global threat because of its potential damage. 'Fake news is intended to influence the opinions and behaviour of individuals' (CCN-CERT 2019). In the wake of the coronavirus crisis, this menace has become evident and intensified. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has stated: 'As the world fights Covid-19, we are also fighting an epidemic of harmful falsehoods and lies.' In just three months, between January and March 2020, the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) reported over 1,500 Covid-19 online falsehoods in more than 70 countries (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020a). Disinformation includes 'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit' (European Commission 2018). Unlike disinformation, misinformation is unintentionally produced by citizens when they share false news. In both cases, the public harm not only affects 'democratic political processes, including integrity of elections', but also affects 'democratic values that shape public policies in a variety of sectors, such as health, science, finance and more' (ibid.). Posetti and Bontcheva (2020b) argue that disinformation about the current pandemic 'is more toxic and more deadly than disinformation about other subjects' because it not only has a direct impact on every person, but also upon whole societies. This is how the term 'disinfodemic' came about.

These heterogeneous and constantly evolving phenomena use technological development to achieve an unknown impact in terms of scale, scope and accuracy. Social media provides a powerful platform for spreading manipulation, propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Although at the beginning it was conceived of as a source of freedom and democracy, it is now being questioned due to its role in amplifying disinformation, inciting violence, and lowering levels of trust in media and democratic institutions.

At the European level, Spain is one of the countries with the highest number of infections and which is suffering the most from the consequences of the pandemic. Since 31 December 2019 and as of 24 August 2020, Spain is the European country with the second highest number of reported cases (386,054) according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). In parallel, Spanish society is not only facing an economic crisis but also a disinfodemic challenge. The Spanish fact-checking

initiative Maldita.es has verified more than 700[1] fake news and disinformation campaigns about Covid-19 during the pandemic. Some of the contents have been created internally in Spain and others are imported from abroad. In addition, the topics, the authors and the goals of these campaigns are varied, as well as the distribution channels (social media, messaging apps, traditional media, etc.).

According to the report *Navigating the 'infodemic': How people in six countries access and rate news and information about coronavirus* from the Reuters Institute and Oxford University, from 31 March to 7 April 2020, 63 per cent of those surveyed in Spain used social media to find out about the coronavirus. The most popular platforms were Google (55 per cent), Facebook (42 per cent), Twitter (30 per cent), Instagram (21 per cent) and YouTube (26 per cent). However, the less trustworthy sources for them were search engines (39 per cent), video sites (25 per cent), social media (23 per cent) and messaging apps (21 per cent). Regarding concerns over disinformation, survey participants said they had seen 'a lot' or 'a great deal' of false or misleading information about coronavirus on social media (44 per cent), video sites (32 per cent), messaging apps (44 per cent) and search engines (24 per cent).

This paper focuses on three areas of disinformation which may significantly affect Spanish society and the lives of its citizens: health, politics and the economy. The objective is to understand how they came about, who created them and what interests they conceal.

Methodology
The investigation process has been carried out through the selection and analysis of different cases of disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The methodology used consists of three phases. Firstly, establishing the criteria for choosing the sample and the case studies according to the objective. Secondly, establishing the variables of the analysis; in particular, the strategies and formats used. And thirdly, identifying the authors and their goals.

Regarding the first step, the original source of information is the site Maldita.es because it adheres to the Code of Principles of the International Fact-checking Network since 2018, is cited by the main media in Spain, uses a multiple verification process and has created a specific division to report on the coronavirus crisis. The sample cases of disinformation have been selected according to their level of visibility and media presence among the more than 700 fake news items in Maldita.es. To this end, the evolution of searches in Google Trends for some of the key words in the samples analysed has also been studied to find out the level of interest generated among internet users in Spain. In this sense, the

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searches before and during the pandemic have been compared to check their evolution.

The time period of the sample has been established as beginning from the pandemic's outbreak and ending on 31 August. Based on the nine key themes of the disinfodemic identified in the report *Disinfodemic: Deciphering Covid-19 disinformation*, the different cases of disinformation have been classified into three major areas and then three samples of each one have been selected; in addition, there is a sample of items that cover all three areas:

- Health: The risks of the vaccines; the Covid-19 pandemic is caused by 5G; the use of masks is dangerous to health.
- Politics: WhatsApp is controlled and censored by the government; the influence of March 8 feminists´ demonstrations in the dissemination of the pandemic; photomontage against the political party in charge of the government, PSOE.
- Economy: Supposed remedies to prevent coronavirus and to disinfect; sodium chlorite cures coronavirus; phishing campaigns related to the pandemic.
- Health, Politics and Economy: The rise of the Covid-19 deniers.

As for the second step, the report *Disinfodemic: Deciphering Covid-19 disinformation* also describes the four key disinfodemic format types against which the selected cases are analysed in this paper (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020a):

1. Emotive narrative constructs and memes: False claims and textual narratives which often mix strong emotional language, lies and/or incomplete information and personal opinions, along with elements of truth. These formats are particularly hard to uncover on closed messaging apps.

2. Fabricated websites and authoritative identities: These include false sources, polluted datasets and fake government or company websites, and websites publishing seemingly plausible information in the genre of news stories, e.g. reporting bogus cases of Covid-19.

3. Fraudulently altered, fabricated or decontextualised images and videos: These are used to create confusion and generalised distrust and/or evoke strong emotions through viral memes or false stories.

4. Disinformation infiltrators and orchestrated campaigns: These are aimed at sowing discord in online communities;

advancing nationalism and geopolitical agendas; illicit collection of personal health data and phishing; or monetary gain from spam and adverts for false cures. These formats may also include artificial amplification and antagonism by bots and trolls as part of organised disinformation campaigns.

Results

The empirical work has consisted of the analysis of ten case studies, three for each of the areas (health, politics and economy) and a last one that covers aspects of all three and is becoming more widely known: the rise of the Covid-19 deniers.

As we will see below, the chosen case studies use different communicative strategies and multimedia content based on the use of text and images, videos and sounds, in some cases modified, cut or decontextualised. Moreover, as Posetti and Bontcheva (2020a) point out, in these cases the authors also use messages that exploit the emotional aspect, feelings, prejudices and the simplification of complex subjects over scientific reasoning, proven data and logic.

Regarding the sources, the origin of the rumour is unknown in some cases. In others, the authors are celebrities, influencers or supposed experts who use their authority, recognition or visibility to promote unhealthy practices, to encourage people to take risks, to incite them to spend money on uncertified and expensive remedies or to incite them to change their mind on some important issues. These can lead not only to the abandonment of effective hygiene and prevention measures – such as hand washing, social distancing or the use of masks – but also to the consumption of products dangerous to health or to take decisions that are contrary to their interests.

Among the different cases of disinformation, the use of similar arguments to defend a certain position has been detected. In fact, the same content often includes attacks on the same elements. This is the case of those groups or individuals who are anti-vaccine and at the same time criticise the use of masks and warn of the risk of 5G technology in the appearance and spread of Covid-19. For example, the viral video *Plandemic: The hidden agenda behind Covid-19*, by former American researcher Judy Mikovits, where she holds these ideas without evidence and without a scientific basis. In the specific case of Spain, it has been detected that the groups of deniers are made up of individuals from the extreme right, as well as from the pseudoscience who find elements of protest in common.

Disinformation and health: The opportunity for pseudoscience

Certain groups or individuals take advantage of people's fear and ignorance to introduce unscientific theories that may put

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public health at risk. Regarding this issue, there are two main disinformation currents: treatments to fight against the illness and denial of the seriousness of the virus. On the one hand, unreliable sources propose different remedies such as eating certain foods to prevent or cure the virus (boil water with garlic, ginger, lemon juice, hot liquids, etc.). On the other hand, messages that compare the gravity of Covid-19 and its effects with the seasonal flu have gone viral.

Case study 1: The risks of the vaccines

Throughout the pandemic, various fake news stories related to the development of the vaccine have emerged. These warn of potential health risks to users – including the risk of death – as well as the use of aborted foetal cells for vaccine production or claim that they are not actually needed. People or organisations who defend or promote the development of the vaccine, such as Bill and Melinda Gates through their foundation, are also targeted. They are accused of introducing microchips into vaccines to control people's minds.

Although in some cases the author is unknown, in others they are famous. For example, the Spanish singer Miguel Bosé. As well, there are so-called experts such as the alleged virologist Judy Mikovits. Thanks to the pandemic, the anti-vaccine movement is exerting pressure from different quarters and increasing its visibility. According to data from the Google Trends tool, searches for the word anti-vaccine in Spanish have increased in recent months.

Case study 2: The Covid-19 pandemic is caused by 5G

Another of the emerging conspiracies is the responsibility of 5G technology at the outbreak of the pandemic. These disinformation cases also warn of the correlation between the coverage of the 5G network and the victims of the disease by country. In another video, a supposed telecommunications engineer claims that there is a component in the electronic circuits of 5G towers marked 'COV-19' that would link this technology to the virus.

In relation to sources, one strategy involves official institutions to give credibility to the fake news. In one of the analysed cases, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Health allegedly announced that the cause of the disease is a bacterium amplified with 5G. This fake news was

spread via WhatsApp. The following graph shows the evolution of 5G searches on Google before and during the pandemic.
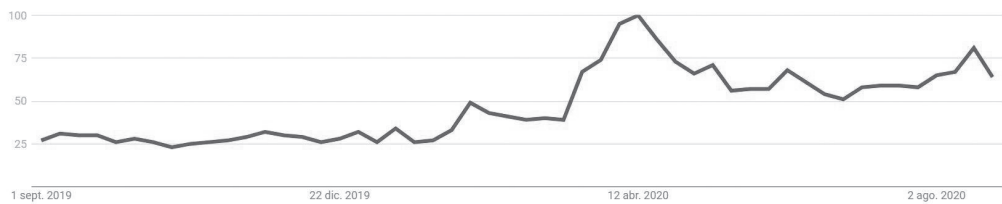
Case study 3: The use of masks is dangerous to health

The use of masks has been one of the epidemic control measures gradually implemented in different countries. In Spain, it has become a compulsory element in most public spaces (indoor and outdoor). This has generated a current of opinion for and against their use. Among those in this second group, different statements have emerged about the dangerousness or uselessness of the use of masks.

Regarding their uselessness, they argue that masks do not reduce the risk of infection because the virus is not transmitted through the air or because asymptomatic patients cannot spread it. However, both airborne transmission of the virus and by asymptomatic patients has been scientifically proven. As for their risks, they claimed that masks prevent correct breathing and lung oxygenation. They also claim that the use of masks causes hyperventilation and intoxication by aspirating microparticles. Furthermore, they say the user breathes in his/her own CO_2 and exhaled waste. All these arguments have also been scientifically refuted.

As we can see in the graphic below, searches for the word mask experienced a sharp rise from February. Unlike in the two previous cases – anti-vaccines and 5G – the word mask is more general in meaning. Therefore, it is more difficult to establish a causal relationship between the outbreaks of disinformation about the use of masks and the increase in searches on Google.

Disinformation and politics: The struggle for the story

Building and controlling the storytelling of the crisis to influence public opinion is a current political goal. Political parties and think-tanks are fighting a battle for information not only about

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health consequences, but also about the economic impact and the measures taken by governments or countries to combat the pandemic. In this context, disinformation also comes into play. If in the previous cases the consequences for citizens' health were analysed, the following examples of disinformation affect aspects related to civil and political rights and to the democratic system itself.

Case study 4: WhatsApp is controlled and censored by the government

During the first months of the pandemic, the messaging application WhatsApp decided to limit the number of times a message could be forwarded to a maximum of five times worldwide to avoid it going viral. With this, the company tried to fight against the spread of false news. This does not imply an effective control over the contents due to the fact that the messages are encrypted and they can only be read by their intended receiver. However, certain extreme right-wing groups accused the government of censorship in implementing this measure. They also claimed that this restriction had only been applied in Spain, even though it was implemented internationally in the countries where Whatsapp was present. Paradoxically, this censorship alert message was distributed through WhatsApp.

As part of the content, an explicit accusation was made to the parties in government and various data verification organisations. In addition, the shared message included a link to a piece of news published in *El Mundo*, one of the most important newspapers in Spain, whose content only informed about the new restriction of the messaging application. In this way, the message acquired a certain veracity as far as the reliability of its source. This disinformation campaign was also shared through other platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube. The following graphic shows the growth in the volume of searches related to WhatsApp during the days following the first messages published.
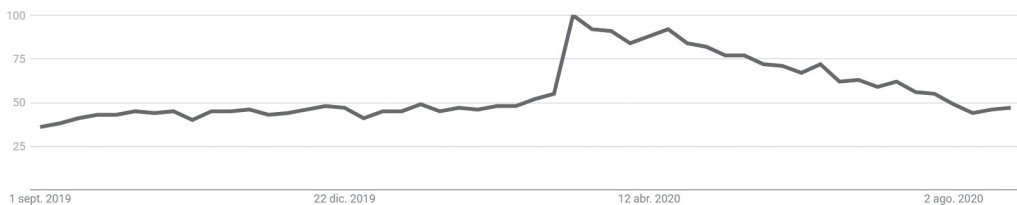
Case study 5: The influence of March 8 feminists´ demonstrations in the dissemination of the pandemic

The annual demonstration in defence of women's rights brought together 120,000 people in Madrid on 8 March, according to official sources.[2] A week later, on 14 March, the Spanish President Pedro Sánchez declared the state of alarm. Right-wing groups and

related media criticised the authorisation of the march, which they blamed directly for the increase in contagion in the following days.

In the heat of this criticism, fake news began to spread. One of the cases of disinformation was the report of an information blackout on the number of victims in the days before and after the demonstration. According to a Twitter feed that went viral, 'the government stopped counting those affected by the coronavirus from 6 to 9 March' because 'they knew that people were dying during those days and yet they hid it so that the 8M demonstration would be a success'.

At different times during the demonstration, the Minister of Education, Isabel Celaá, and the former Minister of Labour, Migration and Social Security and Member of Parliament, Magdalena Valerio, used purple latex or nitrile gloves. Some like-minded media on the right claimed days later that they were wearing them 'for fear of the coronavirus' or because 'the government was aware of the seriousness of the epidemic but did nothing'. However, there is no evidence that the government had that information to prove this allegation. Apart from that, the purple gloves are a symbol of claim, just like the purple scarf or the purple T-shirt, which have been used in previous years.

According to another of the messages analysed, one of the most watched morning programmes in Spain, *Espejo Público*, manipulated an interview with Seth Flaxman, professor of statistics in the Mathematics Department at Imperial College, London. He is also the co-author of a report that estimated infections and the impact of social distancing measures in 11 European countries, including Spain. Specifically, the video was edited in order to make TV viewers think that Flaxman attributed the celebration of 8 March with the increase in the number of infections in Spain. Flaxman then shared the full video and he also stated:

> I cannot talk specifically about this event but I can tell you about our estimates of the number of people infected around 8 March. We believe that at least 260,000 people in total in Spain had Covid-19 around 8 March 2020, so from the beginning of the epidemic up to and including 8 March. And there were perhaps as many as 430,000 [people infected on 8 March]. That is certainly a lot of people, although for many it will have been a very mild infection. Just one week later, on 15 March, our estimates for Spain are between 1.1 million people and 2 million people infected.

The goal of these campaigns was to generate a climate of tension against the government and against the feminist movement. Finally, the authors accused both the governments and the feminists of

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increasing the number of infections by maintaining the International Women's Day demonstrations.

Case study 6: Photomontage against the Spanish President, Pedro Sánchez, and one of the coalition political parties in the government, PSOE

At the beginning of May, in the midst of the lockdown emergency in Spain, a photomontage of a poster at the headquarters of the governing party, PSOE, went viral with the face of the president and secretary general of the party and the slogan: 'Trust your Government. A good citizen obeys.' The aesthetic was reminiscent of the dystopian Big Brother of *1984*.

This image was created by Alvise Pérez, an extreme right-wing influencer, who had previously worked for the centre-right party Ciudadanos. The original photograph had been taken the year before and showed a banner with the party's slogans for the elections on 10 November 2019. Alvise Pérez spread it on Twitter as if it were real with a message accusing Pedro Sánchez of being 'a potential dictator'. This format type and its form of dissemination, a fabricated image accompanied by a message shared on social media, created confusion and provoked a strong reaction in the population.

Disinformation and economy: The pandemic as a business

The pandemic has also become a way of doing business. We find examples of alleged cures or remedies against coronavirus that are, in fact, fraudulent because they do not offer scientifically proven effectiveness and can even be dangerous. Among them, it is worth mentioning the use of sodium chlorite, a product that appears in a recurrent way and that certain groups credit with the ability to cure multiple diseases. Another way of doing business is through cybercrime. One of the most common means throughout the pandemic is phishing. Using this technique, which involves obtaining personal information by posing as a known company or institution, cybercriminals can even obtain users' bank details.

Case study 7: Supposed remedies to prevent, to treat or to cure coronavirus

As with other serious health problems, in the case of coronavirus there are also people willing to profit from the sale of products to which they attribute curative properties or the ability to prevent infection or to disinfect. Among the products that have been promoted during these months are food supplements, certain vitamins and minerals, seawater spray in the throat or some foods, such as lemon, ginger or onion.

Several scientific organisations have issued statements denying the effectiveness and safety of this type of product in preventing infection or mitigating the symptoms caused by the virus. For example, the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition (AESAN in Spanish) warned that food supplements serve to supplement the normal diet. Therefore, they cannot be attributed with properties to prevent, treat or cure a human disease, nor referred to as having such properties at all. The National Police also warned of the risks of fraud with this type of product since they promised results that are not the ones finally obtained.

As some of these disinformation campaigns border on illegality by attributing unproven properties, their authors do not always come forward. However, there are also supposed experts who talk in the media about the alleged benefits of these products. They take advantage of the resource of fear and the lack of scientific evidence, due to the novelty of the virus, to obtain an economic benefit. For this, they use the four main types of formats analysed in the study. On the one hand, they appeal to the emotional aspect, mainly to fear and hope through stories of supposed cures. On the other hand, they reinforce their credibility by using false sources related to public institutions or scientific bodies. In addition, they develop disinformation campaigns that allow them to spread the usefulness of their products more quickly.

Case study 8: The top two miracle products: Sodium chlorite and hydroxychloroquine

Within the range of products supposedly capable of curing or preventing the spread of the coronavirus, there are two that have achieved greater popularity, sodium chlorite or MMS (Miracle Mineral Solution) and hydroxychloroquine.

On the one hand, MMS (Miracle Mineral Solution or Miracle Mineral Supplement) is an industrial bleach used in the paper and textile industry, as well as for making water drinkable. For some years now, there has been a current of pseudoscience that attributes curative properties to MMS against various diseases, from malaria to autism, cancer or AIDS, and now Covid-19 too. This is a toxic and corrosive product. Its regular consumption, even in small quantities,

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can cause kidney failure, as well as blood disorders, among other symptoms. For this reason, the Spanish Agency of Medicines and Health Products (AEMPS in Spanish) warned already in 2010 of the risks of its use.

On the other hand, the WHO started a clinical trial in different countries (The Solidarity Trial) to test the efficacy against Covid-19 of several treatments used for other diseases. One of them was hydroxychloroquine, a drug for malaria. Testing of hydroxychloroquine was suspended in July because interim results did not show a significant reduction in patient mortality with Covid-19 compared to other treatments. Despite the scientific evidence, figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, President of Brazil, and Donald Trump, President of the United States, insisted on defending its effectiveness.

The first of these graphs shows the increase of MMS searches in Spain, while the second shows hydroxychloroquine searches in Spain. As can be seen, the rise of the interest coincides with the peak of the first wave of the pandemic in Spain (March-April).
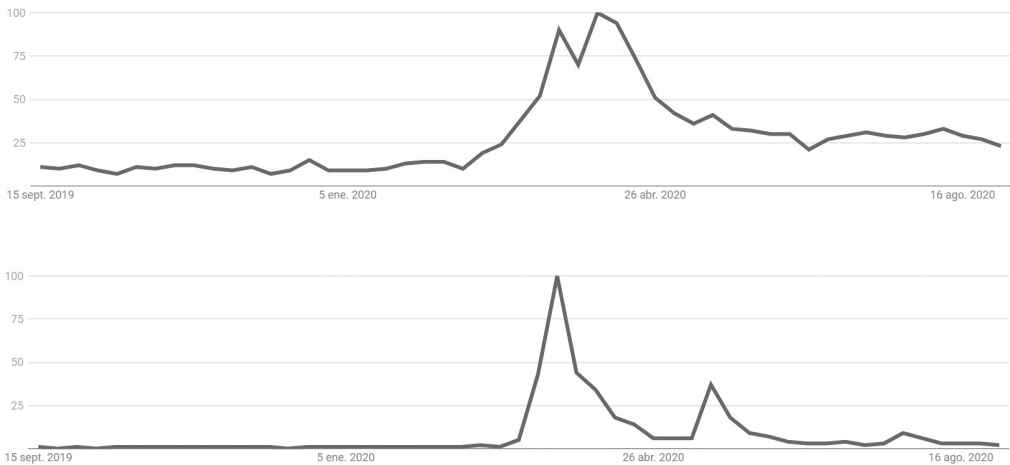
The strategies and types of formats used in these examples of disinformation are like the previous case study: they involve both emotional appeals and organised campaigns to give visibility to these products. However, in this case we observe that there are more visible spokespeople for the use of these products.

Case study 9: Phishing campaigns related to the pandemic
Maldita.es has reported dozens of phishing campaigns that have taken advantage of the pandemic, mainly to obtain private data from users and their contacts. In most of the cases detected, the image of a well-known company, social organisation or public institution (Red Cross, European Union, Amazon, Netflix, Nike, Visa, etc.) is used to give credibility to the message and attract potential

victims with promises of gifts or social aid. The main vehicle for transmission and dissemination of these phishing campaigns is social media. It is also common to create websites with the information, access links and thank you messages of alleged winners or beneficiaries. In these cases, the objective is to obtain an eminently economic benefit. Examples of phishes detected by Maldita.es are given below.

La Union Europea otorga tarjetas Alimentarias para todos sus ciudadanos.

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Health, politics and economy: The rise of the Covid-19 deniers

At the top of all these cases we find the pandemic deniers, who combine the three areas analysed (health, politics and economy). Since August 2020, they gained a lot of notoriety in Spain due to the demonstrations they held in various cities without maintaining security measures and failing to comply with Covid-19 prevention regulations.

One of the most controversial organisations is the coronavirus denialist group *Doctors for the Truth*. They use arguments similar to those seen in the case studies of the previous sections: they defend the non-existence of Covid-19, the dangerousness and uselessness of masks, the poor reliability of PCR tests or the relationship between the flu vaccine and the risk of developing serious symptoms of Covid-19.

They have carried out a disinformation campaign across different media: they appear on television programmes, offer conferences, share content through social networks, etc. They also allude to supposed results of studies by scientific organisations – Carlos III Health Institute or the University of Manitoba (Canada), among others – to reinforce their arguments. In other words, they hide falsehoods within true information or under the supposed protection of reliable sources (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020a). Various experts and scientific organisations have begun to refute some of the messages spread by this group, including the General Council of Official Medical Associations of Spain (CGCOM in Spanish).

Conclusion

In a democratic society, providing citizens with access to reliable and quality information is essential to help them make decisions that are in their best interests. In a situation of extreme gravity, such as the current pandemic, the population is scared and seeks comprehensible answers to a complex reality and an uncertain future. In this case, the information available to the public has more relevant consequences than in other situations. Google Search graphics used in this research reflect precisely this trend: the greater the impact of a disinformation campaign, the more searches it generated. Therefore, the topics that arouse more interest from the population (due to their seriousness, exceptionality, etc.) are likely to become a target of disinformation processes.

Disinformation can affect areas as important to citizens as health, the economy or democracy. Some of the cases mentioned above could go a step further and be considered as crimes. However, it is important to highlight them because the climate of disinformation favours the emergence of this type of campaign. This is the case of Spain, where the problem is particularly serious. The consequences that could explain the penetration of the campaigns among the

population in Spain are varied. Firstly, the virus affected Spain more seriously than other countries, both in terms of deaths and infections, as well as in the economic crisis resulting from the measures to combat the pandemic. Secondly, although a lot of data and expert testimonies were released, the emotional component seemed to prevail in much of the information. Thirdly, the use of the internet as a source of information in Spain is very common, so it is more possible to be exposed to this type of false news instead of reliable sources. In conclusion, the irrational climate prevailed over the rational one, which facilitated the penetration of the messages launched in the disinformation campaigns.

To control the dissemination of false news it is essential to delve deeper into its origins and hidden agendas. In other words, analyse who benefits from these disinformation campaigns beyond economic interests. As research shows, behind some of the disinformation cases are political groups that seek to influence public opinion and to create a climate of tension against the legitimately elected powers. This could threaten the democratic system. In addition, proponents of conspiracies and pseudoscientific theories have used the pandemic to penetrate people's beliefs and impose their ideas above scientific certainties. Consequently, a minority of the population benefits from this pandemic by taking advantage of an extremely serious situation to convince and impose its ideology on the rest of the people.

To end the dissemination of false information once we know the hidden interests in these campaigns, it is important to design and implement a series of rapid and large-scale responses in a range of media. On the one hand, national and international institutions should work together to establish transparent control systems that prevent censorship and provide an appropriate balance between the freedom of expression and the right to information. This collaboration is especially important if we take into account the fact that new technologies have contributed to facilitating the creation and mass distribution of fake news; and as all we know, social media lack borders. On the other hand, news media and journalists have a professional responsibility due to their role as reliable sources of information. Therefore, they must comply with a code of good practice that includes carefully checking sources, using real experts in each area, working in the interest of citizens and explaining complex concepts and information as clearly as possible. This will lead to better informed citizens who can make decisions based on scientific facts and not on speculation that may go against their own interests.

SCIENCE,
RISK AND
MISINFORMATION

Cristina López García

Notes

[1] As of August 24, but the data is constantly updated

[2] This figure is annually calculated by the Government Delegation (regional administration) body

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Alex Connock

Countering coronavirus disinformation: Which strategies work and which don't?

In the spring and summer of 2020, a large percentage of the UK (as well as the global) population engaged with outlandish Covid-19 conspiracies. Deliberate social media disinformation went viral, and mainstream countering strategies failed to win the info-war, not least because they insufficiently targeted the social channels where it was being spread. Commercial pressure on platforms offered opportunity to address this. According to Alex Connock, the war will likely be won by weakening the powerful algorithms that serve misinformation to users and by aggressive dissemination of conspiracy-countering content[1] on the platforms the users are viewing, such as Instagram and YouTube.

The *British Army Field Manual, Volume 1, Part 10, Countering Insurgency,*[2] of *October 2009*, provided a clear guide on how to fight and win a war against a guerrilla-style opponent. This was, after all, something which the army had been practising since at least the first, disastrous Afghan campaign of 1839-1842, and from there through Kenya (1952-1960), Malaysia (1948-1960) and Northern Ireland (1969-2007) along with other more covert campaigns, the ethics of all of which are far too large a canvas to paint here.

What the manual[3] did undoubtedly offer was experience. It included telling quotes from senior officers, then dealing with intractable challenges in the 21st-century iteration of Afghanistan conflict: 'There has been a lot of talk about asymmetry. The true asymmetry of the campaign is that the Taliban rely on 90% psychology and 10% force, whereas we rely on 90% force and 10% psychology.'

The 2009 army manual says: 'Often, the most effective activities are in the psychological domain and are designed to persuade and influence target audiences using non-kinetic means.'

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The same points can be made today about the war against coronavirus disinformation. (Useful definitions: disinformation is deliberate, misinformation is accidental.) The psychological war needs to be more targeted, more aggressive, and as adept in the Machiavellian algebra of predictive algorithm exploitation as the malign content-makers it confronts.

A social media guerrilla conflict
Information certainly matters. It matters to public health, public safety and the psychology of myriad family interactions. A pattern of global misinformation during Covid-19, some of it driven by the far-right QAnon conspiracy movement, covered a dizzying range of propositions, from a made-up virus ('scamdemic') to nefarious schemes to control the populace via microchip, to a catch-all thesis including child abuse networks ('Pizzagate'[4]), to direct (if unsubstantiated) conflation of the virus with the 2020 US presidential election and a potential coup against Donald Trump, to control of water resources and more.

Indeed, the disinformation reached all the way up to the US president himself who, in April 2020, offered an idiosyncratic treatment option of his own: 'And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?'[5]

The consequences of such disinformation could be benchmarked in weaker adherence to public health announcements, an extraordinary measure of the failure by government and media to offer a convincing narrative.

So perhaps the single point on which all political polarities of spring 2020 could agree was that, as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, a global information war was being fought on social media – and that, in many key engagements, early victory was to the extremists. Specific skirmishes were fought around the origins, transmission, treatment and vaccination strategies of coronavirus, on all of which were thousands of memes offering alternative solutions to those proffered by the health establishment. In the UK specifically, by May 2020, almost three out of five adults[6] in England believed that the government was misleading the public about the cause of the virus.

The media also failed to defeat the *meta,* catch-all narrative behind Covid-19. This told how a world elite of politics, business and entertainment personalities had advance information on the virus, trained the public on how to wear masks with prescient augmented-reality social filters and planned to monetise vaccination programmes, artfully controlling the population by inserting microchips at scale.

But in the UK, as elsewhere, state communications and conventional media failed to counter false narratives in the specific channels they were being spread – the social platforms – as the 2009 counter-insurgency field manual would have advised. The UK state and media failed to engage the social media enemy on its turf – Instagram – or with the same charismatic engagement and operational precision. Amongst 16-to-24 year olds, 45 per cent said to a June 2020 King's College/Ipsos survey[7] that they received much of their information from YouTube, while almost 40 per cent of the under-35s said Facebook was a major source for them. Yet the government's press operation was still principally TV and newspaper engagement, and its social communication impact got insufficiently far beyond streaming the daily, afternoon press conferences on LADbible. Avid social media users were still more likely to have heard at least a little about the conspiracy theory: 80 per cent, versus 68 per cent of those who use social media for Covid-19 news less often. Nearly 20 per cent of those who often rely on social media for coronavirus news (17 per cent) said they watched at least part of it, compared with about 10 per cent among those who used Covid-19 news on social media less often (9 per cent).[8]

By May 2020, almost half the British population actually believed that Covid-19 was a 'man-made creation'. In the King's College research, 30 per cent thought that the coronavirus was created in a lab, an *increase* from 25 per cent in April as the peak virus moment was reached. A similar proportion thought the true death toll from Covid-19 was being hidden by the authorities. Some 13 per cent believed that the pandemic was part of that global effort to force everyone to be vaccinated.

Losing the ground war
'When I turned on my computer this morning, I had over 2 million unique visitors searching for the truth.' So said Jude Law's character Alan Krumwiede, avid conspiracy theorist in Steven Soderbergh's 2011 thriller *Contagion*. 'I'm a journalist, and there's informed discussion on the blogosphere that this is a biological weapon.'

It was a prescient piece of scriptwriting. The early months of coronavirus saw a barrage of Facebook and Instagram memes, WhatsApp messages and YouTube videos, which offered conscious disinformation – potentially from foreign powers using routes to a billion social media accounts, on which my Oxford colleague Phil Howard wrote a useful 2020 book, *Lie machines*.[9] These posts were amplified by celebrity influencers (which Howard memorably calls a 'gateway drug' for conspiracies) then by countless real life users – who were willing sharers, but unwitting participants in misinformation. Network virality of the stories was so powerful that it even targeted the networks themselves, by which the content was spread. On 25 April, research suggested that 8 per cent of

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Just one of the thousands of Instagram feeds shared by UK celebrities was @wearewakinup, which argued against masks in memes such as 'even doctors are saying Masks are really bad for us, when are Ye going to listen and even do a simple Google search to see the known dangers'. Another Instagram feed said: 'I read today the NHS had to admit that staff have contracted pleurisy due to prolonged wearing of masks that they tried to cover up as Covid-19.' Meanwhile in Italy, one video, viewed more than 700,000 times on Facebook, claimed that the pandemic was entirely 'invented'. The narrator of the clip claimed the end goal was to get everyone vaccinated: 'This is a sensational hoax, but a very successful one.'

Platforms failed to take content down at speed. *Plandemic: The movie*, a 26-minute film including the allegation that death figures were being fabricated in order to control the population, went globally viral including 7.1 million views on YouTube before it was removed. (It had a sequel, too, memorably described by Buzzfeed as 'bloated, confused and filled with nonsense' but, nonetheless, much sought out by conspiracists.[11]) Conspiracies travelled 'further and faster than ever before', said Oxford University clinical psychologist Dr Sinéad Lambe: 'Our survey[12] indicates that people who hold such beliefs share them; social media provides a ready-made platform.'

Underpinning all of this global disinformation was a vast digital hinterland – of total nonsense. The hard-right *Infowars* compared coronavirus lockdowns[13] to 'what the Nazis did'. QAnon, whose believers circulate the 'mole children' theory,[14] posited that the virus was a ploy to arrest members of the satanic 'deep state' (various celebrities) and to release their hostages (sex-slave children) from underneath Central Park. This as-yet unproven thesis dovetailed with the fantastical Pizzagate, a theory involving Democratic elites, a pizza restaurant and a cover-up of epic proportions, generating 800,000 likes on Facebook plus 600,000 on Instagram and is at the time of writing gaining profile and traction in the US 2020 election campaign, including congressional candidates.[15]

Responses mistargeted
How to counter the certitudes of conspiracy theorists, whose psychological roadmap turns any challenge into automatic verification of a deeper plot, is already one of the great challenges of the 21st century. This is because they have switched focus from harmless theories about UFO abductions and the Duke of Edinburgh being a lizard (fact check: he's not a lizard) to theses directly inimical to real-world public health in the worst pandemic since 1919.

Sometimes, the responses of the centre ground went badly awry. For instance, Twitter put a Covid-19 label on tweets about 5G, thereby algorithmically linking the two concepts, and offering potential encouragement to conspiracy spread about that link.

Other responses were punchy and useful. The BBC allocated website space[16] to cogent demolitions of key conspiracy tropes. On 30 May, it examined widespread claims that the coronavirus pandemic was cover for a dastardly scheme to implant trackable microchips via vaccination, which the Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates was allegedly backing. The BBC put the facts straight on that: 'We've found no evidence to support these claims. … The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation told the BBC the claim was "false".' And of course it is utter nonsense. The Gates Foundation did not create or spread the virus, does not have schemes to microchip people, has led the world on vaccination research and, at December 2018, had an endowment of $49.8 billion.[17]

But the counter-insurgency was still a misfire. The BBC advice[18] – stop and think, check your source, could it be a fake, don't share, check each fact, individually – was a powerful missile, but not a drone strike. It put the onus on the individual to come and find it – wilfully avoiding the guerrilla war. The BBC didn't devote so much space on its conventional news programmes to directly addressing the theories in ways that consumers of populist memes would be likely to see. It didn't have anywhere near the social media traction to make the denials as viral as the conspiracies. Neither the BBC nor the government used charismatic influencers or memes to deflate conspiracy theories as effectively as the opposition used to create them.

In other words, in the 90/10 balance of the psychological versus kinetic equation set out by the British army's 2009 counter-insurgency manual, the weight still favoured the enemy, as it had in Afghanistan.

Fightback
Then a partial solution came, from another quarter entirely: business.[19, 20] In late June 2020,[21] Facebook, a distributor (if unwitting) of posts and memes by virtue of its additional ownership of Instagram and WhatAapp, was hit by major brands[22] including Unilever,[23] Diageo, Starbucks and Levis who withdrew advertising, citing dissatisfaction with adjacency to unknown content. (Some of them specifically cited Facebook, but importantly others did not, and expressed concerns with digital advertising placement in general.)

Facebook denied the problem, but quickly made some adjustment to the coding. Facebook's diversified client base (some 3 million

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advertisers) protected it from economic loss. Such is its economic traction that the brands may find the change tougher than the platform: in July 2020, my Oxford colleagues Andrew Stephen, Jason Bell and Felipe Thomaz produced research on cross-media effectiveness (in collaboration with Kantar) to quantify the consequence of this action to these brands in terms of ad effectiveness. 'In general, boycotting brands should expect a drop in Saliency (-6.16%), Association (-3%), and Intent to Purchase (-8.66%). However, the true extent of the costs borne by brands will depend on their industry as well as their reliance on the digital world.'[24]

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Donald Trump was troubled, perhaps for the first time, by effective digital counter-insurgency. Sophisticated, scaled-up operators like the Republican-backed Lincoln Project,[25] whose founders included former New Hampshire Republican Party chief Jennifer Horn, successfully taunted him with 'Mourning in America', a viral video that suggested he ignored Covid-19, which had by then killed 60,000 Americans. It was a pun on the optimistic 'Morning in America' advert that former President Ronald Reagan used in 1984.

Public opinion was swinging just a little, too. On 29 June, Journalism.org reported that the counter-factual narrative was being undermined – by the actual facts. Now 64 per cent of US adults said the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) mostly got the facts about the outbreak *right* to just 30 per cent saying the same of the Trump administration.

There remains a long fight ahead – one reaching from individual users to the might of major states and even political systems.

The struggle against a virus, the information war against conspiracy theories, and any real war against a guerrilla insurgency, are all won by the same process: a form of herd immunity. Convince the majority of the population to take your side, and they will represent what the *Atlantic* called a 'firewall' against conspiracy theories, a natural limit. Reaching that limit will be critical to the future protection of public health.

Notes

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Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos

From a 'culture of fear' to a 'culture of hope': Media as agent for social change in times of pandemic

Communication enables societies to cope with risks, shifting from a 'culture of fear' to a 'culture of hope'. For media to act as agents for collective responsibility, this paper argues they must act locally towards dignified and non-humiliating risk communication.

Key words: risk society, human communication, pandemic, 'glocal', media development, risk sensitive communication

Considering risk and the need to mobilise our reflexive capacity to understand the challenges of human communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper focuses on communication strategies that could inspire social change in local networks. In order to discuss how the media might act for the social good in such pandemic times, it draws from Hamelink's idea that communication enables societies to cope with risks through shifting from a 'culture of fear' to a 'culture of hope'.

In times of pandemic, it is imperative that media mobilise their power to promote a move from a culture of fear to one of hope, distancing society from the drivers of the 'escalation spiral'. As Hamelink (2011b) described such a spiral, conflict can escalate, moving from simply disagreement to an open aggression stage in a spiral-like sequence with every turn bringing about more violence. Within this spiral, media can foster escalation by nurturing emotional feelings of anxiety, agitation, alienation and accusation. By contrast, these processes can be reversed and prevented when more hopeful modalities of communication are built.

Such escalation happened when US President Donald Trump described the new coronavirus as a 'foreign virus' or even as a 'Chinese virus' during his March 2020 Oval Office announcement of a travel ban to 26 European countries. 'This is the most aggressive

and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history,' Trump said in his televised address, adding that the disease had started in China and was now spreading throughout the world (Porter 2020).

Another example was the former Brazilian education minister's arguably racist claim linking the coronavirus pandemic to China's 'plan for world domination': 'Geopolitically, who will come out stronger from this global crisis?' Abraham Weintraub insinuated in a tweet that was massively spread through social media and news media. In the original text in Portuguese, his tweet replaced the letter *r* with capital *L* – '*BLazil*' instead of 'Brazil', as a way of mocking the Chinese accent (AFP 2020).

During an interview at the end of February 2020 on the local Italian television *Antenna Tre*, the president of Venice, Luca Zaia, made a series of statements against China and the hygiene of its inhabitants. According to the Italian politician, the relatively small size of the epidemic (at that time) was due to the high hygiene standards of the Venetians. Zaia stressed that it was a 'cultural formation' that consisted of taking a shower and washing one's hands often, 'a personal cleaning regime that is particular'. And that such a standard would be absent in China – the reason why the country 'paid a large bill' regarding the epidemic (still not yet considered at that time a pandemic). The prejudiced words implied that the Chinese would be less clean with a less healthy diet: 'We have all seen them eat live rats!' (Efe 2020; Reuters 2020).

When two French doctors controversially suggested in April on a live French TV debate that early vaccine trials could be conducted in Africa, it gave clear signs of racism towards the 'other', in this case, the African continent (BBC 2020; *Deutsch Welle* 2020; Franceinfo 2020). The head of intensive care at Cochin hospital in Paris stated: 'If I can be provocative, shouldn't we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation?' He was suggesting tests be conducted in Africa to see if a tuberculosis (BCG) vaccine would prove effective against the new coronavirus. He continued: 'A bit like as it is done elsewhere for some studies on Aids. In prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed and that they do not protect themselves.' He later was forced to apologise for his 'clumsy' comments. The other doctor joining the debate said that the video had been subject to 'erroneous interpretations' while expressing that amid a global pandemic, the African continent 'must not be forgotten or excluded from research'.

A rise in anti-foreigner sentiment has been reported by several news media, particularly hate crimes against Asians (Cummins 2020; Macguire 2020; Solomon 2020; York 2020). As the coronavirus

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spreads across continents, it is also spreading fear, reported Voice of America on 4 March 2020: 'In many parts of the world, including Africa, xenophobia, and more specifically, "Sinophobia", the fear of Chinese people, is on the rise.'

A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center concluded that in the United States, four in ten Black and Asian adults said that people had acted as if they were uncomfortable around them because of their race or ethnicity since the beginning of the outbreak. Similar shares said they worried that other people might be suspicious of them if they wear a mask when out in public (Ruiz, Horowitz and Tamir 2020).

Increased public anger in Malaysia against Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers as the coronavirus crisis deepened in April sparked concerns of another migrant crisis as experienced in 2015. Sensationalist reporting in local media outlets in Malaysia stimulated internet users to blame the Rohingyas as 'anxiety over the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have eroded sympathy for the persecuted group', reported the American ABC news (Walden 2020).

The danger of living in a culture of fear, particularly in environments prone to panic, anxiety, fear of the uncertainty is that it favours the dehumanisation of the other. Dehumanisation is a psychological process of perceiving others as less than human and not deserving moral consideration (Maiese 2003). Dehumanising may lead to feelings of hatred and alienation towards the other. This process is characterised by the difficulty of parties recognising that they are members of a shared human community (Rai, Valdesolo and Graham 2017). Once social groups are stigmatised as evil or seen as morally inferior, the persecution becomes 'psychologically acceptable'. It is considered to be a fundamental enabler of violence across cultures increasing the likelihood of a conflict to escalate out of control.

Precisely because in the current time of the new coronavirus pandemic we live confined at home, wearing masks when stepping outdoors, living in fear of touching any 'stranger' and of being infected by an invisible illness. This fear renders a gloomy perspective in human relations, including how societies reorganise themselves, become resilient and readjust to a new standard of life – what the press has called a 'new normality' (Connolly 2020; Fonseca 2020; *Deutsche Welle* 2020).

The loneliness of our self-isolation is compounded by anxiety and fear, wrote Gessen (2020) in her column in the *New Yorker* magazine earlier in May. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's (1973) observations on isolation and loneliness, the author shows their resonance for today's world. Isolation entails the inability to act together with others rendering people impotent. But when isolated

and unable to act with others, a person can still create and share her/his thoughts to the world. Whereas loneliness involves the inability to act altogether either with others or alone. And when there is no connection to the collectivity, there can be no voice and no 'common sense' – a shared reality that allows us to know our inner selves, where we end and where the world begins, and how we are connected.

> Living in a constant state of dread, living under extreme constraint on the one hand and with extreme uncertainty on the other, … make it almost impossible to think one's way beyond immediate survival (Gessen 2020).

It is a pitfall that in an environment of fear, the media continue to generate more and more propitious conditions for an escalation that implies a form of violent and aggressive, ethnocentric and racist type of communication.

Hamelink points to the power of the media to mobilise 'hopeful modalities' of communication in order to counter such a violent spiral, and this endeavour takes place through local efforts; fostering local knowledge; contextualised, respectful and open dialogue even on conflicting matters and uncertainties.

Social construction of risk in our societies
Whereas risk is socially constructed through societies' concern for the future, in the global risk society we live in (Beck 1992) communication may assist as an adaptive response to the threats we, locals, face in a global environment. This understanding is informed by the risk society approach originating in the work of the sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. As imagined by the German sociologist, risks can 'be changed, magnified, dramatised or minimised within knowledge' (Beck 1992: 22) and to that extent they are open to social definitions and constructions. For Beck, media, scientific and legal professions are the ones responsible for defining risks that are now 'key social and political positions' (ibid: 2292n), thereby opening a gap between those 'who produce risk definitions and those who consume them' (ibid: 46). Such risks – usually invisible – are based on causal interpretations.

The core of Beck's risk society theory is that risk is the production of new and non-calculable hazards that cannot be 'insured against'. Seen as an entity, it is neither danger nor risk in the traditional sense but rather man-made disasters that are named as 'new risks'. They involve global and irreparable damages that are not possible to predict or whose consequences it is not possible to calculate, including the time and space of those consequences. Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is more and more occupied with 'debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced' (Beck 2006: 332).

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Seen in these terms as anticipated disasters, risks are threatening. But the moment they become real they 'cease to be risks and become catastrophes' (ibid). In Beck's view, risks only take symbolic forms once they are shaped by media that employ techniques of visualisation. Given that risk does not exist independently of observation but is socially constructed, the perception that the world faces a number of risks with potentially dreadful consequences – calamities, nuclear disaster, diseases – has been at the heart of scholarly debates.

As Giddens reminds us, the word 'risk' may have been first used in English in the seventeenth century, drawing probably from the Spanish nautical term meaning to run into danger or to go against a rock (Giddens 1990: 30). In his book *The consequences of modernity* (1990), Giddens refers to Beck in relation to the possibility of potential global catastrophes that generate an 'unnerving horizon of dangers for everyone' (ibid: 125).

As Beck comments, globalised risks of this sort do not respect divisions between rich and poor or between regions of the world. The global intensity of certain kinds of risk transcends all social and economic differential (1990: 125-126).

What risk presumes is precisely danger, but not necessarily awareness of it (ibid: 34). Such notions began with the understanding that 'unanticipated results may be a consequence of our own activities or decision' (ibid: 30), but it is not only a matter of individual action, since Giddens agreed that there are 'environments of risk' that may collectively affect large masses of individuals (ibid: 35). He continues by saying that in conditions of modernity, 'many risks are differentially distributed between the privileged and the underprivileged' (ibid: 125-126).

In this line of universality and asymmetrical distribution of its impact, Beck's perceptions of global risk can be characterised by features of:

i)   'de-localisation' of its causes and consequences, i.e. they are not limited to one geographical location or space, turning them omnipresent;
ii) 'incalculableness' of its consequences; and
iii) 'non-compensatibility' through which the unsafe consequences and dangers of decisions are neither controllable nor compensable (Beck 2006: 333).

As groups of people may be more affected than others due to unequal distribution of wealth and the growth of risks, a different dynamic is created of international inequalities between what Beck calls the 'Third World' and the 'industrial states', and among the

industrial states themselves. What thus emerges is the 'political potential of catastrophes' with reorganisation of power and authority (Beck 1992: 23-24).

Within the understanding that risk society has become part of our daily lives, imbuing us with this impulse converts it as a methodical way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself. The new coronavirus outbreak has turned our risk society into a vulnerable one. The outbreak of Covid-19 and its associated health, social and economic consequences may be considered as one of the most important social events in human life in the 21st century (Sadati, B Lankarani and Bagheri Lankarani 2020).

Within the idea that global catastrophes can potentially generate dangers on a large scale and that risks and their aftermaths are unevenly distributed and irregularly felt across layers of societies and cultures, Giddens' and Beck's thoughts pave the way for us to discuss what has been conceptualised by Furedi as a 'culture of fear'. Sense-making of danger, misery and hardship grant our contemporary societies a deep feeling of apprehension and uneasiness.

Culture of fear: Human survival as an everyday anxiety

Furedi (2009) suggests that the sense of existential security has moved from probabilistic to possibilistic risk management that characterises contemporary cultural attitudes towards uncertainty. Western society's culture of fear impels the idea that contemporary risks are 'qualitatively more dangerous' because we know very little about them (ibid: 198). And that the contemporary understanding of risk does not take the shape of probabilistic but possibilistic thinking, leading to what he outlined a 'precautionary culture' that encourages society to approach human experience as a potential risk to our safety and well-being.

Anxieties about being 'at risk', feeling 'stressed', 'traumatised' or 'vulnerable', indicate that we have internalised an individualised psychological lexicon that influences our susceptibility of fear. How we fear is subject to historical and cultural variations (Furedi 2006: 7). The 'free-floating dynamic of fear' is promoted by a culture that communicates hesitancy and anxiety towards uncertainty and continually anticipates the worst possible outcome. Being at risk implies the autonomy of the dangers that people face. Those who are at risk face hazards that are independent of them. If risk is autonomous, it suggests that it exists independently of any act or individual (2006: 5).

In his book (2006) *Culture of fear revisited*, Furedi argues that features of a fearing culture embrace a shift in moral reaction to harm, towards a notion that safety is an end in itself and that there

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is a need to change the narrative of harm. Contemporary society finds it difficult to make sense of misfortune and adversity and barely accepts the fact that occasionally bad things may happen to us. The difficulty that society has in making sense of incertitude is what gives contemporary fear its very 'raw character'.

Human beings have always required a terminology and reasoning that helped us to account for unexpected events, particularly those that cause pain and suffering. Today, such a plea for rationalisation implies that someone ought to be blamed. Society has adopted the view that preventing injury is an end in itself.

For Furedi, when safety is 'worshipped' and risks are seen as inherently bad, it is a clear statement about the values that should guide our lives. Through the media, we are relentlessly reminded of the risks we face from several environmental hazards. The tendency to treat 'human survival as an everyday problem' is paralleled by a constant boom of harms that we face (2006: 1006n).

In line with Furedi, Hamelink (2012) argues that media promote feelings of agitation, angst, nervousness and a shared perspective on life where news and entertainment represent 'key vehicles' for anxiety promotion to a fearful perspective of the world.

> People are made anxious by telling them there is something wrong with them, (like in advertising or in medical TV programmes), by suggesting uncertain and probably very troubled futures (in daily newscasts about issues like the credit crisis), or by making them fearful (by discourses on terror, evil, and war) (2012: 223).

Human anxiety can be associated with perceived dangers and hazards, and such perceptions are socially mediated. By amplifying anxiety and the rhetoric of evil, media enlarge people's sense of risk and their disposition to expect that things will work out the wrong way by constantly alerting them to one or another danger (Hamelink 2011b, 2012).

In this regard, media can often be an agent for producing drivers of what Hamelink names an 'escalation spiral' that comprises sentiments of apprehension, tension, distress and anguish. The spiral of conflict escalation moves from disagreement through aggression to destruction. The four key elements of this spiral are: anxiety, agitation, alienation and accusation (2011a: 21). The phases of this escalation period are socially mediated, with media an important conduit.

A culture of hope in a post-pandemic world

Exploring how these phases of escalation are mediated and how media can be positioned in reverse processes of de-escalation requires us to take some reflective and creative approaches to media research and media ethics, particularly during this dystopian reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. Human communication could empower citizens in coping with the imponderable risks constructed, mediated and broadcast to almost every corner across the world, but with an unequal impact on different social fabrics.[1]

Social justice, non-violence and human dignity are among the fundamental ethical concerns that have received scholarly attention in media ethics (e.g. Christians 2011: 1). The one that requires the most attention, according to Christians in the *Handbook of global communication and media ethics*, is justice. To the utmost level, justice entails the issue of accessibility. Access to media and reliable information should be allocated to everyone regardless of their level of income or geographical location. 'Comprehensive information ought to be assured to all parties without discrimination' (ibid: 7).

Non-violence is, furthermore, a key ethical principle and discussion on how to implement it has become a major challenge (ibid: 11). The principle of non-violence offers the basis and direction by which information and media reporting and coverage can be carried out from the assumption that leading away from hostile and aggressive actions and verbal abuse, more space is opened for respectful, generosity and human equality. Human dignity is regarded of elemental importance to communication ethics, stressed.

> In order to advance this demanding agenda, journalism needs to give up its utilitarian neutrality and detachment, and adopt the principle of nonviolence. … Different cultural traditions affirm human dignity in a variety of ways, but together they insist that all human beings have sacred status without exception (ibid: 12).

Almost a decade ago, Hamelink (2012) called the modality of communication of hope a means for human survival. As he understood, human humiliation embodies the discrimination and the degrading of people by forcing social groups into dependent and disempowered positions and by denying them agency, as if they had no capacity of choice or action (2012: 2202n).

Being inherent to human nature, fear is related to the perceived dangers of future conditions. Humiliating forms of communication are inspired by the feelings of fear that people experience in their encounters with others. Human dignity, thus, means the rejection of all forms of humiliation. As Hamelink advocates, the deployment of communication for survival in dignity requires the engagement of learning the art of non-humiliating conduct across cultures.

SCIENCE, RISK AND MISINFORMATION

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Such mobilising power held by the media to transform an obscure scenario of fear to a scenario of hope is what turns it into an agent for social change during the Covid-era and in a world to come post-pandemic where social relations are still to re-accommodate, recreate and become resilient.

A possible form of dignified communication in a post-corona world could emerge from the location where people live their lives, i.e. the 'locality' (ibid: 224). By locality he means the geographical and psychological place that shapes our daily environment. It is in the local places where we manifest our existence that are concurrently affected by global flows of goods, finance information and narratives.

The use of communication for human survival in dignity entails social engagement, as well as notions of locality and non-humiliating forms. Local communities can reach beyond their surrounding borders, engage and network with other localities so as to develop a counterbalancing power and shared dignified perceptions.

In the current pandemic, the endeavour of mobilising hopeful modalities and sensitive forms of communication should be grounded in the understanding that media can act as agents for collective responsibility. Such a cooperative sense of commitment and devoir – of duty and responsibility – would preferably come from media initiatives locally embedded that grant people the opportunity to address their angst, uneasiness, uphold constructive dialogue and breed joint responsibility without nurturing the fears of the unknown and strangeness and turning almost unbearable risks into bearable ones.

Note

1 The term 'social fabric' embraces numerous complex and interrelated phenomena, including demographic and economic factors, behavioural issues, social institutions, social organisations, and social networks, or relationships amongst people. The social fabric is underpinned by people's beliefs and sentiments, including a sense of belonging and identification with a particular social unit (Atkinson et al. 2016)

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FURTHER INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES FACING MEDIA

Zhan Zhang

From domestic epidemic to world pandemic: News coverage about Covid-19 in China

This paper analyses Covid-19 related news reports from Chinese media between January and June 2020. By combing news published through legacy media outlets and social media channels, this paper offers an overview of how the Chinese media has been communicating the crisis with its domestic public. It argues that, in a particularly mysterious and mistrustful period of the Covid-19 outbreak, the early information vacuum and especially the silencing of local media coverage resulted in the public being unprepared and unaware of the contagion. Different media strategies were applied immediately in late January and February 2020 to rebuild the Chinese public's trust, with a significant emphasis on crisis resolution and institutional performance. The 'blame game' between China and America from March 2020 further unified the Chinese public sphere to be in line with the state media in promoting a patriotic online campaign, faithfully supporting the Chinese government and forcefully accusing the Trump administration.

Key words: Covid-19, China, news coverage, crisis, information management

Introduction

At the time of writing (August 2020), the unprecedented world pandemic of Covid-19 has caused around 25 million infected cases and taken away more than 850,000 lives. The outbreak of the virus in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei province, drew worldwide media attention to China. Since the escalated trade war from 2017 has already strained US-China relations, the coronavirus and various conspiracy theories generated around it pushed the

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bilateral relation into a particularly mistrustful and combative period. The intensifying of the diplomatic conflicts between the two great powers brought uncertainties to many fields threatening the stability of the world economy and the geopolitical balance.

In the time of pandemic or any form of crisis, accurate information is essential to facilitate public needs, especially the decision-making process for crisis management. Vukajlovic et al. (2019) argue that both the lack of information and the information overload negatively impact on the effectiveness of the crisis resolution. Therefore, having the right information, in the right place, at the right time, in the right form, and of sufficient completeness requires accurate information release and a whole set of information management (Jones 2007). Having arguably one of the most centralised and restrictive media systems globally, information management in China has a renowned sophisticated internal mechanism in maintaining a close state-media relationship. Considering the commercial reform and digital revolution of the entire media industry, scholars have been discussing how the complex censorship system in China has persisted, or further strengthened under Xi's leadership in the new environment with expanded social media networks (Tai 2014; Guan 2019; Esarey and Xiao 2011).

The delayed information release about Covid-19, the transparency of the Chinese government's handling of the situation and the Chinese media's performance have been criticised a lot by international media. Studies emerged fast in discussing how the legacy media reports in China lagged behind the development of Covid-19 in the early phase (Liu et al. 2020) and how the Chinese state-backed outlets tried to reach international social media users for Covid-19 news (Rebello et al. 2020). This paper puts together the legacy news reports and news circulated on social media platforms in China from January to June 2020 to examine the different information management phases of leading Chinese media outlets. It offers an overview of how the Chinese media has been communicating the crisis with its domestic public through different channels. It tries to reflect the emerging features of news practices in China within the central-local power structure in a diverse digital environment, where social media has already become the most influential channel to connect the government to the general public.

Moreover, the tight information control through content filtering and nurtured loyal agents at the local level has also changed the Chinese state's official and self-censorship instruments in a subtle and powerful way. During the Covid-19 crisis, strategic propaganda through social media and heated public patriotism became particularly prominent after the Trump administration blamed Beijing for the pandemic. WeChat public accounts, for example,

as the fastest and most interactive media channel, have been filled with news of the scathing criticisms, promoting an online campaign in support of the Chinese government and attacking the Trump administration.

The paper argues that, in a particularly mysterious and mistrustful period of the Covid-19 outbreak, the missing information (especially from Wuhan local media) in December 2019 suggested that the Chinese administrations (especially Wuhan local health authorities) were unprepared for the information gathering and dissemination tasks required for the effective handling of the crisis (see, for background, Coombs 1999). Different media strategies were applied immediately in late January and February to rebuild the Chinese public's trust in the media and the government. A significant emphasis on crisis resolution and institutional performance is recorded during this phase to ease the public panic. Between March and June, the 'blame game' between China and the United States further unified the public sphere to be in line with the state media in promoting a patriotic campaign online. Tensions continued to escalate as the confrontation between Washington and Beijing intensified.

Method

This paper analyses related news articles in three different categories:

1) news items published by leading Chinese state media and the most popular regional media (including those in Wuhan) from 31 December 2019 to 20 January 2020;

2) news items related to Covid-19 (through keyword search of 新冠病毒 and 新冠疫情) from 56 available Chinese news sources on the Factiva database (including national news services, leading national newspapers and municipal daily newspapers) between January and June 2020. News topic and subject analysis was provided in order to understand the primary trend of the mainstream media performance about Covid-19 in China;

3) all news stories published by the WeChat public account of the *People's Daily* from March 2020 to June 2020, as it has been ranked No.1 for news content distribution among all WeChat public accounts in China (GSdata 2019). News topic analysis and sentiment analysis were applied.

Findings and discussions
Questioning the information delay: The local-central power struggle

The first official announcement about the 'Wuhan unknown pneumonia' was published by the Wuhan Health Commission online on the last day of December 2019. During the entire month, when patients suffering from fever and viral pneumonia began

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to present at hospitals in Wuhan, it received almost no Chinese news media coverage. However, the Wuhan Health Commission did send an internal letter urging local hospitals to trace and report the 'pneumonia with unknown etiology' but only doctors were involved in this discussion – not patients, nor the public.

A social media storm sparked off the night before this official announcement when Wuhan doctors, including Li Wenliang, posted messages in private WeChat groups about the return of a SARS-type virus, and the screenshot of the message disseminated quickly as rumours about 'the coming back of SARS'. Consequently, when Chinese media began to report about the Wuhan Health Commission announcement, one of the focuses of the information releases was to stop SARS rumours and avoid public panic. On the one hand, the local authority repeatedly stated that 'no evidence was found for significant people-to-people contact contagion' (Wuhan Health Commission 2019). On the other hand, those doctor-whistleblowers were represented by the media as 'rumour generators', and follow-up news stories focused on how the Wuhan local police were investigating them (*Beijing News Newspaper* 2020).

Interestingly enough, most of the news coverage about the official announcement, the police investigation, the situation of Huanan seafood market and local hospitals in Wuhan, and the arrival of the first group of experts from the National Health Commission were not reported by any of the local media in Wuhan. Instead, they were all reported by state media such as China Central Television (*CCTV News* 2019) or news organisations from other cities like the *Beijing News Newspaper* (Zhang et al. 2020) and *Jiemian News* (2020) from Shanghai. This highlighted one of China's particular news practices, namely 'cross-regional reports' or 'cross-regional collaborations'. Accordingly, journalists from one province report news stories or share news sources with journalists in another province to bypass pre-publication censorship by local officials (Repnikova 2017).

According to the 'centralised media control' theory about Chinese media studies, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) sets the propaganda rules for nation-wide media, including the selection of news topics, the manner of coverage and prioritising national interests over all other issues (Brady 2006; He 2004). However, sometimes the local authority exercises much more control over real news practice than the central authority. In the case of Covid-19 in Wuhan, it was not until 6 January 2020 that the topic finally appeared on the front page of a best-selling Wuhan local newspaper, the *Chutian Metropolitan Newspaper* (2020a), pointing out the fact that '59 suspicious cases were not SARS-like pneumonia'. Nevertheless, this topic soon faded away as

the 'two sessions' (the Hubei Provincial People's Congress and the Hubei Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) began on 11 January 2020. All the local media's attention concentrated on these political events. During the five days of the 'two sessions', the Wuhan Health Commission reported no new cases, and the local media's attention waned further. However, during these days, the highest-level Public Health Emergency Response was activated internally by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) as an urgent response from the central government, and a second national expert team was sent to Wuhan.

On 19 January 2020, the *Chutian Metropolitan Newspaper* (2020b) carried a front-page report about a mass banquet for 40,000 families held in Wuhan on the previous day which was organised to demonstrate community harmony in welcoming the Chinese New Year. Until then, the spreading of Covid-19 in Wuhan was never a priority topic in the local media. News stories from national or other regional media also reported Covid-19 as an unknown virus that needed further investigation, and it was under reasonable control in the hands of the experts and government. The continuous focus on the 'majority have only mild-symptoms' and 'the virus is not identified to be contagious among people' successfully shifted the public's attention.

On 20 January 2020, the Chinese President Xi published his first public comment on 'resolutely containing the virus' (Xinhua News 2020a). More importantly, one of the most admired Chinese respiratory experts, Zhong Nanshan,[1] spoke to the public through an interview by the state broadcaster that the coronavirus was highly contagious and could spread via person-to-person transmission (*CCTV News* 2020). This top-down message finally turned the entire public awareness of Covid-19 in the nation upside-down.

Three weeks passed after the publication of the first official announcement. This turning point of information release on 20 January 2020 came 10 days after the beginning of the *Chunyun*. This is when Chinese people head home to celebrate the festival with their families, triggering the most massive human migration on the planet involving over 3 billion passenger journeys. Only from this moment on, all media outlets – national, regional and local – began to cover Covid-19 extensively. Three days later, Wuhan decided to lock down completely.

The Chinese media mandate: Serving the party or serving the public?

In the following weeks after 20 January 2020, both legacy and social media in China gave much space to reporting the surge of patients in Wuhan, the bottleneck situation of medical resources

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and the nation-wide support for Wuhan. Taking an overview of the number of news articles from the 56 available Chinese news sources on the Factiva database, besides 16 news articles in January recorded after 24 January 2020, Covid-19 news items increased in February and March until they reached a peak in April 2020 (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Number of Covid-related Chinese news articles available on Factiva
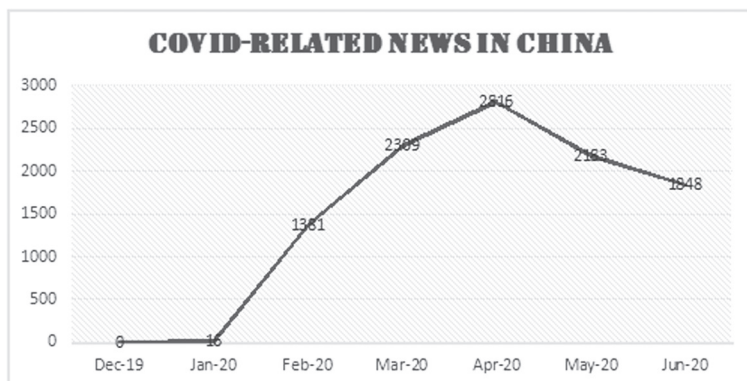
The result is complied with keyword search of Covid (新冠病毒/新冠疫情) among 54 available Chinese news source from mainland China. The time period is set from 1 December 2019 to 1 June 2020

The changing focus of news topics may help explain the Chinese media's stance in managing the information flow during the epidemic (see Table 1.). While topics related to the Covid-19 outbreak itself (such as 'outbreaks/epidemics' and 'novel coronaviruses') always remain at the top, several changes need to be highlighted here:

1) reports on 'regulation/government policy' appeared immediately in late January;

2) topics relating to 'output/production' stood out in February, demonstrating the efforts made by the government and the people in combating the severe situation;

3) a focus on 'international relations' appeared prominently in February. It began to gain more importance after the blame shift started in late March and until June (moving in ranking from 7 to 3);

4) issues relating to 'domestic politics' appeared as early as February (ranking no. 9), and then became as important as 'international relations' between April and June;[2]

5) economic news or topics about the economic impact of Covid on Chinese society have not been a key subject. Only in April, the subject of 'earnings' appeared, and in June, 'economic news' emerged.

Table 1. The Top 10 News topics and subjects of mainstream Chinese media about COVID-19 (January-June 2020)

	01/2020	02/2020	03/2020	04/2020	05/2020	06/2020
Top 1.	Outbreaks/epidemics	Outbreaks/epidemics	Novel coronaviruses	Outbreaks/epidemics	Novel coronaviruses	Novel coronaviruses
Top 2.	Novel coronaviruses	Novel coronaviruses	Outbreaks/epidemics	Novel coronaviruses	Outbreaks/epidemics	Outbreaks/epidemics
Top 3.	Infectious disease	Respiratory tract disease	Respiratory tract disease	International relations	Domestic politics	International relations
Top 4.	Respiratory tract disease	Infectious disease	Output/production	Domestic politics	International relations	Respiratory tract disease
Top 5.	Medical research	Output/production	Medical research	Respiratory tract disease	Medical research	Domestic politics
Top 6.	Regulation/Government policy	Medical research	Infectious disease	Medical research	Output/production	Output/production
Top 7.	Regulatory bodies	Medical conditions	International relations	Output/production	Poverty	Medical research
Top 8.	Product/consumer safety	Regulation/Government policy	Sports	Earnings	Soccer	Infectious disease
Top 9.	Corporate social responsibility	Domestic politics	Domestic politics	Regulation/Government policy	Regulation/Government policy	Trade wars
Top 10.	Product shortage	International relations	Olympics	Immunizations	Earnings	Economic news

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Zhan Zhang   Unlike the Western media which tends to offer diversified voices to represent different communities of the society, Chinese media always aims to construct a unity of voices and stances in order to provide its audience the one version that is in line with the party and the government (Zhang et al. 2019). In a crisis such as Covid-19, this 'unity of voices' became even more important as it needed to mobilise the entire population. This explains why subjects like 'regulation/government policy' stood out immediately in late January following the Wuhan lockdown. It also explains why topics such as 'output/production' became prominent in February, offering stories about volunteer doctors from different regions who flew to Wuhan to support local hospitals, the progress of the construction of special Covid-19 field hospitals to tight deadlines and the all-round efforts made by the administrations, the professionals and ordinary citizens. These media stories went into overdrive with positive and constructive coverage highlighting the effectiveness and sacrifice of the government and the people, insisting that efforts to combat the disease had united the whole of Chinese society.

However, the delayed and misleading information release during the first three weeks in January 2020 about the contagion and the severity of infections in Wuhan had a very negative impact on the public's trust in the media and government. Positive stories may help reduce tensions and bring hope to the public somehow, but they could not answer questions such as 'What is the real situation now?', 'Why was there the information delay?' and 'Why should the public not know more about the virus?' The mainstream Chinese media was in a very challenging situation at this time as it had to repair the growing mistrust from the public. Three media strategies were applied immediately to rebuild accountability:

1. *Data visualisations, answering the question 'What is the real situation now?'*
One day after 20 January 2020, the first epidemic map with real-time reported Covid-19 cases went online through *Dingxiang Doctor*, a new media platform established in 2012 to fight medical rumours with facts provided by experts. In the following days, similar epidemic maps appeared on different online platforms, including *Ali-Health* (from Alibaba), *Tencent-News*, *Sina-Weibo* and online news portals of legacy media including *Beijing News Newspaper*, *Caixin Media*, and *ifeng news-Phoenix TV*.

These real-time epidemic maps acquire and share different data to guide users for different usage and to differentiate from each other. For example, the *Beijing News Newspaper* collaborated with *Baidu Map* by adding a 'nearby' function on their epidemic map, where the users could access information about the 'residence zones' where those who tested-positive cases live. Without

disclosing further details of the patients, such geographic location information helped the users understand the real-time situation in his/her neighborhood to avoid going to places of higher risks. *CCTV News*, together with *Sogou Search Engine* promoted the function of 'public transportation search' on their epidemic map, where the users could check whether any passengers during the same flight, train ride, or bus ride tested positive in the past days. Therefore, the users could then understand whether they should follow stricter quarantine rules at home without passing the virus to their families and report to their communities at the earliest possible time.

2. *Investigative journalism, answering the question 'Why was there the delay?'*

The space for investigative journalism in China has shrunk in recent years due to the financial challenges, digital media technologies and a tightened media environment (Svensson 2017). However, during the Covid-19 outbreak, some investigative journalists regained recognition from the general public and elite society and even official support from the central authorities. One of the best examples is *Caixin Media*, a Beijing-based media group founded in 2010 as a leading investigative journalism outlet with a primary focus on financial news. *Caixin Media* was one of the first Chinese media to introduce a paywall for online subscriptions, and it decided to offer free access to the public of its feature stories on coronavirus during the crisis.

On 1 February 2020, thirty-seven journalists from *Caixin* published four detailed front-page stories, comprising a total of 40,000 words (*Caixin Weekly* 2020), bringing critical observation on four aspects: 1) how the crisis unfolded due to the local Wuhan authorities' delays in revealing information; 2) the numbers of suspicious cases who died without testing positive in Wuhan; 3) the mysterious origin of the coronavirus; and 4) the global response to China's effort. By offering a considerable number of in-depth stories, *Caixin* brought its readers close to citizens in Wuhan who are facing life and death challenges in fighting the coronavirus. Moreover, *Caixin* led protests against the local health commission and local authorities over their denial of contagion for weeks. Such efforts from *Caixin*, together with other investigative reports from *Beijing News Newspaper*, *Beijing Youth Newspaper*, *Life-weekly Magazine*, brought calls for the replacement of the chief members of local government and health commissions in early February.

Responding to the central authorities' own need for targeting local officials who are responsible for releasing information about the outbreak of Covid-19, investigative journalism was encouraged to play its watchdog role. Like the 'cross-regional report' in early January, *Caixin*'s editorial team could also bypass the pre-publication censorship from local officials in Wuhan. The criticism

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it initiated not only shifted the public blame to the local authorities but also reconnected the public to *Caixin*'s professional standards and credibility in disclosing social problems. When all kinds of information began to flood into the public sphere after 20 January 2020, investigative journalism provided a reliable information channel in dealing with public confusion. It successfully managed the public anxiety and separated the central authorities from the blame.

3. *The voice of experts, answering the question 'What should the public know more about now?'*

Because the first warning of the contagious nature of Covid-19 came from the respected figure of Zhong Nanshan, his words and those of other medical experts were regularly referenced in news reports about the epidemic in China. Like investigative journalism, the Chinese media had to enlarge the space for these trusted experts to regain the trust of the general public and reframe the authentic 'unity of voice'.

For example, among the Chinese news items collected on the Factiva database during the first month after 20 January 2020, Zhong's name alone appears 773 times, with 113 articles mentioning his name in the headline. A keyword map shows three main focuses out of these headlines (see Figure 2.): 1) the estimation of Zhong about the arrival of the turning point of the epidemic in China; 2) the medicines that have been effectively applied in the treatment against coronavirus; and 3) the long incubation time of the virus and how to deal with public panic.

Figure 2. Keywords map of news titles containing the name of Zhong on Factiva (20 January 2020-20 February 2020)

Besides this 'Zhong Nanshan phenomenon' (Zhou, 2020), another doctor's name was also dominant in the Chinese media sphere since the beginning of the outbreak, the whistleblower Li Wenliang. Li

began to have Covid-19 symptoms on 10 January 2020 and was very soon hospitalised. During his stay in the hospital, he gave about ten media interviews including with *Caixin*, *Beijing News Newspaper*, *South Metropolis Daily*, *China News Weekly*, and *The New York Times*. He also updated his health situation through his own Weibo account since many Chinese netizens began to follow his social media account after his first warning of the contagion was proven to be true after 20 January 2020. Such public concern and sympathy about his sickness went wild during the early morning of 7 February 2020 when he passed away. An official investigation about his case was initiated immediately to ease the public anger (Xinhua News 2020b). News coverage about Li continued till June 2020, following the investigation results that led to the repeal of the early penalty (for SARS's rumour in December 2019) with an official apology sent to his family in March, and several national prizes awarded to him in the later months.

Social media and public sentiment: The accelerated patriotic campaign
According to Digital 2020, until February 2020, active social media users in China exceeded 1.04 billion (Hootsuite 2020). The Chinese social media platform WeChat, for example, according to the first quarter industry report of Tencent 2020, reached 1.2 billion monthly active users (*Sohu News* 2020). This explains why all mainstream news media in China now have a '2W (WeChat & Weibo)+1A (App) model' for content distribution, with priority being given to mobile portals, and especially the social media channels.

The public account of *People's Daily* on WeChat (*People's Daily* WeChat hereafter) alone attracts over 26 million followers (*Sina News* 2019) and it has been ranked No.1 for news content distribution among all WeChat public accounts in China (GSdata 2019). Thanks to the WeChat group, the Wuhan doctors were able to spread the message about the coronavirus outbreak quickly. Moreover, during the entire epidemic, this virtual network of over one billion users became the leading publication platform for PGC and UGC targeting different online communities and interest groups.

After the epicenter of Covid-19 shifted outside China from late February, Chinese news coverage of the pandemic moved into a new phase. After Trump described Covid-19 as the 'Chinese virus' more than 20 times between 16 March 2020 and 30 March 2020 (Factbase 2020), the 'one-voice' Chinese media became even more unified. Taking *People's Daily* WeChat as the best example, two clear communication strategies are identified when observing how the Chinese media report Covid-19 from a domestic epidemic to a global pandemic through social media channels.

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A clear and enhanced focus targeting the United States
The first news article *People's Daily* WeChat published about the United States during Covid-19 pandemic was on 18 February 2020, pointing out that the promised aid of $100 millions for infected countries from Washington was never sent, and that the White House was even planning to cut its annual budget to the World Health Organisation (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020a). When Covid-19 began to spread fast in different countries in Asia and Europe in February, the only 'travel warning' published by *People's Daily* WeChat was about limiting travels to America due to the 'unfair treatment' Chinese tourists may encounter (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020b).

When the numbers of Covid-19 cases in Europe began to surge in March, *People's Daily* WeChat reported only 21 news items (17 stories about Italy, two about the United Kingdom, one about Germany and Serbia; half of these news items were about the medical aid and especially the expert team China sent to Italy). Instead, many more news articles were published about the United States, especially after 16 March 2020. Responding to the use of the 'Chinese virus' smear by Trump, 35 news stories emerged during the last two weeks from *People's Daily* WeChat (74 per cent of the entire month), clearly quoting the spokesman from the Chinese Foreign Ministry who fiercely argued against the use of the term (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020c).

From then on, the 'blame-game' between the two countries intensified. And the focus was directed almost entirely to the Covid-19 outbreak in America and the White House's response. Between April and June, *People's Daily* WeChat publishes 17-18 news items daily, with an average of 14-16 per cent international news. However, news about America occupied 72.8 per cent of all the international news in April, 80 per cent in May, and 81 per cent in June (see Table 2.).

Table 2. No. of published news through WeChat public account of *People's Daily*

	Total News Items	International News	News about the U.S.
March 2020	545	96	47
April 2020	526	140	102
May 2020	557	135	108
June 2020	519	74	60

Harsher stance and patriotic sentiments
Besides daily updates about Covid-19 infections highlighting the worsening situation in the United States through data visualisations (see Figure 3. as an example), the fierce reaction against Trump's

attacks on China over Covid continued on *People's Daily* WeChat for almost two months until mid-May. Whenever Trump or Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised China, the official response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry would be immediately reported through *People's Daily* WeChat. For example, 'The Chinese government urges American correspondents to cover the truth of Covid-19' (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020d), 'Investigation into the Wuhan Institute of Virology' (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020e) and 'Punishing China for Covid-19' (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020f) were some of these headlines.

Figure 3. Sample of Covid infected case report, People's Daily WeChat public account (1 June 2020)

What is important to note here is that most of these articles were *responses* to Trump's accusations. But, over time these official responses became increasingly harsh, pointing out Trump's 'irresponsible behaviour' (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020g).

People's Daily WeChat also responds a lot to mainstream American media, especially elite news outlets like *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and CNN. On the one hand, it criticises those media for representing China negatively (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020h) while it also directly quotes those media when they publish comments critical of Trump (*People's Daily* WeChat 2020i). What is more, *People's Daily* WeChat offers reactions from members of the American elite (such as former President Barack Obama and Bill Gates), the general public and Chinese residents in America to present a broad picture of Trump's troubles during his presidential campaign. As one of the commentaries concluded, there are three main storylines in the Trump administration's 'scapegoat China' rhetoric: 1) to condemn China for covering

the truth on what led to the Covid-19 outbreak; 2) to criticise Democrats whose attitude towards China has been weak; 3) to further support the Republicans' trade embargoes on China and blame Covid-19 on China (Yan 2020).

In addition, *People's Daily* WeChat displays up to 20 comments under each article, deliberately choosing the comments that are patriotically supporting China, criticising Trump, and questioning the leading role of the United States in the world (see Figure 4. as an example). By combining official news on WeChat with the selected comments, Chinese media intensified its unified voice.

Figure 4. Screenshots of samples of displayed comments on People's Daily WeChat following the news 'Trump calls Covid-19 the "Chinese Virus"', while WHO says we didn't call H1N1 "North American flu"' on 19 March 2020. Translated by the author.

薄荷绿	29.4k	(WHO) makes sense!
说得好!		
Nutcracker waltz	25.9k	Trump makes no sense… even children understood the virus is the enemy of the humankind
特朗普这样搞真的就没意思了。。。小孩子都懂病毒才是是人类的公敌啊		
幸福像花儿	22.8k	WHO understands well, I'm relieved
看到世卫是这么明白人 我就放心了		
跃 翔	19.8k	It's not Trump doesn't understand, he did it on purpose. Disgusting!
特朗普不是不懂,而是故意! 险恶用心令人不齿!		
王海浪	17.8k	Being the president of such a big nation, he is so irresponsible in his words
这么大的国家总统,居然说话这么不负责任		
wang	11.0k	WHO is objective and correct, Trump is indiscreet
世卫组织是客观的正确的 特朗普是不明智的		
LxT	8752	The virus is the real enemy of humankind
病毒是人类共同的敌人		
Andy	7976	Without common knowledge and logic, how could he lead America?
没有常识和正常逻辑,不知道如何能带领好美国		
丽丽	7711	As a president, how could he speak in such irresponsible way?
作为一国总统,说话可以这么不负责任吗?		
ice袁媛	7553	There are no boundaries for the virus, as a leader, he should never speak that way. Don't forget what your own people really need for now and what you can do for them.
病毒无国界,作为国家领导人,不该说那么不负责任的话! 面对疫情,别忘了你们家的老百姓需要的是什么,你能给他们什么? 作为一个家长只会对别人家说三道四妄加评论,自己家孩子哇哇哭都不管,不称职呀		
赋歪	6287	Clear, (WHO) makes sense!
明白人,说的在理!		
跳跳虎	5605	The fairness is in people's heart. Keep fighting, China!
公道自在人心,中国加油!		
Miss AN	5344	Mr. Trump, you destroy others without benefiting yourself!
老特啊,损人不利己!!		
子豪	4821	Virus has no boundaries, but the fairness is in people's heart
病毒没有国界,公道自在人心!		
上善若水	4655	Such bullshit will never gain hearts and minds
公道在人间,胡言乱语不得人心		
郝淇	4455	Finally someone stands out and speak for the objectivity
终于有人出来说句公道话了		
绿竹	4105	What you don't want for yourself, don't give to others!
己所不欲,勿施于人!		

Conclusion

The proper use of information channels is essential in any public health crisis (Tiong 2004; Pearson 1998). Since epidemics far exceed most ordinary people's knowledge, news coverage is the most crucial information source for the public (Schwitzer et al. 2005). Due to the strict government controls over information in China and especially the local-central power structure, the early information vacuum during the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, and especially the silencing of local media coverage, resulted in the public being unprepared and unaware of the potential danger of the virus. Without systematic information management connecting the local public health departments to the central government in providing timely response to the crisis, the Chinese media lagged behind the real-time developments of the virus. It failed to play its 'forewarning function' and monitor the crisis closely during the initial phase.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic was confirmed on 20 January 2020, the Chinese media began both to provide extensive information and monitor the public's reaction.

Yet there was a danger that such an overload of information could lead to adverse psychological effects in the society (Wang et al. 2019) or result in mass communication fatigue (Collinson et al. 2015). Therefore, the Chinese media tried to serve both the party and the public strategically to rebuild trust. Mobile technology and data visualisations were used to provide accurate information; investigative journalism highlighted the failures of local authorities; and reliable experts were on hand to challenge any unsubstantiated rumour. In the end, the Chinese media was able to present a 'united voice' about the Covid-19 outbreak to its people and the outside world, affirming that China was the first country to suffer the virus while also asserting the nation's confidence in containing the virus.

When the Trump administration initiated the 'blame game' and the tension escalated between America and China from March 2020, the Chinese media could quickly stir patriotic sentiments in combating Covid-19. The full use of social media channels together with the filtered comments helped the Chinese state media reinforce its narrative against American accusations and conspiracy theories. The news items from *People's Daily* WeChat collated here showed not only a significant focus on the United States but also a harsh and unyielding attitude in defending China's contribution to upholding regional and global public health security.

Chinese nationalism is largely seen as an instrument used by the Chinese government to either deflect criticism of domestic problems or signal its resolve in diplomatic relations (Zhao 2004). The rise of nationalism online and the patriotic social media campaign during

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Covid-19 proved to be in line with these two purposes: 1) it helped shift public attention away from the accusations about information mismanagement at the start of the outbreak; 2) while the Chinese state media constantly stress that 'collaboration is the only right choice for the US-China relations' (Zheng 2020), it united the voices and opinions online behind China in its conflicts with America.

Notes

[1] Dr Zhong made his name during the SARS outbreak in 2003, and led the national health commission team investigating the Wuhan outbreak before this interview

[2] News about Hong Kong appeared mostly under the topic of 'domestic politics', focusing on the different Covid-19 measurements the Hong Kong administration applied and the lives of local citizens facing the pandemic's challenges. News about the protests as opposition to the proposed extradition bill, the Hong Kong national security law, and the legitimacy crisis of Hong Kong authorities was discussed intensively among Chinese media, clearly stating that 'Hong Kong's affairs are all China's domestic affairs', and 'no other countries have the right to interfere'. However, since this paper's main keywords search were only about Covid-19, not much news about these topics was recorded

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Arabic narratives: A study of Gulf Press coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic

Popular discourses about the interconnectedness of the world tend to focus on the movements of goods and capital across national borders and, consequently, this perspective tends to dominate analyses and understanding of globalisation. From February 2020 to date, however, the Covid-19 pandemic that engulfed the world has taken centre stage and is reshaping perspectives on the discourse about the interconnectedness of the world. From legacy to social media, there is no topic as prominent as Covid-19. The same borderlessness of the world that eased movements of goods and capital has enabled free movement of illnesses and pandemics in a way that brings back the searchlight on previous mythologies about globalisation. This paper employs content analysis in studying trends and patterns of Arabic Gulf Press coverage of the pandemic. In particular, the paper aims to provide insight into why, even though the five Gulf countries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE) share similar political and cultural identities rooted in Arab and Islamic values, profound differences in inclinations emerge in both the patterns and trends of their coverage of Covid-19. The economically endowed Al Ittihad, *of the UAE, epitomises the mainstream, conformist reporting culture of Gulf Press while* Alrai *of Kuwait stands out as an outlier in a unique culture of interrogation of issues not often seen among most newspapers in the region.*

Key words: Arabic Gulf press, Covid-19, content analysis, cultural identities

The globalisation of contemporary illnesses
If myth is understood as a way of understanding or interpreting sets of ideas about world history, events, society and culture including the process of its production then we can see that it is not value free.

That informs why in her classic critique of globalisation Marjorie Ferguson (1999) attempted to unpack the dominant notion of globalisation as a myth predicated on capitalist modernity and its desire for market expansion. All other supportive policies that would create the enabling environment for such expansion and creation of markets such as deregulation, competition, economic and political liberalisation etc are propagated as beneficial to everyone. The obvious power relations inherent in the globalisation project are obfuscated in the classifying narrative and consequently it is exposed as mere myth.

The mythologising narrative of globalisation propagates trade liberalisation and market expansion that would lead to capital flight. Such capital flight, as the argument goes, will impact on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of nation states so that there will be increased income for the poor and improved health facilities in countries of the world (see Swende et al. 2008; Jani et al. 2019; Woodward 2001; Dollar and Kraay 2004). Jani et al. summarised the trickle-down effect impact of globalisation by observing that:

> Increased GDP may also result in higher tax revenues and hence more resources for government. The higher disposable income may result in higher spending on nutrition and healthcare, which would result in better personal health levels. At the same time, increased resources with the government would result in better health across the country (2019: 211).

Nearly four decades since the ascendancy of the neo-liberal market system as a global social order the reality that has unfolded confirms Ferguson's description of the earlier narrative as a myth. The asymmetrical power relation in the globalisation project is evident as countries of the South remain at the margins. The new international division of labour that accompanied neo-liberal globalisation only turned their countries into locations for production of finished luxury goods sold in centres of global capital. Their countries are attractive for such production because of a cheap and de-unionised labour force. In addition, contrary to the mythology that globalisation has raised the GDP of countries and, therefore, additional investment in the health sector, the opposite unfolded in most countries in the neo-liberal globalisation orbit. Privatisation of social services including health, cuts in government spending in the sector and imposition of user fees have actually left citizens in most countries worse off. The speed of the modern transport system enabled by the removal of boundaries as part of deregulation policies has meant that infections and disease are also easily transported around the world within a short time as was seen with the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), in 2002-2009, the avian flu virus and now Covid-19.

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The policy of de-regulation that brought about the globalisation of the market social order has extended to the media sector. The global media have become channels for exporting and propagating lifestyles that promotes that social order. Development in technology that brought about internet and social media has expanded the channels for the advertising and marketing of consumer goods and lifestyle in a lopsided way, from centres of global capital to the rest of the world. One of the outcomes is the globalisation of lifestyle ailments such as obesity and diabetes. Similarly, according to Lee:

> The shift in the tobacco pandemic to the developing world has been clearly driven by the tobacco industry. It is estimated that, by 2030, 70% of all tobacco-related deaths (7 million annually) will occur in developing countries (Lee 2004: 157).

That Covid-19, which started in the city of Wuhan in China has, within three months of its manifestation, been exported and domesticated in almost every country of the world must be understood in the context of the very features of neo-liberal globalisation such as de-regulation and opened borders, fast and unhindered transportation of goods and services etc. As a result, what started as a health crisis has assumed pandemic proportions impacting on economy and society in a way that was not seen since the Great Depression.

The press in the Gulf region like their counterparts in the rest of the world have dwelt on the coverage of the pandemic as it relates especially to their individual countries. Even though the Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE) share common cultural values such as language, religion, fashion, food and music, press coverage of Covid-19 pandemic manifests some differences in trends and patterns. All these Arab states of the Gulf have relied on exports of global commodities, namely oil and gas, as well as tourism as the bedrock of their economies that made them among world's richest countries. Sales and demand for the precious commodities have been negatively affected since the outbreak of Covid-19 as industries and transport, including airplanes, have been grounded while tourists have stayed away as world airports have shut down.

The Gulf press: Insight into media development
What is known as the Gulf press (newspapers of the countries of the Gulf) is a development of the twentieth century starting in 1908 in the countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain and spreading to Oman, Qatar and the UAE in the early 1960s-1970s. Both the increase in literacy and development in printing and publishing technology facilitated a rapid rise in the number of published newspapers at the end of the twentieth century. By 2002

it is said that KSA alone had 176 news publications, Kuwait had 80, UAE had 72, Oman had 27 and Bahrain and Qatar 22 each. Arabic has been the dominant language of newspapers in the Gulf even though each of the six countries making up the Cooperation for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) now has influential newspapers published in English either as a sister publication of the main Arabic language paper or as a stand-alone independent publication.

Modern journalism in the Gulf is said to have gone through four phases. The first, pioneer, phase started with the birth of the *Journal of Kuwait* in 1929, only for the paper to move to Bahrain a year later. By 1929 a second paper called *Al-Bahrain* was launched and was especially noted for its voice in support of the United Kingdom against Nazi Germany (Al-Jaber and Gunther 2013).

The second phase, 1949-56, saw the emergence of several newspapers and magazines across the countries of the Gulf but especially in Bahrain. It was a period characterised by a rise in literacy and educational activities generally. The *Voice of Bahrain* was especially noted for recruiting highly educated writers who produced quality journalism that impacted on society by their commentary on issues of the day.

The third phase in the development of print news was the 1990s when print journalism was challenged by satellite television but especially the Cable News Network (CNN) and its coverage of the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq (Hachten and Scotton 2012; Sakr 2006). There are two crucial implications of this development for newspaper journalism in the Gulf. First, it gave journalists, but especially citizens, an insight into and awareness of the important role private media could play when they are detached from state ownership that has been the norm in the region. Second, it provided governments in the region, especially KSA, a pragmatic understanding of the need to re-think current state media monopoly in a way that would match the country's ambition and desire to tell its story to the world in a credible fashion. Such new awareness and consideration, according to Al-Jaber and Gunther, 'resulted in the spread of international Arab press and the emergence of celebrity newsmen whose views influenced the public opinion locally and abroad' (2013: 24).

In spite of such claims, though, Al-Jaber and Gunther have cited Freedom House (2009) to indicate that Kuwait ranked as first in the Gulf region in terms of freedom granted to the press and second among all Arab countries. We would note that the relative freedom of the Kuwaiti press is underpinned by the fact that the country has a more robust and, therefore, advanced political culture than most other countries in the region (Sager 2006; Parolin 2006). The country has a parliament of elected representatives that formulate policy for the monarchy.

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The Reporters Without Borders annual report for 2009, which summarizes the nature of the media in different countries, indicated that there were signs of evolution in freedom of the press in the Arabian Gulf region, but noted that the GCC states still have a long way to go (Al-Jaber and Gunther 2013: 25).

The fourth phase in the development of the press in the Gulf region is most largely technology-driven and starts with the arrival of broadband internet from 2005 to the present. The Gulf countries rank among those with the highest internet penetration in the world with Oman being the lowest at 78.5 per cent and the rest all well above 90 per cent. This situation has provided citizens in the region an opportunity to become active participants in news making and it also poses a challenge to state control of the media. The outcome is, among others, that most newspapers embraced convergence of their newsrooms and created online versions of their publications.

Arabic narratives on Covid-19

Like all other countries in the world, the Arab countries of the Gulf have not been spared the spread of Covid-19 and its devastating impact on economy and society. Consequently, Covid-19 has become a prominent story and subject of commentary in all newspapers across the region. Through a content analysis of the leading Arabic language newspapers in each country in the GCC, this study has attempted to gain insight into trends and patterns of coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study selected five newspapers: *Alittihad* in the UAE, *Akhbar-Alkhallej* in Bahrain, *Aljazirah* in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Alrai* in Kuwait, and *Oman* in the Sultanate of Oman. Even though Qatar is among the GCC countries, the current blockade imposed on it by the remaining GCC members has made it impossible for us to access any newspaper from the country. The study has analysed 14 copies of each newspaper from the month of April to July 2020. This period falls within the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the region.

The content analysis points to interesting trends and patterns in the coverage of Covid-19 among the Arabic language newspapers in the five countries. For instance, *Alittihad* of the UAE leads all others in terms of number of hard news items, with about 297 stories. Others are not too far behind: *Alrai* has 232, *Oman* has 193 and *Akhbar* of Bahrain has 187. *Aljazirah* of KSA has the lowest number of hard stories with 101 (Table 1). An explanation for this pattern has to do with the extent of media development as well as the economics of the newspaper organisations in these countries. *Alittihad*, as a local newspaper, gives a lot of attention to local issues and initiatives. At the same time, it is very well resourced so that it can also afford to source news from overseas about the pandemic. The paper is bigger than all other newspapers in the region at 32-

40 pages per issue. This accords it space to cover issues in a way other papers in the region cannot. The other papers have between 16-24 pages per issue. Generally, newspapers in the region have downsized editorial staff in the period before the pandemic but during the pandemic many experienced further downsizing as reporters were working remotely and others were laid off. *Alittihad* enjoyed more reportorial resources than the rest even at the time of the pandemic.

Another factor that explains the lower number of hard news items from *Aljzaeera* of KSA is that it has established a reputation for publishing more opinion pieces than hard news.

Table 1. Number of hard news items about Covid-19 published in each newspaper

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	297	187	101	232	193	1010
Average[1]	21.214	13.36	7.214	16.571	13.785	14.4288

The study also tried to establish if newspaper content was simply mundane accounts of rates of infection at home and abroad or attempted to create awareness and educate the public on prevention procedures such as use of hand sanitisers, social distancing, wearing of face mask, isolation and lockdown etc. Newspapers from KSA, UAE and Oman account for the biggest number of stories in that area with 24, 18 and 14 respectively. Both Bahrain and Kuwait had fewer than 10 awareness and prevention stories each.

In terms of population, KSA has 40 million people, UAE 12 million and Oman about 5 million, while Bahrain and Kuwait are city states with just about a million people each. Clearly, the bigger the population the bigger also the social responsibility on newspapers to create awareness. Generally, the awareness content in *Aljazirah* from KSA was in opinion columns and articles, compared to *Alittihad* in the UAE and *Oman* where they were mainly in features and news reports (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of news content that aims to create awareness and prevention procedures of Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	18	9	24	3	14	68
Average	1.28	0.643	1.714	0.214	1	0.9702

In terms of opinion articles related to Covid-19, *Aljazirah* had the biggest number (105), while newspapers in UAE and Bahrain are second and third with 63 and 58 (Table 3). It is thus clear that *Aljazeera* of KSA leads in creating a public sphere for the

expression of views and opinions on Covid-19. This reflects the high proportion (about 40 per cent) of opinion articles and columns in the newspaper.

Table 3. Number of opinion articles related to Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	63	58	105	27	27	280
Average	4.5	4.143	7.5	1.928	1.928	3.9998

The newspapers in UAE, Oman and Kuwait are the top three in terms of number of feature stories and in-depth reports related to Covid-19 with 27, 25, and 23 respectively, while KSA is fourth with 17 and, again, Bahrain the least with only 14 items (Table 4). It is possible that *Alittihad*, which is the biggest and best resourced newspaper, tends to deploy multiple reporting practices. *Aljazirah* and *Akhbar Alkhaleej* are small in terms of size and resources.

Table 4. Number of feature stories and in-depth reports published about Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	27	14	17	23	25	106
Average	1.928	1	1.214	1.642	1.785	2.2

The UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain newspapers cite state officials and world leaders as major sources of stories (72, 43 and 42 stories respectively; Table 5).[2] A possible explanation to this is that *Alittihad* is a government-owned newspaper and sees part of its role as to publicise the initiatives of government officials in covering the pandemic. Another possible reason is that *Alittihad*, due to its larger size, has more space that needs to be filled up. Consequently, it finds it convenient to resort to official sources at home and abroad. *Oman* and *Aljazirah* cited officials and world leaders the least, with 22 items each. *Oman* newspaper often combines all international stories about Covid-19 in one big piece with a headline. *Aljazirah*, as mentioned before, is more focused on local opinion pieces.

Table 5. Number of state officials and world leaders mentioned as major sources of information

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	73	42	22	46	22	205
Average	5.214	3	1.571	3.285	1.571	2.9282

Scientists are cited as major sources of news on Covid-19 by newspapers from UAE with 34, Oman with 22 and Bahrain with 20 (Table 6). Newspapers from Kuwait and KSA cite scientists least with 13 and 7 respectively. The closest ally of the United States in the

Gulf region is KSA and to the extent that the current US leadership is also not the strongest advocate of scientific wisdom on Covid-19, we could see a semblance of international political alliance playing out here. *Alittihad*, which leads the other newspapers in terms of the number of hard news, features and in-depth-reports, also leads other papers in terms of citing experts and scientists as the major source of information.

Table 6. Number of scientists and experts mentioned as major sources of information

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	34	20	6	13	21	94
Average	2.428	1.492	0.428	0.928	1.5	1.342

Three of the newspapers contained criticism of the World Health Organisation (Table 7). The United States government has been the strongest critic of WHO to the extent that it pulled out of the world body and withdrew its financial contribution that is needed to fund global research towards the invention of a vaccine against Covid-19. Even though UAE and KSA newspapers appear to be critics of WHO, the number of stories are not significant enough to make direct allusion to the political alliance between the Gulf countries and the Unites States on the matter relating to the organisation. Moreover, *Alittihad* and *Aljazirah*'s criticism of WHO appeared exclusively in opinion articles.

Table 7. Number of articles or news items that criticize role of WHO on Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	3	0	2	1	0	6
Average	0.214	0	0.14	0.071	0	0.085

Alrai of Kuwait is the only newspaper from the study with entries criticising the role of local governments on Covid-19, while the other papers have no entries at all (Table 8). This could relate to the existence of a more developed political culture in the country. First, Kuwait has an elected parliament that is known for robust debates on issues. Kuwait ranked 109 in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (https://rsf.org/en/kuwait), leading the other GCC countries which rank 130 and higher. *Alrai* belongs to a private enterprise (Alrai Media Group) which gives it more liberty compared to the other papers which are government-owned or owned by elites close to the government.

Table 8. Number of articles or news that criticize the role of the local government on Covid-19

	Alittihad UAE	Ak Alkh BH	Aljaz KSA	Alrai KW	Oman OM	Overall
Total	0	0	0	5	0	5
Average	0	0	0	0.357	0	0.1142

Conclusion

Since this first case of Covid-19 was reported in Wuhan, China, in February 2020 the virus has travelled the length and breadth of this world and assumed a pandemic proportion. The devastation Covid-19 has unleashed on nations means that what started as a health crisis has now extended to all sectors of society. In times such as these media are arguably more important as sources of news. This study has looked at the coverage of the Covid-19 by Arabic language newspapers of the Gulf countries. The countries are differently endowed in terms of both media development and political culture. In addition, the Gulf countries, even though they share similar cultural values, adopt different stands on some regional and international issues. All these factors shape differences in the newspapers' narratives on Covid-19.

Coming from a region that is economically endowed has meant that Arabic language newspapers in the Gulf have more funds at their disposal than their counterparts outside the region even at a time of turbulence experienced by the industry globally. This has reflected on their differential capacities in reporting hard news on Covid-19. But even among them, *Al Ittihad* of the UAE has a bigger financial muscle than the rest and, consequently, is bigger in size and number of pages as well as personnel. As a result, the newspaper is able to report more hard news than the rest which rely on opinion pieces. But even in its hard news coverage, *Al Ittihad*, as a policy, avoids asking strong critical questions that challenge the status quo at home and internationally.

Notes

[1] Average number of articles per day

[2] Note that we have only considered one major source per story in the analysis

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Balancing privacy and the right to information in Covid-19 reporting in Kenya

Reporting Covid-19 has been a complex issue. Journalists strive to balance observing the privacy of their sources and the right of the public to know (Bezanson 1992). The concept of privacy is complicated given the competing rights. In reporting Covid-19, the Kenyan media, while observing the public's right to know, risked encroaching on the privacy of individuals. This paper explores challenges of Kenyan media in tackling these issues. It argues that the greater good, which is the public's right to education and information, should prevail in perilous times such as this.

Key words: conflicting rights, right to privacy, access to information, Covid-19 reporting, Kenyan journalism

Introduction and background

How to tell the compelling Covid-19 story has been the challenge for journalism in Kenya. On the one hand reporters have a responsibility to the public as part of their information function. But on the other hand, there are cultural, legal and ethical considerations to be taken into account in telling the story. The outbreak of Covid-19, as long as the epicentre was miles away, and there were no local human faces to the story, posed little challenge; but that changed when the pandemic crossed the borders and the first case in the country was reported. The knowledge that the disease had no cure, and that it was a pandemic, created fear and the government scrambled to respond. The government launched educational programmes as its public response including the messages: wash hands, wear face masks, keep social distance and self-quarantine. Still, the public remained sceptical so long as the pandemic seemed to be occurring in a faraway place. Then local incidences started to occur. Those affected ranged from ordinary citizens to high society actors. The media challenge was how to make public information touching on high social actors, who did not wish to be associated with the pandemic.

Reporting Covid-19 posed a challenge to journalists in terms of whether such reporting would violate the privacy of the victims. With four daily newspapers, a few irregularly appearing periodicals, 85 local television channels and over 130 radio stations, Kenya, a nation of 50 million people, is a vibrant media market relative to neighbouring nations. With vibrancy comes competition. This, however, saddles journalists with potential danger of breaching the boundaries of culture, ethics and law. Discussions around death are often muted in Africa. Religious philosophers Idowu and Mbiti argue that Africans hold a strong belief of a divinity-centred life genesis. It is posited that death is a divinely controlled experience. Engagement in discussions of death could be construed as inviting the intervention of the ancestors to effect it (Idowu 1962; Mbiti 1980). Associating one with the pandemic could be construed as calling down ill will besides concerns with invasion of privacy.

The legal and ethical conundrum

The pandemic presented a conundrum. Education through the media, both print and electronic, provided a way to stem its spread. While pandemic-related stories broke out in December 2019, the reality of the infection did not hit Kenya until mid-March when the first national case was reported. The reporting, however, was shrouded in mystery. The fact that victims were not named heightened the sense of inscrutability around the disease. The disease infected people but those people, including the dying, remained invisible. The challenge for the media was simple: how to execute its information, surveillance and education functions (Wright 1960) without reference to human cases. The sources of information, in this case, patients, were private individuals whose privacy had to be respected.

Every day in the newsroom is a challenge to decide on whether to do a story and how a story is to be done. First is the decision to do a story. Such decisions are made on a collegial basis grounded on many factors. Galtung and Ruge (1965) provided a taxonomy of news values. Harcup (2004: 30-31) framed the 12 factors as: frequency of an event, the factor of the event's threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite events, reference to elite people, reference to persons and reference to negativity. But these guidelines vary from newsroom to newsroom depending on the level of professionalism. The more professional the newsroom the more objective the decision-making process. The unpredictability explains Bezanson's (1992: 1153) scepticism:

> Exploring the nature of news is a dangerous business. News is a phenomenon sheltered effectively against scrutiny by the mystique of the editorial process and embedded firmly in the disguise of editorial judgement. News judgments are made in

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confidence and in the quickened pace of publication schedules, based on intuitive judgment and competitive strategy. This process makes elusive, and perhaps impossible, the reduction of the concept of news to a clear and fixed definition (ibid).

Given this fluidity characteristic of the decision-making in the newsroom, there is no uniform objective structure of decision-making. Sigal noted that factors influencing decisions at the newsroom level include economic constraints, formal hierarchies and action channels, the division of labour and organisational conflict, bureaucratic politics, the publisher power and the idiosyncrasies of the individual journalist (Sigal 1973).

The Media Council of Kenya is the custodian of the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya. The little blue book is a product of a long drawn-out consultation by journalists and borrows from other jurisdictions. Kenyan journalists abide by the standards in the code and subject themselves to peer accountability in cases of violation. The process is housed and coordinated at the Media Council (MCK), the quasi-government corporate body set up for that purpose among others. The code requires journalists to be accurate and fair, to demonstrate integrity in the course of their work, and to exhibit accountability. It spells out how journalists are to treat their sources where such sources are confidential, addresses issues of confidentiality and tone in reporting. The guidelines also provide direction on privacy, intrusion into grief and shock, use of pictures and names, and also on treatment of innocent relatives and friends.

Privacy of sources is both an ethical and legal issue. Kenya's media is intensely regulated. The constitution, in Article 34, addresses freedom of the press and ownership models permissible under the law. In Article 31, the Constitution addresses the matter of privacy – but this is not limited to sources of news alone. It states that:

> Every person has the right to privacy, which includes the right not to have a) their person, home or property searched; … c) information relating to their family or private affairs unnecessarily required or revealed; or, d) the privacy of their communications infringed.

There are other legislative tools that address concerns around privacy. The Kenya Information and Communication Act, Section 8W prohibits accessing private information on an individual's computer. However, the Programming Code for Free to Air Radio and Television, Section 7.2.1 provides that: 'The right to privacy of individuals shall be respected. Intrusion into purely personal matters which have no bearing on the public interest is prohibited.'

As a legal concern, the right to privacy has been extensively debated and probably no voices are more prominent than Warren and Brandeis (1890). They essentially argue for the right to be left alone. Over a century later, not much has substantially changed from the argument that they laid out. Bezanson notes that Warren and Brandeis:

> believed that the press had overstepped 'the obvious bounds of propriety and of decency'. Gossip … [had] become a trade … That trade was pursued with 'industry' by the press to 'satisfy a prurient taste' and to 'occupy the indolent' with material that could only be 'procured by intrusion upon the domestic circle' for the benefit of the mass audience. The consequences… was the 'lowering of social standards and of morality' and an 'inventing [of] the relative importance of things,' especially by the 'ignorant and thoughtless' (Bezanson 1992: 1138).

Bezanson contends that 'freedoms protected by today's more individualistic idea of privacy are of two sorts: freedom from intrusiveness and freedom to achieve identity' (1992: 1144). Volokh suggests that what the privacy tort does is to bar the public dissemination of 'non-newsworthy' personal information that most people would find highly private (2000: 1055).

Reporting Covid-19 raises the challenge of balancing what may be considered media's intrusion into the privacy of the individual, the substance of Warren and Brandeis' essay, and continuing to play its educational role and satisfying the public interest. The concept of right appears absolute by definition and separate from aspirations or moral claims that emerge out of a specific contractual bargain (Jones 1994). If two 'rights' conflict, then emphasis has to be given to one right over the other. Rights emerge from the idea of societal principles such as freedom, equality and justice. In the current social context, there is heightened competition over attaining equal rights and obligations (Radoli 2011: 43). Determining which claim or right has a priority over the other is complex (Giovanella 2017; Alleinkoff 1987; Jones 1994; Xu and Wilson 2006). Giovanella (2017) demonstrates that determination of a dominant right must take into account a system of norms and policies. To put that into context, when an individual's private information is revealed, their identities and status risk exposure and public damage. On the other hand, citizens are put in danger if they cannot access the right information. Therefore, a delicate balancing act is needed.

Kenya recently passed the Right of Access to Information Act which gives individuals the right to access their personal information. The human rights organisation, Article 19, suggests that individuals' right to access information and maintain privacy may be withheld during a public health crisis, as decisions are made about eligibility

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for treatment, support, housing and other crucial services (Article 19 2020: 8). It can be argued that this applies in the case of Covid-19. Alleinkoff (1987) argues against balancing of claims and considers social contexts through which claims appear, rather than one claim overriding another in the quest to find a perfect equilibrium. He argues that in balancing one claim over another, there is a group likely to be inconvenienced, thus making part of their rights non-achievable. Realistically, a 'balancing operation' must be undertaken, with the final decision being the one that yields the best results (ibid: 943). In reporting Covid-19, individual rights must be weighed against disseminating information that would benefit a majority. Article 19 (2020) notes that in responding to the Covid-19 outbreak, many governments took steps to limit access to information related to the pandemic. The information was held within public agencies and touched on crucial areas of public interest. But some were held by individuals who had the experience which could benefit the public.

Access to information is crucial for ensuring public awareness and trust, fighting misinformation, ensuring accountability as well as developing and monitoring implementation of public policies aimed at solving the crisis. The balance of access to information, while observing the privacy of those who hold it and bringing it to the attention of the public for educational and informational purposes, provides ways of dealing with the Covid-19 situation. Bringing this information to the public can be categorised as a fundamental constituent of public interest. It gives the media and journalists a direct responsibility to gather, publish and pass on information deemed of public interest, such as Covid-19.

Journalists navigating conflicting rights
Journalists have the responsibility to gather and disseminate information that fulfils the public's right to know and to save life. Xu and Wilson (2006) demonstrate cases of conflicting rights, for instance, during the 2002 and 2003 outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The Kenya Access to Information Act (2016) establishes guidelines on the rights of individuals to information. Obonyo and Nyamboga (2011) note that the Kenyan media sector strictly enforces these guidelines. Aspects of privacy will also entail cases involving personal grief or shock, where media practitioners must ensure that inquiries are made with a sensitive discretion.

The pandemic is certainly a public interest story. It was essential, at its outbreak, that citizens access information on health directives such as maintaining social distance, sanitation and staying at home among others. Although the measures were crucial in flattening the infection curve, they remained a challenge in African communities used to socialising publicly. Moreover, journalists were unable to

follow up the human-interest aspects of the virus infections. In the Covid-19 story, public officials withheld the identity of patients. In fact, one of the few instances of identity being released came after two recovered patients went public on their own accord.

Analysis of newspaper coverage

Iraki (*Standard*, 26 July 2020) argued that disclosure of people dying of Covid-19 acted as a moment of truth to compel the public who had taken a *laissez-faire* approach to the pandemic to be more vigilant. He stressed the need for individuals to do more before a vaccine or cure was found.

The law of defamation often does not treat people equitably (Young 2019). The wealthy and famous are perceived in law to have more to lose than the obscure and less propertied individuals. It weighs damage to the individual based on, among other factors, the extent of their loss of reputation which is tied to their standing in society. In a similar way not every victim of Covid-19 had the same level of social rank. When the first case of Covid-19 was announced, an individual the Minister for Health said had travelled into the country was the first acknowledged victim, but that individual remained anonymous. As a developing country, travel by air in Kenya is associated with the middle and upper socio-economic classes. The first cases to be made public were of a young lady, Ivy Brenda Cherotich, and a young man simply known as Brian. But this was almost two weeks after the reporting of the first patient. The couple, Ivy and Brian, were paraded for the media as they took a call from the head of state live on television. This was an effort to put a human face to the pandemic, but it took two weeks to do so, and the human face was of ordinary young people.

The government had announced stringent measures that included quarantine for individuals who had arrived in the country from regions known to be at higher risk, or those who had been exposed to known cases. The dichotomy between the treatment of the rich and famous and the treatment of the less endowed in society was glaring. The former category was, for example, quarantined in five-star hotels that levied high daily rates. They were hidden from the press while in these secure premises. The latter were hosted in government facilities and makeshift structures with little comfort and with easy access for the media. It is these facilities that the media would visit to gather information on the pandemic. Occasionally, these quarantined individuals would protest at the conditions in which they were kept and so provided fodder for media reportage.

As the pandemic continued to spread the data released by the Ministry of Health focused on areas where the largest concentrations of the outbreak were, which were also the areas of comparative low

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income. The *Daily Nation*'s Dickens Wasonga reported the hasty, pre-dawn burial of a victim (*Daily Nation*, 13 April 2020). The family of the deceased was exposed to unnecessary grief and shock as the body was, soon after his death, wrapped in a body bag and thrown in a shallow grave. Too often, the victims, who also happened to be poor, were buried quickly and hastily. This was in keeping with the instructions from the Ministry of Health. But the treatment was seldom even. High society actors were treated differently, and the media coverage reflected this. The celebrities who contracted the disease and whose cases were publicised were few: a former politician who is now leading a church group in Nairobi, a socialite famed for his social media postings, a pilot – while five fairly well-known journalists conclude the list.

A high-profile political leader whose child may have succumbed to the pandemic had the manner and cause of death hushed up. Even the act of burial was different, visibly played out with prominent people attending. The preparation for the burial took much longer than the period prescribed by the Ministry of Health. The lowly in society were buried quickly with little fanfare, the low-level ceremonies particularly noticeable in a culture where burials are drawn-out practices. The rules of privacy applied to these relatively bottom-of-the-pyramid actors with less stringency.

A contrast between Kenya and other countries is starkly clear. Globally, high profile society actors who contracted the virus were openly reported in the media: from the President of Brazil to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom; film celebrities such as Tom Hanks and Idris Elba; sports personalities such as Usain Bolt among others; even in Africa, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Nigeria were comparatively open with the information regarding people who contracted the virus. The challenges in countries such as Kenya notwithstanding, UNESCO has underscored the need for continued involvement of journalists in telling the story of the pandemic where impact is essential (UNESCO 2020).

Conclusion

Reporting Covid-19 pandemic is more than just a social interest story. It is a duty, an obligation for the media. But media do not operate in a vacuum. Their operations are conducted in spaces guided by cultural norms, ethical considerations and legal frames. Navigating these spaces is tricky as was evidenced in Kenya where the high society actors, with greater access and claim to cultural, ethical and legal protection avoided association with the pandemic. In the process the resulting images that appeared in the media obscured the extent of the reach of the pandemic, and also distorted its spread. In the process, the role of the media to effectively execute its functions are compromised.

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Reporting coronavirus responsibly – across the globe

The Covid-19 pandemic is hot news but it poses new challenges to journalists who must grapple with complex public health information, societal disruption, economic downturns, and personal risk during an infodemic of fake news and medical misinformation. What resources are there to help? What key types of advice do they offer? This paper seeks to categorise and analyse key resources for journalists reporting Covid-19. After contextualising the phenomenon of such guides, the categories of reporting coronavirus resources are described and the themes within the guides and tipsheets are analysed. Tipsheets and guides foregrounded the following themes: verification and fact-checking, tackling fear mongering, language choice, source choice and expertise, headline, language and image choice and economic impact. Journalist health and safety was a key theme. Also identified were ethics, respect for affected people, and solutions journalism. Links to professional values and ethics codes are discussed.

Key words: ethics, journalism, pandemic Covid-19, journalism education

Context

Covid-19 is hot news, dominating media coverage with dramatic stories of a novel 'killer virus'. This tragic situation poses new challenges for journalists, especially the many who find themselves unexpectedly working as health reporters. Challenges include the complexity of pandemics, rapid changes in impact and advice, managing personal fears for self and loved ones, finding reliable information and navigating a sea of misinformation (Bonfiglioli 2020; Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). Personal risks for reporters include infection, lockdown restrictions, mental wellbeing in isolation and access to sources (Wake, Paton and Pryor 2020; Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020).

In a pandemic, journalism is more important than ever as a corrective to an information environment so polluted by 'fake news', scams, misinformation, and disinformation, that we've

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entered what has been called a 'post-truth' era (Iyengar and Massey 2018; Wardle 2017) and a 'misinfodemic' (Gyenes and Mina 2018). Online communicators have widely varying commitments to veracity and transparency (Steffens, Dunn and Leask 2017). Digital upheavals have taken their toll on science and medical journalism (Bonfiglioli and Cullen 2017). The weakening of the watchdog role of journalists, who are bound by ethics codes, is a threat to the public; however, there are signs pandemic coverage has been vital to informing the public (Nwakpu, Ezema and Ogbodo 2020), the quality of reporting has been high, and uptake of mainstream news has risen (Kleis Nielsen et al. 2020) as people look for high quality information. Park et al. (2020) found nine in ten Australians are concerned about the pandemic and the most concerned have increased news consumption (p.6). Two thirds are accessing news at least once per day. Coverage in many countries has risen dramatically: nine-fold in India and 20-fold in Australia (Bonfiglioli 2020; Mohanty 2020). However, news may be making people more anxious, driving panic purchases (Park et al. 2020) and promoting fear (Ogbodo et al. 2020). News avoidance is also growing (Fletcher et al. 2020).

Journalists are charting Covid-19 by number, proportion, geography and social, health, and economic status of those affected or at greater risk. Key topics in Indian newspaper coverage included case counts, quarantines, lockdowns, precarious employment and attacks on doctors (Mohanty 2020). An analysis of *The New York Times* and the *Global Times* from China found the pandemic was politicised, with blame directed at China in *The NYT* and China portraying Trump's America as weak, slow and unprofessional in its response (Abbas 2020). Tourism-related news in Chinese papers focused on the impact on tourism, government support for the industry and hope for the future (Chen, Huang and Li 2020). Topic analysis showed US newspaper coverage in early March 2020 was dominated by disease outbreak, case numbers, estimating fatality rates, economic angles, global impacts and quarantine measures (Chipidza et al. 2020). Chipidza and colleagues (2020) found a neglect of public health topics and public health voices leaving other, less-informed voices to dominate early coverage.

News outlets are publishing prevention advice, updates on treatments, tracking the development of candidate vaccines, and reporting on quarantine breaches, all in an information environment polluted by Covid misinformation (Brennen et al. 2020; Samios 2020). Medical misinformation often circulates without warning labels (Brennen et al. 2020), it sticks in people's minds (Pluviano, Watt and Della Sala 2017), and its spread may be driven by perverse incentives to publish (Hanage and Lipsitch 2020). Almost one in three journalists say ethical challenges are a problem in Covid reporting, with 8 per cent feeling their ethics

had been compromised and 82 per cent noting employers did not provide Covid reporting guidelines (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). The question is: where can journalists turn to for advice?

Aim
This paper aims to identify key pandemic communication resources offered to journalists and health communicators, categorise them by structure, and analyse selected guides and tipsheets for the characteristics of the advice they offer. Findings will be discussed in terms of professional values and ethical codes, touching on the implications for established codes.

Approach
The key approach was thematic analysis. Web searches were conducted for tipsheets, guides and resources intended for journalists reporting the pandemic. Guides and resources were categorised by structure and analysed for their advice themes. Expected themes included: reflective practice, verification, language, news values, source expertise, personal beliefs, proportionality, fear mongering, 20-20 hindsight, economic imperatives, headlines, images, celebrity survivors and identification of individual cases and their geographical location. Journalist health and safety was expected to be a key topic.

The web search for guides to reporting Covid-19 identified 18 resources online. These fell into two broad categories, tipsheets and portals. The tipsheets took two forms: targeted guides or tipsheets with specific advice for journalists about what to do, what not to do and how-to tips (tipsheets, n=5) or hybrid guides in the form of features or blogposts offering practical tips (hybrid, n=4). Please see Tables 1 and 2. The portal resources (portals, n=9) tended to have few or no tips on the main page but provided numerous links to resources, guides and/or learning modules. Some links were labelled with sources and some with brief descriptions to inform choices. In this paper, we focus on the guides and tipsheets because they offer immediate advice without requiring readers to search and evaluate remote resources.

Guides and tipsheets
Guides and tipsheets are hosted by these organisations: First Draft; Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN); International Journalists' Network (IJN); International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX); Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA); Lenfest Institute (LI-A); Pan American Health Organization (PAHO-WHO); Scientific American (Sci-Am); UN-International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

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Portals

Portals are hosted by these organisations: Dart Center (Kaplan et al.); Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD); Knight Science Journalism (KSJ); Lenfest Institute (LI-B); Public Media Alliance (PMA); the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ1 and SPJ2); the Walkley Foundation and the Thomson Foundation. The portals are very useful gateways to resources, guides and deeper learning materials but it is beyond the scope of this study to describe them further. For links to selected portals see Table 3.

Table 1 – Guides and tipsheets for journalists reporting the pandemic

Organisation	Link
PAHO/WHO	https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52392/PAHOCMUPACOVID-1920003_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
First Draft	https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/tips-for-reporting-on-covid-19-coronavirus-and-slowing-the-spread-of-misinformation/
IJN	https://ijnet.org/en/story/10-tips-journalists-covering-covid-19
IREX	irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/covering-covid-19-tips-journalists.pdf
Lenfest (LI-A)	https://reframe.resolvephilly.org/covid-19/

Table 2 – Hybrid resources - Features with tips and advice for journalists reporting the pandemic

Organisation	Link
GIJN	https://gijn.org/2020/03/10/tips-for-journalists-covering-covid-19/
Sci-Am	https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/how-to-report-on-the-covid-19-outbreak-responsibly/
JERAA	https://jeraa.org.au/responsible-journalism-in-a-time-of-coronavirus/
ICFJ	https://www.icfj.org/news/un-icfj-research-examines-covid-19-disinformation

Table 3 – Webpages with links to resources for journalists reporting the pandemic

Organisation	Link
DART	https://dartcenter.org/resources/reporting-and-covid-19-tips-journalists?section=3
	https://dartcenter.org/resources/covering-coronavirus-resources-journalists
Walkley	https://www.walkleys.com/useful-covid-19-resources-for-journalists/

KSJ	https://ksj.mit.edu/coronavirus-reporting-resources/
SPJ 1	https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/2020/09/02/resources-from-journalism-organizations/
SPJ 2	www.journaliststoolbox.org/2020/08/04/flu_and_miscellaneous_medicalhealth_sites/
Thomson	http://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/the-challenges-of-covering-coronavirus-how-we-can-help/
PMA	https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/resources/tools/coronavirus-resources-and-best-practice/
Lenfest (LI-B)	https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/local-journalism/coronavirus-covid19-reporting-resources/
GFMD	https://gfmd.info/reporting-on-covid-19-resources-and-tools/

Tipsheets and guides: Key themes
As expected, tipsheets and guides foregrounded the following themes: verification, accuracy and fact-checking, source choice and expertise, proportionality, fear mongering, headline, language and image choice and economic impact. Journalist health and safety was, indeed, a key theme. Also identified were ethics, respect for affected people, solutions journalism, the need for responsible coverage, for clarity and simplicity and to separate facts from opinion. Less prominent were issues of reflective practice, personal beliefs, the risks of 20-20 hindsight, identification of individual cases and their location. Little guidance was provided on news values, conflict framing and celebrity survivor coverage.

Themes
Verification and accuracy
Fact-checking was widely advocated to support accuracy, detect misinformation, avoid spreading misinformation and bust myths (PAHO-WHO; Sci-Am; JERAA; UN; ICFJ). Reporters are advised not to trust figures (IJN; GIJN); to favour statistics over anecdotes (GIJN); to verify facts, fact-check op-eds (GIJN), and get expert help with fact-checking (IREX; GIJN; JERAA; ICFJ). Accuracy was singled out as a key goal by five organisations (PAHO-WHO; IREX; GIJN; Sci-Am and LI-A), advising journalists to get the facts; be accurate with maps (IREX); rapidly correct falsehoods; and slow down to balance speed with accuracy (LI-A; Sci-Am).

Separate facts from opinion
The Scientific American authors urged journalists to divide knowledge into known facts, things we think are true and opinions and speculation. Similarly GIJN warned reporters to be alert to political spin and secure academic help assessing claims. Reporters were advised to be specific about things that happen sometimes and things that happen often enough to be significant (Sci-Am).

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Sources

Choice of sources was well addressed by six organisations (PAHO-WHO; IJN; IREX; GIJN; JERAA; Sci-Am). Reporters were advised to use a wide range of sources (IJN; GIJN; Sci-Am), use authoritative, expert sources (PAHO-WHO, IREX, GIJN, JERAA), be cautious with pre-prints (research not yet peer-reviewed) (GIJN); and think carefully about how to interview experts (IJN; GIJN). Guides suggested including patient and health care workers' stories, listening to the community and understanding the mood (PAHO-WHO; IJN; IREX, GIJN).

Respect for affected people

Advice on reporting on people affected by the pandemic was concentrated in the GIJN tipsheet. Reporters are advised to treat people with dignity, be transparent, prioritise their source's well-being, put humanity before the story, elicit informed consent for identification, listen, empathise and allow affected people autonomy in the interview setting. Difficult questions should be deferred. JERAA tips advised refraining from identifying people with Covid-19.

Ethics and responsible coverage

The PAHO guide provided the most advice on ethical practice, advising reporters to be ethical and respect sources and privacy, avoid propagating stigma, blame or ridicule. Journalists were warned to avoid racist tropes (JERAA; IJN; GIJN). Responsible use of images was advised by Lenfest (LI-A), GIJN and PAHO.

Problems-solutions

Given the heavy toll of the pandemic and the propensity of journalists to highlight negative news, Lenfest (LI-A) provides timely advice to journalists to reflect on the impact of negative news and, concurring with the PAHO guide, to be sure to include solutions news. Reporters are advised to report and explain preventive actions, and include useful facts and public health information (PAHO; GIJN; ICFJ).

Fear mongering and sensationalism

Arguably a key challenge is the advice to resist amplifying fears, avoid alarmism, panic mongering, and the language of fear and killer disease (PAHO; IREX; GIJN; JERAA; LI-A) as well as reflect on personal fears (JERAA). Journalists are advised to take care with headlines, avoid clickbait, cover significant stories even if they are not exciting, and stick to the story when things appear to wind down (IJN; IREX; LI-A; GIJN).

Rhetoric and language choice: General

The Lenfest Institute (LI-A) provided the most detailed focus on the language choices of journalists. Reporters are advised to refrain from using xenophobic descriptors for Covid-19 such as 'Chinese'

or 'foreign' even when quoting sources. They should avoid the rhetoric of war (heroes, frontline, war on the virus) especially if it glorifies politicians or obscures workplace safety issues. The institute urges caution when reporting official comments using criminal-style language such as 'persons under investigation' or 'suspected cases', preferring 'people who may have Covid-19'. Avoid referring to cases climbing or surging; choose, instead, to present precise numbers of cases. Bear in mind 'cases' are just known cases not every case and avoid reporting comparative case numbers like a horse race. Specifics are preferred to vague binary terms such as 'reopening' which obscure details needed for decision making or 'social distancing', which fails to include the six foot/1.5m distance guide.

Rhetoric and language choice: Economic
The Lenfest Institute (LI-A) calls for sensitive and respectful reporting of pandemic-related economic hardships. Reporters are advised to keep in mind the systemic nature of poverty and how widespread hardship is across the USA and avoid using loaded language such as 'welfare'. People-first language should be used: people experiencing hardship rather than 'the poor' or 'poverty stricken'.

Clarity and simplicity
The GIJN urges journalists to keep things simple, while Lenfest (LI-A) encourages journalists to publish 'explainers', not to assume knowledge, and to use words that enhance comprehension.

Reflective practice
Reflective practice underpins the issuing of tips, guides and portals but it is rarely directly mentioned. The JERAA tips invite journalists to reflect on their practice, the GIJN advises reporters to read other journalists' work and the IJN and GIJN remind reporters they can set limits and say no to their editor.

In other advice, journalists are advised to question pandemic responses (ICFJ), track curbs on media freedom (ICFJ), stay up to date using medical sources (GIJN; JERAA), map the outbreak (IJN; GIJN), flag facts likely to change (LI-A), and focus on reporting, not analysis (IJN; GIJN).

Journalist health and safety
Reporter safety was addressed by four organisations (PAHO-WHO; IREX; GIJN; ICFJ) with advice focused on avoiding animals, personal hygiene tips and self-care. Reporters are advised to avoid markets, farms, animals and droppings, keep gear off floors and avoid eating near animals/farms. They should use gloves and PPE, decontaminate gear and wash hands with hot water and soap before, during and after being in affected areas. Engage in self-care after interviewing trauma victims.

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Discussion

Covid-19 has revealed strengths and weaknesses in social structures. The swift and expert delivery of reporting guides demonstrates the strengths of journalism and its codes. However, the weaknesses revealed could inform reform. Here I hope to reflect on the strengths and identify where significant advice could be more clearly reflected in established codes.

Validating professional standards

The strong alignment between the Covid-19 reporting advice and existing codes validates professional standards. These alignments were strongest in advice on accuracy and verification, ethical and responsible coverage, respect for vulnerable people, language choices and making the significant simple, interesting and clear.

The calls for truth, accuracy and verification are strongly rooted in ethical codes such as the Australian Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance code (Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance 2019) which exhorts journalists to 'Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts' as well as aligning with Kovach and Rosenstiel's point that 'Journalism's first obligation is to the truth' (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014). The advice to engage in fact-checking reinforces Kovach and Rosenstiel's element: 'Its essence is a discipline of verification.' The calls to combat misinformation and rapidly correct falsehoods align with MEAA's 'Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors'. The MEAA's call for accuracy and disclosure of facts underpins the advice to journalists to strive for precision in describing the ebb and flow of cases.

The more direct calls for ethical reporting, respect for sources and privacy and for avoiding stigma, blame, ridicule and racism are embedded in the codes. For example, MEAA says: 'Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race … or physical or intellectual disability.' Professional codes provide solid support for the advice to treat people affected by the pandemic with respect and allow them some autonomy, with the MEAA code urging journalists thus: 'Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice'; 'Respect private grief and personal privacy'; and 'Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material.' Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude on such people (MEAA) and 'exercise their personal conscience' (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; IJN; GIJN). However, Posetti and colleagues find many journalists lacked guidelines from employers and wanted ethics training (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020).

Careful choice of language and, in particular, avoiding xenophobic labelling of the virus also aligns with the MEAA point not to 'place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics' or to

'give distorting emphasis'. Avoiding the rhetoric of war and criminalising cases should help to 'keep the news comprehensive and proportional' (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014).

Reminders to include stories which are not immediately exciting and to keep reporting after the peak of the crisis align with Kovach and Rosenstiel's element that journalism 'must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant'. In a complex viral pandemic, clarity and simplicity are key challenges for reporters but these goals fulfil journalists' duty of loyalty to citizens. The same could be said for producing clear guidance in relevant community languages.

Informing reform

This analysis highlights areas for improvement including clearer advice to journalists about separating facts from opinion, avoiding fearmongering, using expert sources, particularly on health issues, and including positive, solutions- and success-focused reporting. Posetti and colleagues report that journalists are calling for guidance on ethics and reporting Covid (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). Greater attention to the need to practise self-care and reflective practice and to receive institutional support for such professional development is warranted (Wake, Paton and Pryor 2020; Posetti, Bell and Brown).

The advice to distinguish between known facts, what we think is true and opinions and to separate knowledge from speculation is in line with traditions separating news from comment and analysis. While the MEAA code calls for truth and accuracy, it does not offer explicit advice on separating news from opinion. Calls for responsible coverage and solutions journalism mitigate against fear mongering, clickbait, and sensationalism aligning with the code point: 'Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit, to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.' Journalists' fears and beliefs, which may influence reporting with some seeking to elicit 'worse-case scenario' stories (Bonfiglioli 2020), may lead to unsafe coverage of suicide predictions (Wake, Paton and Pryor 2020).

Selecting expert sources is a professional norm; however, this lacks explicit discussion in the MEAA code or Kovach and Rosenstiel's elements of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014).

The need for 'solutions' and reporting of public health prevention can be linked to Kovach and Rosenstiel's point that journalism 'must keep the news comprehensive and proportional' and the MEAA code point of reporting fairly and not suppressing facts such as effective solutions.

FURTHER INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES FACING MEDIA

Catriona Bonfiglioli

The current pressures on journalists and editors make reflective practice a challenge but reflection is crucial for reporters to step back and look at patterns of coverage, identify shortcomings and the neglect of certain voices, angles, solutions and address these through refined practice (Sheridan Burns 2004). The JERAA tips invite journalists to reflect on their practice, the GIJN advises reporters to read other journalists' work and the IJN and GIJN remind reporters they can set limits and say no to their editor. The MEAA preamble says: 'Journalists will educate themselves about ethics and apply the following standards' and the pandemic tipsheets and portals are arguably built on the presumption that journalists are urgently educating themselves. There is a fine range of resources for the safety and well-being of journalists (SPJ and Dart Center) and major news organisations embed support resources (Wake, Paton and Pryor 2020) but employer support has been found wanting by reporters (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020). Whether journalists should have a right to be supported by employers in their education and reflection is not clear in the codes. The MEAA code lacks explicit self-care points.

Conclusion

This survey of nine selected resources for journalists presents a distillation of key advice, revealing clear and practical guides strongly grounded in professional values and ethics. Despite the additional pressures on and challenges for journalists, the pandemic is a time for journalistic reflection using the guides and tools emerging as the pandemic evolves. However, reflection and reviewing of patterns of coverage is rarely explicitly advised and may be squeezed out of most working days.

These pandemic tipsheets highlight aspects of practice which could be explicitly addressed in codes of ethics. Balancing brevity, utility and comprehensiveness is a fine art in code development, but the pandemic highlights the price of embracing conflict news values, giving a platform to fear-mongers and powerful commentators with little or no public health expertise, undermining legitimate leadership, exposing vulnerable subjects, and confusing opinion with clear news about effective prevention and treatment. In the 'new normal', journalism training should explain the media's role in the 'social amplification of risk' (Kasperson, Renn et al. 1988). It is timely to discuss expert source choices, debate the blurring of boundaries between news, analysis, and opinion and emphasise well-being and self-care.

Stronger links could be built between the excellent work of the Dart Center on safety, self-care, wellbeing and active codes of ethics to embed explicit guidance on self-care. Research ethics committees expect researchers to consider their own safety, why not journalist groups?

Researchers should investigate how to strengthen ties between communities and journalists to tap into community experiences and reduce uncritical misinformation sharing (Downman 2017). This could include building citizens' media health literacy through training in journalistic skills such as seeking and verifying reliable health information.

It is heartening to see the richness, depth and sophistication of the advice offered to journalists in this pandemic. One can only hope reporters will find spaces in the working day to absorb, discuss and apply them, employers will step up their support (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020), and journalists' associations will gather to refresh codes of ethics in the light shed by this powerful virus.

Limitations

The sheer quantity of resources for journalists reporting Covid-19 means this discussion is limited by time, scope, and research capacity to examining a subset and makes no claim to be exhaustive. Excellent guides or tipsheets may have been inadvertently missed by the search strategy. The Dart Center and the Society of Professional Journalists provide extensive resources (Dart Center 2020; Society of Professional Journalists 2020). It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at HIV/AIDS-Covid-19 nexus, for which see Juhasz and colleagues (Juhasz et al. 2020). The use of the MEAA code of ethics and Kovach and Rosenstiel's elements is recognised as selective and the existence of other codes is acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of Interest

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