

CoViD-19 and the Media: Devastation or Renaissance?

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Australia.....	4
Austria	5
Belgium – Flanders	5
Canada.....	6
Chile.....	7
Denmark.....	8
Finland	9
Germany.....	10
Greece	11
Hong Kong	12
Iceland	12
Italy.....	13
Netherlands.....	14
Portugal	15
South Korea	16
Sweden	17
Switzerland.....	18
United Kingdom.....	19

The Media for Democracy Monitor 2020 (MDM) is a longitudinal research project on the performance of the media with regard to democracy. In 2011, communication and political scientists from 10 countries delivered a state-of-the art report, based on relevant indicators, researched by national experts. Results have been published by Nordicom ([free and open access book](#)), and on the website of the [Euromedia Research Group](#).

In 2020, experts from 18 countries applied the MDM indicators to their national media landscape, providing insights on the development of the media performance with regard to democracy over the decade of media digitalization (2010 to 2019). Full results will be released early 2021. The [Dutch Journalism Fund](#) supports the project.

The Euromedia Research Group is the academic host of the MDM project, which is coordinated and managed by Josef Trappel, Professor for Media Policy and Media Economics, at the University of Salzburg.

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Introduction

Josef Trappel

When in March 2020 European countries, and with them most countries of the world, went into lock-down, the legacy media as well as digital platforms experienced unexpected and unprecedented transformations. Two trends became visible quickly after the CoViD-19 induced lockdown, at first glance contradictory: On the one hand, news media enjoyed an increase in reach, and eventually, trust. Demand surged for news, produced by professional journalists in qualified and trusted newsrooms within well-established media organisations. Public service, as well as private commercial news media experienced booming demand, both offline (television, newspapers, often radio) and online (websites, social media profiles, etc.).

On the other hand, sizeable industries, trade and service sector companies such as the travel and mobility sector, collapsed from one day to the next because of the lock-down. Business was not only suspended, but customers had to be compensated for earlier bookings and reservations. Other core industrial sectors such as the car industry had to bring their production to a stillstand, following the collapse of supply chains and customers' demand. Some, if not most, of these strongly affected economic sectors are core advertisers, both offline and online. Subsequently, these advertisers cancelled their promotional activities in the media to the detriment of advertising based media business models. As a rule of thumb, some 30 to 50 per cent of advertising revenue disappeared from the media markets.

These two trends, *renaissance* of the news media, and *devastation* of advertising markets and the *collapse* of the advertising based business models, characterize the media landscapes in the countries under observation by the Media for Democracy 2020 research project.

In addition, when looking into the content of media coverage, CoViD-19 related reporting dominated up to 70 per cent of the entire coverage, as a Swiss content analysis demonstrated for the first half-year 2020. Besides dominating the news, misinformation and fake news became even more prevailing than ever before. In Chile, for example, tensions between the government and the media increased, not the least because of accusations of disinformation. Legacy media finally profited from an increase of trust by the people.

"With few exceptions, we're talking about the extinction of the entire Canadian media industry" said Daniel Bernhard, executive director of Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, in March 2020. This sober scenario has become reality in many countries. In Australia, some 112 community and regional papers ceased printing, and another 76 titles changed their publication to online only. In Hong Kong, the troubled state for political and CoViD-19 reasons, publishing tycoon Jimmy Lay appealed to his audience to enter into subscriptions for Apple Daily to survive due to the long lasting political suppression and the pandemic. European countries such as Greece and Portugal, where newspapers are normally sold at kiosks all over the country, found their delivery system suspended when newspaper buyers were no longer allowed to walk out to buy their paper. Furthermore, entirely advertising-

funded media such as commercial television and radio, as well as the freely distributed commuter press lost the majority of their income. Consequently, journalists were dismissed or their contracts temporarily suspended in great numbers.

These developments did not go unnoticed by national governments. By acknowledging journalism and the media as critical infrastructures, the obvious and widely recognized response has been financial support for the media industry. This is remarkable, as even countries with strong political reservations (if not resistance) against any form of government intervention in the media business changed their mind. Germany, for example, set up a media support fund of no less than € 200 million. The Finnish government returned to their once abandoned subsidy scheme. Even the British government decided to spend some £ 35 million in the media industry. Other countries with a tradition of granting media subsidies piled up their annual support substantially. Austria increased press subsidies by the factor 1.5 and granted lump sums to private broadcasters, Sweden expanded the subsidy scheme by € 70 million and the Netherlands set up a temporary support fund of almost € 10 million, with an option for another € 24 million during September to December 2020.

Subsidies were intended in most cases to rescue news and media operations and to keep journalistic staff in their jobs. This generally worked well for employed journalists, but neglected the large number of free-lance journalists, as reports from Germany and Belgium show.

A closer look shows some interesting differences in how the media support is granted. Portugal (€ 15 million) and the UK decided to allocate state funds to the media in the form of public advertising campaigns, while most other countries grant their subsidies as non-refundable support.

Actually, very few of the country governments in the MDM 2020 sample developed a strategy to cope with the media crisis. Italy is a best-practice example. The regulator AGCOM established four working groups including media representatives, to combat in a structured way negative effects of the pandemic. One task force was (and still is) scrutinizing online disinformation.

Overall, observation of the national media landscapes show that media companies with newsrooms and a long tradition of operations have been and are indispensable during the pandemic. They regain trust among their users, and they manage to distance their professional work from noise in digital platforms. People tend to recognize and honour trustworthy information during the pandemic crisis. Governments, on the other hand, have been caught unprepared and their activities so far addressed short-term glitches rather than support for urgently required structural reforms as a response to the evolving digital environment.

Australia

Tim Dwyer, Derek Wilding & Saba Bebawi

During the pandemic there have been a succession of business closures in 2020 as a result of falling advertising and revenue. This impacted quite heavily on media businesses in Australia and accelerated structural decline in the newspaper sector.

The advocacy group 'Public Interest Journalism Initiative' (PIJI) has documented 200 news 'contractions' in the sector (meaning title, masthead or newsroom closures, the end of a print edition, a move to digital only, or a merger) since January 2019 (PIJI, 2020).

In late May News Corp announced that it would cease printing 112 community and regional newspapers, transition 76 titles to digital only, and close 36 of their titles completely (Mason, 2020). A number of commentators noted that CoViD-19 had accelerated a plan initiated by News Corp in 2018 to transition its print publishing operations to digital only. The company announced that it would retain 375 jobs in its regional and community sector. This was in a sector that was previously employing some 1200-1300 jobs.

In the context of these job losses, lobbying has intensified by regional media businesses to remove the few remaining anti-concentration ownership limits including the one TV licence and two radio licences to a market rules. Further deregulation of the 'voices test' is being called for. This requires a minimum of four separate voices (or distinct media groups) in any regional market. New media such as online news sites, streaming services or social media are not currently included in these limits (Mason, 2020).

Recognising these extraordinary times for the sector, the Government introduced a series of measures to assist the media sector (Aust. Gov, 2020). Firstly, commercial television and radio broadcasters will receive a 100% rebate on their Commercial Broadcasting Tax for 12 months (2020-2021). This is expected to provide the commercial broadcasting sector with \$41 million in tax relief for the use of broadcasting spectrum. The rebate is specifically intended to offset the sharp downturn in advertising revenue, which has significantly impacted the operating revenues of commercial broadcasters.

Secondly, an existing fund – the Public Interest News Gathering Program (PING) of \$AUS50 million receives \$AUS13.4 million of new money as well as repurposed unallocated funds from the Government's Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package. This is intended to further support public interest journalism delivered by commercial television, newspaper, and radio businesses in regional Australia, which have been particularly hard hit by the downturn in advertising. In addition to the PING Fund, the Government has brought forward the release of \$AUS5 million from its Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund. The Innovation Fund is being independently administered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Thirdly, in recognition of the disruption caused by the CoViD-19 pandemic on production of Australian screen content, the Government is suspending Australian programming obligations for the remainder of 2020. This programming requirements relate specifically to

Australian drama, Australian documentary and Children's and Preschool program quota obligations on commercial television broadcasting licensees until the end of 2020. The government also announced the suspension of the licence condition requiring minimum levels of expenditure by subscription television broadcasting licensees on new eligible drama programs until the end of 2020.

Austria

Josef Trappel, Manuela Grünangerl & Tales Tomaz

From mid March to mid May 2020, the then new Government imposed severe restrictions on liberal freedoms, such as closed borders to neighbouring countries, a ban on all public gatherings and events, curfew and shutdown of all shops except food supply, pharmacies and a few others. During this shutdown, linear television (both public and private-commercial) increased their audience, daily newspapers (both on paper and online) their readership and radio its listeners. Nonetheless, because of the economic restrictions, advertising slumped, causing revenue losses in advertising-based media. Most affected were daily free-sheets, as well as fully advertising based private-commercial television and radio channels.

In order to prevent media companies from collapsing, the Government increased substantially its media subsidies, along with unprecedented financial support for various sectors of the Austrian economy. The Government increased the regular press subsidy for newspaper distribution by the factor 1.5. In addition, subsidies based on the numbers of printed newspaper copies were allocated. This way, the highest-circulation newspapers (all of them yellow press) received the largest share, smaller quality-oriented papers received less. Furthermore, private-commercial TV stations received some € 15 million in addition to the previously foreseen € 20 million subsidies. In total, the Government allocated € 32 million to support the media during the Corona-crisis.

Belgium – Flanders

Karen Donders, Ike Picone, Jonathan Hendrickx & Pauljan Truyens

Belgium went into lockdown (light) on the 17th of March. The Government banned public gatherings and events, closed borders to neighbouring countries and a majority of the stores were forced to shut down. Working from home became the new normal. This had of course an impact on the lives of all Flemings, also on their (news) media consumption.

The first weeks of the lockdown showed a substantial rise of news consumption. More and more people tuned in, with especially the main news bulletins at 7 PM and the press conferences of the National Security Council attracting record-high audiences. On the 27th of March a record of 1.75 million people watched the 7 PM news show of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT. The leading news media also noted a rise in subscribers as well as online traffic. This would have been good news, if at the same time the advertising market hadn't collapsed. According to the Union of Belgian Advertisers UBA, 80% of advertisers postponed

their advertising campaigns. The fall of income from advertisements made, especially commercial media organizations, go into 'crisis mode'.

This had a severe impact on Flemish media companies and therefore also on journalists. According to a survey published in May 2020, in particular freelance journalists were hit hard by the crisis. More than half had less work and income in March and April. 40% asked for Governmental support. Salaried employed journalists were less affected, however 8% had to go into temporary unemployment. At the same time the virus changed journalistic working methods. Face-to-face interviews, press conferences and access to buildings were drastically hindered. Journalists had to shift to online sources and interviewing via telephone.

The last few weeks the Government started to reverse restrictions and a return to 'normal' life lays ahead. News consumption is normalizing, with more and more people mentioning 'corona-fatigue'. However, as the number of CoViD-19 infections increased again, some of the restrictions have been reinstated as of August 2020. Advertising revenues have not fully bounced back yet. The end of the crisis for the industry is thus not in sight.

Canada

Gregory Taylor & Brooks DeCillia

The CoViD-19 pandemic has proven devastating for Canadian news as advertising revenues, already weakened over the previous decades, collapsed even further. In an opinion piece published in the Toronto Star in March, 2020, Daniel Bernhard, executive director of Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, called the CoViD crisis a "six alarm fire" and predicted "we are staring down the end of Canadian private media as we know it. With few exceptions, we're talking about the extinction of the entire Canadian media industry" (Bernhard, March 27, 2020). In short order, the industry began to prove him right.

The Quebec newspaper La Presse reported that the National Cooperative of Independent Information, the cooperative that brings together six daily papers in Quebec, would temporarily lay-off 143 people because of the CoViD-19 pandemic — almost half the number of people employed by the papers collectively (Marin & Paradis, April 4, 2020). West of Quebec, also in April, Postmedia announced the closure of 15 weekly newspapers in Manitoba and the Windsor-Essex area of Ontario. It blamed the closures on the financial fallout from CoViD-19.

The Canadian Journalism Project, a collaboration of Ryerson University and Carleton University, maintained a database on the impact of the CoViD-19 epidemic on Canadian news providers, including a map demonstrating that news closures were not restricted to any one region of the country. According to this project, of the 50 news outlets that closed across Canada in March and April of 2020, 48 were community newspapers (J-Source, 2020). However, major cities were not spared the economic pain brought on by the CoViD-related collapse of the advertising market. In May 2020, Torstar, the company which includes a wide range of newspapers including the Toronto Star, Canada's highest circulation newspaper,

was sold for a price of \$52 million or 63 cents per share. Torstar stocks had been trading at \$1 per share in June 2019.

The horrible contradiction in this situation is that while the CoViD-19 pandemic has proven economically devastating for news media across the country, the Canadian public maintained a very strong reliance upon news organizations for their information on the most significant health story in a century. This was captured in data from Statistics Canada for March-April 2020, that noted 51.3 per cent of Canadians named traditional news outlets as their main source of information about CoViD-19 during the peak of the pandemic. The next most popular source was daily announcements by public health and political leaders in individual provinces at 12%. Less than 10 per cent of Canadians listed social media as their main source (Statistics Canada, April 8, 2020). The data is clear that, by a wide margin, Canadians turned to established news sources in this period of emergency.

This overall reliance on professional journalism has not made Canadians immune to the false information floating around associated with CoViD-19. A study out of Carleton University surveyed Canadians responses to CoViD-19 conspiracy theories and nearly half of those who responded (46 per cent) believed at least one of four CoViD-19 conspiracy theories and myths addressed in the survey. A quarter of Canadians surveyed (26 per cent) believe a widely discredited conspiracy theory that the coronavirus that causes CoViD-19 was engineered as a bioweapon in a Chinese lab and released into the general population. Despite the prevalence of conspiracy theories, over half of Canadians surveyed (57 per cent) were confident that they can distinguish conspiracy theories and misinformation from factual information about CoViD-19. The study also notes that the individuals who believe the discredited conspiracy theories spend more time every day on social media platforms than those who do not believe them (Carleton Newsroom, May 20, 2020).

The CoViD-19 pandemic seems to have greatly accelerated the elements that our study reveals were already in place: Canadians look for information via professional journalism that current economic models simply will not sustain.

Well before the outbreak of the pandemic the Liberal government under Justin Trudeau brought forth measures to try and offer some relief to the struggling news industry. To ensure trusted, local perspectives as well as accountability in local communities, the Government proposes to provide a fund of some \$500 million over five years, starting in 2018.

Chile

Enrique Núñez-Mussa

The scenario described in this introduction has had a few variations since CoViD-19 arrived at the country. It is very early to evaluate if this is a response to the immediate context, or if some of these changes will remain when the virus stops being a political priority and the public conscience returns to concerns such as the national referendum.

The early strategy from the government was moderate quarantines, which led to a fast growth of the contagion curve. Two months after the first cases, there were erratic calls for a “new normalcy”, when the country could return to adapted routines and commercial activity, which were later dismissed, after the obvious increase in contagion. Currently, there are large parts of the country under total quarantines, a curfew has been implemented since April, borders are closed, and supermarkets have its opening hours shortened. Permissions are required to move within quarantined areas.

The relationship between the press and the government has been tense. The former Minister for Health, who was in charge of the crisis for the first months, denounced in an interview on television: “The work of the press is to sell by inventing lies” (Vera, 2020), and after being questioned by different news stories he accused journalists of fabricating “fake news” (CNN Chile, 2020a).

Now that the press is overseeing the government, right wing sectors started spreading the hashtag “#rechazoprensabasura” (“#rejecttrashmedia”). This shows that the lack of trust towards journalism is transversal and intensified in different political sectors according to the context.

Despite the aforesaid, the most recent study (Cadem, 2020) shows that the government approval rate, which reached critical lows during the protests, started to grow since CoViD-19, from 13% to 23%. The trust in legacy media also increased, while the confidence in all the social platforms decreased. In January the trust in open access TV was 29%, in April it reached 47%. A similar scenario happened with printed media and online outlets, which went from 48% to 59%. The radio always maintained high levels of trust. However, Facebook dropped from 47% to 35%. If the media will maintain this sudden regain in trust in the future, is uncertain.

Denmark

Mark Blach-Ørsten, Rasmus Burkal, Eva Mayerhöffer & Ida Willig

From mid-March to mid-May 2020, the Danish Government led by the Social Democrats imposed a large number of restrictions on liberal freedoms in Denmark, such as closed borders to neighbouring countries, a ban on all public gatherings and events with more than 100 participants, the shutting down of many parts of the public sector, the physical closing down of schools and universities, as well as limitations in public transportation. A large part of the staff from both public service broadcasters were also sent home by the Ministry of Culture, though this was later admitted to be a breach of the arm's length principle.

During this shutdown, linear public service television increased their audience share, as did daily newspapers online. A study published late August from Danish Media Association, the industry organization for private Danish media, shows an increase in the Danes' willingness to pay for online news during the Corona crisis. In June 2020 around 100,000 more Danes had access to paid digital news services compared with October 2019. The study also indicates that during the corona crisis, Danes have gained more trust in the news media and to a

greater extent prefer to get their news from traditional news channels than from social media.

However, because of the economic restrictions, advertising slumped between 30 to 50 %, causing revenue losses in advertising-based media and leading to lay-offs in several media companies. To prevent further layoffs and even the collapse of media companies the Government has so far given two aid-packages to the private Danish news media, which so far, has prevented closures and mass firing in the media industry. On June 9th, however, Denmark's second largest media company JyskFynske Medier announced cut-backs due to loss of advertisement revenues under the CoViD-19 pandemic that may result in the firing of up to 100 employees.

Finland

Marko Ala-Fossi, John Grönvall, Kari Karppinen & Hannu Nieminen

During the coronavirus pandemic in the spring 2020, interest in news and journalism has significantly increased. In the early stages of the crisis, the number of visitors to the websites of main national news outlets was as high as double the normal traffic, and even after that, the demand for news has remained higher than normally. Many outlets have also reported an increase of up to 20 % in digital subscriptions.

According to a survey of citizens' trust in various information sources during the pandemic, the mainstream news media, and public service media in particular, remain the preferred and most trusted news sources for most citizens (Matikainen & Komulainen, 2020).

On the other hand, the advertising revenue has dramatically declined during the crisis. According to a Finnmedia survey to media organizations, commercial media organizations have seen a decline of at least a third and possibly up to 50 % in advertising, with print and local newspapers and local radio suffering the most. Over half of all newspapers have laid off employees, and a handful of local papers have also suspended publication altogether during the crisis (Grundström 2020).

In response, the Ministry of Transport and Communication commissioned a report on supporting journalism during and after the crisis. The report, authored by a former chair of the Council for Mass Media, includes proposals for both short-term and long-term support (Grundström 2020). In a supplementary budget proposal in June 2020, the government channeled € 5 million for supporting journalism and € 2,5 million for news agencies. While the need for short-term support is less contested, the idea of more permanent support to journalism has been a more divisive topic within the industry. Unlike other Nordic countries, Finland has abandoned practically all direct press subsidies since the 1990s, apart from minor support to minority and cultural outlets. While industry actors have generally preferred indirect subsidies, such as reduced value-added tax, the issues of direct subsidies and other support mechanisms are now back on the media policy agenda.

Germany

Barbara Thomass & Christine Horz

From mid March to mid May 2020, the Coalition Government of Christian Democrats (*CDU*) and Social Democrats (*SPD*) imposed severe restrictions on liberal freedoms, such as closed borders to neighbouring countries, a ban on all public gatherings and events, curfew and the shutdown of all shops except food supply, pharmacies and a few others. During this shutdown, linear television (both public and private-commercial) increased their audience, daily newspapers (both on paper and online) their readership and radio its listeners. Nonetheless, because of the economic restrictions, advertising slumped, causing revenue losses in advertising-based media. Most affected were fully advertising-based private-commercial television and radio channels.

In order to prevent media companies from collapsing, the Government introduced some media subsidies, along with unprecedented financial support for various sectors of the German economy. The well-established instrument of short-time work, according to which part of the reduced salary is supplanted by funds of the Federal Employment Office, helps many media houses whose advertising income has gone down. However, many of the freelance journalists do not benefit from these subsidies. Other subsidies are due to the federal structure of Germany extremely scattered. The government of Berlin, for example, where many media houses are located, offers up to 25.000 € to help cultural and media companies, which were particularly hard hit by the Corona crisis and usually employ more than ten people, to overcome an economic situation that threatens their existence. In justified exceptional cases, up to 500.000 € can be applied for. (IBB) In order to promote the digital transformation of the publishing industry, to boost the sales and distribution of subscription newspapers, magazines and advertising journals, the Federal Government announced to provide a maximum of 220 Mio €, of which 20 Mio € this year and the remaining 200 Mio € in the future financial years.

One the first studies about the quality of covering the Corona pandemic during its first three months of the current year, came to the conclusion that no comprehensive tendencies towards uncritical or hysterical reporting were found - with one exception of the tabloid *Bild* (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 2020). The accusations voiced by critics that there had been predominantly negative reporting or one-sided panic-mongering could not be confirmed by the analysis. (epd) This had consequences on the news consumption side. Television news has seen a considerable uplift between January and April 2020: a 12-point decline in reach for TV news since 2013 was partially reversed as many people turned to trusted sources of news including public service media (DNR 2020).

Greece

Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Achilleas Karadimitriou, Christos Kostopoulos & Ioanna Archontaki

It is widely acknowledged that Greece managed to react successfully to the CoViD-19 pandemic crisis by taking early severe restrictions and imposing, as other countries, a lockdown. From mid-March to mid-May 2020, the Greek Government imposed strict measures on liberal democracy freedoms and rights of the citizens in order to curb the spread of the potentially deadly coronavirus, such as closed borders to neighbouring countries, a ban on all public gatherings and events, curfew and the shutdown of all shops except food supply, supermarkets, bakeries, pharmacies and a few others.

Nevertheless, the case of the media, especially the so-called mainstream media is another story. The media, coming out of the recent financial crisis accompanied by major losses of advertising revenues, had now to face the pandemic, however continuing the task of informing the public which became more necessary than ever. Although the lockdown has increased TV viewership, advertising revenue was decreased considerably, according to media professionals, by 40%. Moreover, the lockdown imposed further impediments to the distribution of the press, since most Greeks are used to buying newspapers distributed and sold by the news kiosks rather than to subscribe. The new and sharper decline of the newspapers sales has led some to consider that these were the last days of the Greek press. On March 21st the government decided to allow supermarkets to sell daily and Sunday newspapers. Media people in the press industry, as in other sectors of the economy, were given a one-off compensation of € 800.

Although news websites attracted new readers/users, they faced the same problem of TV stations: there was no advertising. In effect, it declined sharply by 40%, causing revenue losses in advertising-based media, affecting especially Sunday newspapers and private-commercial television channels and radio stations. As in other countries, most of the remaining advertising revenue went to the tech giants such as Google and Facebook. A similar pattern was followed in the field of the TV streaming and subscription services. Since Greeks, due to the pandemic lockdown, stayed home, there has been an increase of pay-tv and streaming services. In Greece the crisis of the CoViD-19 pandemic was also accompanied - even with fluctuations - by an increase in the consumption of news, particularly on television, as occurred in other countries as well.

The Greek media have urged the government for support in order to sustain their business. In effect, initially the government granted € 11 million for a campaign regarding CoViD-19 which was later supplemented by another campaign fund of € 9 million, but actually it was an indirect way to help the desperate media for advertising money. Adversarial media or media affiliated to the opposition accused the government of discrimination regarding the allocation of the “CoViD-ads”.

Hong Kong

Lo Wai Han & Wong Tin Chi

The Hong Kong government has adopted a range of measures in response to the CoViD-19 pandemic, including the suspension of educational classes from early February to 27 May 2020, a ban on public gatherings of more than eight people, a restriction on the number of customers at catering businesses, and restrictions on arrivals from foreign countries. The revenue of news media organizations has been disrupted by the pandemic, with some interviewees reporting a significant drop in advertising revenue from many business sectors (e.g., the property market, luxury services). The revenue crisis is an open secret: for example, Jimmy Lai, the Chairman of Next Media, which is one of the largest media companies in Hong Kong, made a video appeal to audiences to subscribe to Apple Daily, suggesting that almost all advertising revenue had been lost due to the long lasting political suppression and the pandemic. People working for other media companies have faced pay cuts or salary freezes, and some have been asked to take unpaid leave.

The HKSAR government has provided a HK\$137.5 billion package of relief measures, including the HK\$80 billion Employment Support Scheme designed to help employers to retain their staff. Under this scheme, all employers in the private sector, including news media companies, are eligible to apply for a subsidy, which lasts for a period of six months and is based on number of employees.

Iceland

Valgerður Anna Jóhannsdóttir, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, Friðrik Þór Guðmundsson

On March 13th the Government imposed several restrictions on liberal freedoms in order to curb the spread of the CoViD 19 virus. The restrictions were not as strict as in many other countries, for example were the borders not closed, but passengers tested or required to quarantine themselves, public gathering was restricted, but primary schools stayed open, as did shops and services. These restrictions have been changed constantly, in tune with the spread of CoViD19 the country.

During this time the use of and trust in traditional media seems to have increased, at least momentarily (Gallup n.d.; Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir, 2020). In general the Icelandic news media is believed to have risen up to its public service obligations, and has been praised for its extensive coverage and mediation of necessary information about the pandemic to the concerned citizens (visir.is, 2020). Financially, the CoViD 19 pandemic has however made a bad situation even worse for the commercial media. Advertising revenue decreased considerably due to the economic setback that has followed the pandemic (RÚV, 2020A). So far the news media companies have not laid-off any journalists, but one national newspaper *Fréttablaðið* has cut down its publication days from six to five days a week. The biggest magazine publisher has laid off 14 of its staff (RÚV, 2020). Mid May the Parliament passed laws providing substantial and unprecedented financial support for various sectors of the

Icelandic economy. Private news media was included and will receive up to ISK 400 million, approx. € 2,6 million in September 2020 (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðuneytið, 2020).

Furthermore, the Icelandic National Security Council has established a special working group to map the extent and nature of information disorder concerning the CoViD 19 pandemic in the country. The working group is also supposed to suggest actions to facilitate people's access to reliable sources and information about the pandemic (Forsætisráðuneytið, 2020).

Italy

Christian Ruggiero, Claudia Padovani & Francesco Marrazzo

When the CoViD-19 pandemic hit outside the Chinese territory in early 2020, Italy was the first country in Europe to impose several restrictions on the free circulation of people, schools and universities opening and on all non-essential economic and commercial activities.

During the so-called "lockdown" (which in some areas of the country started at the end of February to be suspended only at the beginning of June), the TV total audience has considerably increased, both during the day (about +2 million users) and in prime time (about +4 million users). According to the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), in March and April 53 per cent of people aged 18-34 years and 50 per cent of people aged 35-54 years have watched TV to a greater extent than in the previous period.

For what concerns newspapers, even if the news-stand sales have decreased (the Italian Government let news-stands operate even during the worst phase of the pandemic), Italian Internet users have considerably increased their visits to newspapers apps and websites (Comscore); possibly more than other European users (during the first lockdown week +140 per cent compared to a normal week before CoViD-19; during the Easter week in April +90 per cent compared to a normal week before CoViD-19).

The average daily time spent online by every Internet user has remarkably increased (+3% from February to March 2020, by tablet and smartphone, +16% by computer), even because of the shift to online mode for all classrooms (schools and universities) and working activities (smart work and '*lavoro agile*'). In any case, according to the March 2020 Audiweb report, about 25 per cent of the Italian population (two years or older) has still been offline in the average month.

Following the Law Decree n. 18/2020, the Italian Regulatory Communications Authority (AGCOM) has established four permanent Working Groups (WP) involving the main stakeholders, aimed at sharing proposals and initiatives for managing priorities arising from the ongoing emergency. These WPs are specifically dedicated to: a) Electronic Communication Services and Consumers; b) Postal Services; c) Media Services; d) Online Platforms and Big Data.

Within the Online Platforms and Big Data WP, AGCOM is focusing on the implementation of initiatives aimed at contrasting online disinformation on medical and health issues related to

CoViD-19, also through the collaboration with online platforms themselves. In this context, Facebook has launched a project aimed at tackling disinformation on Whatsapp, in partnership with [Facta](#), the new branch of the Italian fact-checker Pagella Politica.

Furthermore, AGCOM is publishing monthly special issues of its [Online Disinformation Observatory](#) specifically dedicated to CoViD-19, and has set up a [Data Science Task Force on online disinformation](#), in partnership with research as well as academic institutions.

With regard to Governmental initiatives, the Under-Secretary of State for Press and Publishing has launched a special [CoViD-19 Fake News Task Force](#), involving journalists, fact-checkers, scholars and scientists. Furthermore, following the journalists and (online) publishers' requests, Law Decree n. 34/2020 has extended the chance to get a tax credit for advertisers spending in press, radio and tv advertising spaces; it also introduced a specific tax credit for online publishers IT (information technology) expenses, and other measures affecting press distribution and newsstands.

In order to verify the impact of the emergency situation on the role of journalism and editorial routines, we conducted some follow-up interviews with selected leading media representatives. Three aspects of CoViD-19 impact on Italian news emerged:

- the ability of institutional communication to set the agenda: the perception of pandemic risk has been strongly influenced by an information routine created and managed by the government, to which the various news outlets have substantially adapted;
- the role of experts: since journalism had to rely heavily on what was the mediation by experts - epidemiologists, virologists, infectiologists - each media outlet selected one or two experts, trusted their approach and thus contributed to the polarization of the debate around the different "schools of thought";
- the challenged newsroom: the application of "smart working" to journalism has meant the need to redesign the working and power relationships typical of the newsroom, opening a debate on the very meaning of sharing a common physical workplace.

Netherlands

Hanne Vandenberghe & Leen d'Haenens

From mid March to mid May/beginning of June 2020, the Rutte III cabinet took measures restricting freedom of movement (a so-called 'intelligent lockdown') in the name of public health to prevent the spread of this viral disease—including working from home, banning events and meetings involving the physical presence of more than 100 people, closing borders to neighbouring countries, closing schools (under public pressure, including the example set by neighbouring countries), childcare centres, cafés, restaurants and sport clubs. Shops, however, were not shut down.

The beginning of this CoViD-19 crisis resulted in an unprecedented hunger for news among the Dutch audience: daily newspapers (both print and online) saw their sales of subscriptions increase significantly. The mainstream media were able to reaffirm their authority as reliable

sources for facts and opinions, bringing expertise and explanations to the CoViD-19 debate. This had not been the case for the past decade. Also radio and television stations appealed to a growing audience, with the public broadcaster reaching record viewer numbers. However, advertising-based news media revenues fell significantly (an estimated 30 percent). Such revenue shortfalls led to drastic decisions in the Dutch media market. Three examples so far: Firstly, the last ever print version of the free newspaper *Metro* appeared on Friday, March 20 (Bakker, 2020). Secondly, lifestyle magazine *VRIJ*, a weekend supplement of *De Telegraaf*, will be discontinued as of July 2020 (De Telegraaf, 2020). Thirdly, Mediahuis Nederland has said it will cut about 70 out of its advertising department's 160 jobs (Rogmans, 2020).

As CoViD-19 resulted in both decreasing advertising revenues and an increased demand for news, and considering that provision of information during a crisis is of vital importance, the Government decided to create a temporary support fund. Local media are the most vulnerable in this respect. Hence, this special support fund is aimed at door-to-door newspapers and local public broadcasters. A total of € 9.3 million has been allocated to these media organisations. Most of the interviewees were against accepting support from the Government for their own medium given the importance they attach to their independence. Generally speaking they were understanding of the support given to local media because they are the most vulnerable. However, four comments were made. First, our interviewees mentioned that many door-to-door newspapers do not provide (a lot of) information and news. Second, some indicated that local public broadcasters are already subsidized, others noting that the subsidies are quite low. Third, some told us they could not understand why the so-called 'hyper-locals' were originally not eligible to apply for this extra money. For that reason, € 1.6 million of the special support fund is allocated to local newspapers following a subscription model as well as to local new sites (the 'hyper-locals') (SVDJ, 2020a). Fourth, the loudest criticism was that the special support fund is not backed by a new budget, but subtracted from subsidies earmarked for 'special research projects' in 2021. This fund is an important source of income for smaller or local media outlets such as *Investico* or *VersBeton*. Investigative journalism was viewed as far more important for democracy than door-to-door newspapers, the beneficiaries of this special support fund. In response to criticisms, special research projects will continue to be funded in 2021. Moreover, an additional subsidy of € 24 million is made available to support local news media in the period September-December 2020 (SVDJ, 2020b).

Portugal

Joaquim Fidalgo

The CoViD-19 pandemic had a strong impact in all the Portuguese media. On the one side, media consumption rose to levels never felt before, especially in what concerns television and online news (newspapers almost lost their paper editions, because the general confinement rules for everybody during three months made it impossible to go out to buy a paper copy – and many newspaper shops closed for weeks). Just to have an idea, the four

main dailies together had a reach online of 10.4 million persons in December 2019, and in April 2020, they had a reach of 12.8 million, an increase of 23% (Marktest – NetAudience). In spite of the paywalls they have put in place, they all decided to give free access to all content somehow related with the pandemic. While they did this, they also tried to increase their online subscriptions, making marketing campaigns and offering more discounts than usually, thus convincing people of the importance of having good timely information, particularly in difficult occasions like this. Many of them had good results here. Actually, they needed them: with sales of print copies strongly decreasing and advertising virtually disappearing from their pages (because most industry and commerce was inactive), they felt serious problems in order to keep the business running and to pay their workers. Most companies were forced to put a lot of journalists in lay-off (with the State in charge of a part of their salary), while almost all the newsroom was obliged to work from home, using computer, smartphone and Skype or Zoom to keep in touch with each other.

According to a report made by the Regulatory Entity for the Media (ERC, 2020) and focusing on the first two months of CoViD-19 impact, “global revenues of all media decreased sharply” in March and April 2020, with one-third of the media companies referring to losses between 61 and 80%” (ERC, 2020, p. 5). The same report refers to about 30% of local newspapers that had to suspend their print editions.

In May 2020, in the sequence this serious crisis and of the big losses for news media in advertising revenues, the government decided to grant them an emergency aid. A total of €15 million were distributed by national and local media (Television, Radio, Press, Online), in the form of advertising campaigns paid in advance. There was some controversy about the criteria followed by the government to allocate the different amounts to the various media. Two online publications (by coincidence, two publications that would receive a small amount of money and also known as very critical of the present government, led by the Socialist Party) even decided to refuse those advertising campaigns, claiming they would do that in the name of total independence from the political power.

In the meantime, a couple of studies and surveys were launched, either by journalists institutions (Journalists’ Union, Commission for the Professional Chart) or by research centres from Universities, trying to evaluate the seriousness of these impacts in the news media and to understand the challenges brought by the pandemic crisis to the journalistic work. One of these studies, recently published, shows in its main conclusions that almost all journalists were forced to leave the newsroom and to work from home; that many of them had their income reduced; that the trend to precariousness in labour situation worsened; that the fear to lose the job is now much higher among journalists (Camponez et al, 2020).

South Korea

Eun-mee Kim

Facing CoViD-19 pandemic in the early 2020 all public attentions were on news media reporting the numbers of cases and deaths every hour or so. Ratings and clicks on the

pandemic news sky-rocketed. But at the same time they are criticized on two aspects. One is instilling too much fear backed by only flimsy scientific evidences. However, the urgency and uniqueness of the CoViD-19 required news media to continue reporting in much uncertainty on anything. Second point of criticisms was privacy infringements taking place with details of paths of movements of those with confirmed cases revealed to public. Whether this fear appeal have contributed to Korea's success in terms of dealing with this pandemic is yet to be assessed. But certainly it contributed to voluntary lock-downs and social distancing (Korea has never officially experienced total lock-down).

Policy makers, such as Korea Communications Commission, are reported to take initiatives in collaboration with Internet portals to join forces to combat fake news especially related to CoViD-19, but no concrete moves have been reported yet. They make effort to enforce deletion of personal information of the confirmed patients and the places they have visited after 14 days.

Sweden

Lars Nord & Torbjörn von Krogh

From the middle of March 2020, public health authorities confirmed general diffusion of corona virus in specific areas in Sweden. The Government soon imposed restrictions on travelling and public meetings with more than 50 people. However, compulsory schools and nurseries remained open. The "Swedish model" deviated from other countries and was perceived as 'softer', and more based on recommendations and individual responsibilities. At time of writing, death rates per capita have been high in comparison with neighboring countries, and protection of old people has been particularly unsuccessful.

As normally is the case during crises, news media consumption in Sweden generally increased during the pandemic. The topic dominated the news media agenda completely as a major event of great importance for society and with huge implications for every single individual. The most significant change in traditional media use was observed among younger people, aged 15-24, where the share of daily news consumers increased from 49 % to 59 % during Spring 2020

(<https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=7484402>).

The corona crisis has hit the media industry badly, and the loss of advertising revenues has been particularly heavy in regional printed media. The Government has announced two economic aid packages for news media. In April 2020, existing media subsidy system was expanded with approx. € 20 million per year for printed newspapers to cover distribution costs and journalism in 'under-covered' geographic areas. One month later, the package was followed up by an extra amount of approx. € 50 million available for all types of news media facing economic difficulties due to the pandemic.

Switzerland

Heinz Bonfadelli

In spring of 2020, when Switzerland was hit by the Corona virus like the other European countries, the Federal Office of Public Health BAG (www.bag.admin.ch) quickly launched a large-scale information campaign with posters and advertisements as well as online information in more than one dozen languages with concrete rules for behavior such as keeping distance. But it wasn't until August that the wearing of masks became mandatory on public transport, but it still wasn't when shopping in stores. By mid-August 2020, Switzerland was still affected by the Corona crisis, with around 38,500 infections and around 1,720 deaths since the beginning, with a population of 8.57 million. However, the affected persons are not only individuals due to illness, but also the (guest) trade and not least the media industry due to newspaper bans in restaurants, but above all due to the loss of advertising. At the end of May, the Federal Council (Swiss Government) therefore formulated an emergency package for the media amounting to SFr 30 million.

From the beginning, BAG expert Daniel Koch informed about the Corona situation almost daily, always broadcast in the main news of the public service SRG SSR radio and television. And probably analogous to the rest of Europe, the Corona virus largely dominated media coverage, prompting an increase in the public's use of news (Mediapulse 2020).

Quite early, at the beginning of April 2020, individual voices from the communication science of Switzerland were critical of the quality of media coverage. Among other things, shortcomings such as the media's handling of numbers, the focus on dramatic individual cases and fear-mongering, the virologists as infallible media stars, but also a lack of transparent reporting were questioned.

At the end of July, the Research Centre for Public and Society fög at the University of Zurich published a first systematic content analysis of 22 leading newsmedia from German and French-speaking Switzerland in the period from 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2020, based on a representative sample of 1,448 articles from 28,695 articles on the subject. The conclusion is that the performance of the Swiss media during the pandemic tends to be positive. The diversity of topics as well as experts, but with a dominance of men, as well as the relevance of the reporting was relatively high, although shortcomings were also noted, such as the low-level low level of thematic integration. Although a critical discussion about the government and the authorities as well as a critical distance of the media from the measures prescribed by the authorities were observed, these apparently behaved relatively uncritically, especially in the sensitive phase before the lockdown – in the opinion of the fög – and possible developments were not classified enough. In addition, a problematic handling of numbers and statistics was revealed. These general findings on media performance differ by media type, with public broadcasting performing particularly well. Tabloid and commuter newspapers, on the other hand, are less diverse in their reporting according to the fög analysis, tending to convey bare numbers without classification and to alarmist-dramatizing reporting.

From the point of view of media users, Mediapulse AG, which measures usage of TV & Radio in Switzerland, pointed out in a press release in April 2020 that in the first two weeks of the lockdown significantly more people sat in front of the TV, especially during prime time, and also watched TV longer.

A representative survey study of some 1,000 people conducted in March by the Institute for Communication Science and Media Research of the University of Zurich on information and communication behaviour in the Corona crisis found that the German-Swiss population attributes great relevance to the information of the Federal Council and the BAG on the one hand and to Swiss television on the other hand in the Corona crisis. Interpersonal communication also played an important role, e.g. via telephone or SMS, whereby Social Media was classified as not very relevant. From the point of view of the respondents, the journalistic media offerings contributed the most with their information for orientation and classification, and also helped emotionally to deal with uncertainties during the Corona crisis. At the beginning of the lockdown, the German-Swiss population felt well or very well informed, and confidence in the Swiss public institutions was very high. After all, a majority, especially the younger ones, found that the Corona crisis was over-addressed.

The conclusion of the two empirical studies of the situation in Switzerland is a good performance of the media, apart from some shortcomings, which were also intensively used by the people and evaluated positively. Good journalism is important and needed, especially in times of crisis, as the example of the Corona pandemic illustrates.

United Kingdom

Martin Moore & Gordon Ramsay

In response to the coronavirus epidemic the UK government imposed significant restrictions on movement, travel and public gatherings as well as the closure of non-essential businesses and industries in late March 2020. Although journalists reporting on the pandemic were classified as 'key workers' and news audiences – particularly on broadcast platforms – rose sharply, the negative effect on the newspaper industry was initially profound and is expected to remain so for some time. The abrupt loss of advertising revenue – expenditure across all UK advertising was forecast to decline by 50 per cent – has resulted in publishers ceasing print distribution of some or all titles, the furloughing of a significant proportion of staff (20 per cent at the national and regional newspaper publisher Reach Plc) and the temporary suspension of some local newspaper titles completely. On 17 April 2020 the UK government announced a three-month £ 35 million (€ 39 million) advertising partnership with the majority of the newspaper industry to offset some of the lost advertising revenue, although none of the funding has been allocated to independent news providers.