

The digital new normal: Implications on journalism and journalism practice

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Introduction

Amid the uncertainty caused by the coronavirus pandemic, one thing is certain: the gradual transition to digital platforms has advanced tremendously, with cross-cutting effects in almost all aspects of daily life. The digital world, where there are few or even no face-to-face interactions, has become more of a reality. Many academics, writers and commentators have described this as a “new normal”¹, as the world struggles to contain the Covid-19 outbreak, develop a vaccine, and find a cure. Even if the lockdowns are eventually lifted, the world has changed.

In journalism, the implications have become very clear. While there is a resurgence in news consumption, the already dying print media are being choked to death. People have increasingly turned to social media platforms for news and information even before the pandemic. Government content is threatening to crowd out the news media. Worse, government restrictions during the lockdown have limited the practice journalism. Finally, this new normal will have a profound impact on journalism education.

Implications

¹ Kluge, H.H.P. (2020, April 16). Statement – Transition to a ‘new normal’ during the COVID-19 pandemic must be guided by public health principles. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (website). <http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/statements/2020/statement-transition-to-a-new-normal-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-must-be-guided-by-public-health-principles>;

Lacina, L. (2020, April 14). Prepare for a 'new normal' as lockdown restrictions ease: Monday's COVID-19 WHO briefing. World Economic Forum (website). <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/13-april-who-briefing-coronavirus-covid19-lockdown-restrictions-guidance/>.

In the US, viewership of the three network evening newscasts, which had dropped because of 24-hour cable news programming and the shift to the internet and social media, went up 42 percent during the lockdown. The increase in younger viewership, ages 25 to 54, was higher at 67 percent². In the Philippines, three news programs (TV Patrol, News Patrol, and 24 Oras) were in the top five when an “enhanced community quarantine” was announced by President Rodrigo Duterte in March³. It might be a temporary bounce. But this is an opportunity to cultivate among viewers a habit of tuning in to the news every day, by providing reliable and compelling journalism.

Like the rest of the economy, however, the pandemic took its toll on the newspaper business. The high cost of publishing, long been a pressure on the economic viability of print media, became untenable with newsstands shut down. At least three newspapers in the Philippines (*Malaya*, *Manila Standard Today*, and *Abante*) suspended their print editions, joining dozens, if not hundreds of others across the globe. The Murdoch family’s News Corp. alone suspended publication of 60 newspapers⁴. This phenomenon was accompanied by job losses. Only the bigger publications, some attached to business conglomerates, were able to withstand this existential threat.

News organizations fortunately took full advantage of social media for content distribution. So did government and government officials. The objective was of course to try to bypass the

² Jones, T. (2020a, April 16). America is watching the evening news again. TV news numbers are up. Way up. The Poynter Institute (website). <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2020/america-is-watching-the-evening-news-again-tv-news-numbers-are-up-way-up/>.

³ ABS-CBN Corp. (2020, March 13). National TV Ratings (March 11-12, 2020). ABS-CBN.com. <https://www.abs-cbn.com/newsroom/tv-ratings/2020/3/13/national-tv-ratings-march-11-12-2020?lang=en>.

⁴ Smyth, J. 2020, (April 1). News Corp to stop printing 60 Australia titles due to coronavirus. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/16d97b5f-acca-466d-80d9-4375db79730b>.

judicious filtering and fact-checking of the news media. It was already a tall order for the news to compete with social media and streaming services like Netflix⁵. Amid Covid-19, they had to contend with politicians' virtual press conferences packaged like news broadcasts—examples are Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York and Mayor Isko Moreno of Manila. US President Donald Trump held White House news briefings on the same timeslot as 6 p.m. television newscasts, to try to bolster his political standing⁶. Not to be outdone, the Duterte government came up with a full lineup of Covid-19 programming, from morning to midnight. In contrast, news and entertainment programming in private media had to be reduced⁷.

Journalists were also subjected to Covid-19 quarantine protocols and precautions; as a consequence, many were sidelined. In the Philippines, CNN Philippines and radio station DZMM were forced to shut down temporarily for disinfection because of exposure to infected persons⁸. Three anchors belonging to the top TV networks, ABS-CBN and GMA, were asked not to report for work because they are senior citizens, a demographic considered among the most vulnerable to the disease.

⁵ Koeze, E. & Popper, N. (2020, April 7). The Virus Changed the Way We Internet. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html>.

⁶ Jones, T. (2020a, April 16). President Trump seems to have a reason to hold coronavirus press conferences around 6 p.m. Eastern. So what is it? The Poynter Institute (website). <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2020/president-trump-seems-to-have-a-reason-to-hold-coronavirus-press-conferences-around-6-p-m-eastern-so-what-is-it/>.

⁷ GMA Network Inc. (2020, March 15). GMA is temporarily suspending the production of some TV programs amid COVID-19 crisis. GMA Network (website). <https://www.gmanetwork.com/international/newsandevents/1120/gma-is-temporarily-suspending-the-production-of-some-tv-programs-amid-covid-19-crisis/story>.

⁸ CNN Philippines Staff. (2020a, March 18). CNN Philippines temporarily goes off air as building undergoes disinfection. CNN Philippines. https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/18/CNN-Philippines-Worldwide-Corporate-Center-coronavirus-COVID-19-case.html?fbclid=IwAR0tIcK02947-gR2OeWbg2KkRkTnPCSuld1NsvABfSOYkCRspl_YhB69GJc;

CNN Philippines Staff. (2020b, April 2). DZMM temporarily halts operations as personnel go on quarantine. CNN Philippines. <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/2/dzmm-suspends-operations-quarantine-covid-19.html>.

What raised the alarm among journalism practitioners and academics were government restrictions on journalism, specifically the mobility of journalists. The government task force that led the Philippines' Covid-19 response limited to only half the number of journalists and media workers allowed to go outside their homes or do fieldwork. Aside from a requirement to secure official badges, journalists were asked to go through a second layer of accreditation and provide more personal information to obtain a second badge. This second badge contained a QR code for scanning by police or military at quarantine checkpoints. Press briefings of the Malacañan Presidential Palace and the different Cabinet departments were conducted virtually and in many instances, questions from journalists were pre-screened. The time for follow-up questions was often limited. In Malacañan Palace itself, reporters were banned from the briefing room altogether⁹. These restrictions weighed down on the ability of news organizations to do quality journalism.

The role of competent journalists during pandemics, in which carefully vetted news on the public health emergency could spell the difference between life and death, cannot be underscored enough. Waszak et al. (2018)¹⁰ flagged “fake, misleading and over-interpreted health news” on social media as “the potential threat for public health,” after finding out that 40 percent of frequently shared links to news items contained text they had classified as fake news. Writing in *The Lancet* at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak in Asia, Shimizu (2020)¹¹ found that fake

⁹ Cabico, G. K. & Mendez, C. (2020, March 27). Media no longer allowed inside Palace's briefing room during Luzon-wide lockdown. Philstar.com. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/03/27/2003783/media-no-longer-allowed-inside-palaces-briefing-room-during-luzon-wide-lockdown>.

¹⁰ Waszak, P. M., Kasprzycka-Waszak, W., & Kubanek, A. (2018). The spread of medical fake news in social media—the pilot quantitative study. *Health policy and technology*, 7(2), 115-118.

¹¹ Shimizu, K. (2020). 2019-nCoV, fake news, and racism. *The Lancet*, 395(10225), 685-686.

news and misinformation had contributed to racism against the Chinese and discrimination against patients in Japan. Shimizu called on the mass media to:

also take responsibility for providing correct information and creating comprehension among citizens. Journalists have an important role in health communication and should acknowledge that their strong but inaccurate and misleading headlines agitate members of the public, cause fear, impinge on public communication, and diminish countermeasures for the outbreak (Shimizu, 2020).

Shimizu also called for cooperation and open communication between health-care professionals and news media practitioners, such as by disseminating information on what is “known or unknown” about the new coronavirus disease, to eliminate fake news and misinformation and their ill effects.

Reaction

In a joint statement on March 20, 2020, Philippine news organizations and journalists expressed opposition to government media accreditation rules during the lockdown: “Media are also frontline service providers and, as such, should be able to determine how to effectively carry out their work. This includes deciding who to deploy to the field, man the offices, stay at home, and when to rotate these duties. Most media houses have, on their own, undertaken measures to keep their staff safe. We also recognize that reasonable restrictions that have to do with safety and health can be imposed on journalists’ movement and behavior, such as requiring disinfection before and after entering an affected place or banning face-to-face interviews with infected

patients. But all such restrictions should be covered by clearly defined rules and not hamper journalists' ability to perform their work"¹².

On May 5, broadcast industry regulators ordered ABS-CBN, the Philippines' largest media network, to stop airing. The legal basis was the expired congressional franchise of ABS-CBN, owned by the influential Lopez family. Critics however saw the move as yet another attempt by the Duterte government to stifle press freedom, after previous actions against the owners of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Rappler news website head by the journalist Maria Ressa. The closure of ABS-CBN came as a shock as the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) had promised legislators it would grant a temporary license to ABS-CBN after its franchise expired on May 4, 2020, a normal practice that benefited other broadcast companies with pending applications for the renewal of their franchises before Congress. Solicitor General Jose Calida, described by Malacañan Palace as an "alter-ego" of President Duterte, had threatened to file graft cases against NTC commissioners if they allowed ABS-CBN to operate¹³.

Taking ABS-CBN off the airwaves happened in the middle of the pandemic, when its newsgathering capabilities and extensive reach throughout the country was most needed by the public. The shutdown of the TV network took away an important source of news, information and entertainment for millions of locked-down Filipinos. Public outcry ensued and various sectors issued statements condemning the closure and supporting ABS-CBN. Veteran journalist and editor Vergel Santos, a member of the board of the Center for Media Freedom and

¹² Joint Statement. (2020, March 20). PCOO Accreditation: Unnecessary, Unreasonable, Unconstitutional. Rising Sun Blog. <https://risingsun.dannyrao.com/2020/03/20/joint-statement-pcoo-accreditation-unnecessary-unreasonable-unconstitutional/>.

¹³ Salvosa, F. (2020, May 6). Top Philippines TV network told to close under Duterte pressure. *Asia Pacific Report*. <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2020/05/06/top-philippines-tv-network-told-to-close-under-duterte-pressure/>.

Responsibility, the media nonprofit and press freedom advocate, noted that ABS-CBN had been “stepping up in its role” as a news source and watchdog of the government amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Santos told ABS-CBN News: “We are being blindsided here. We’ve been locked down and therefore focused on our own well-being, and this government is taking advantage of all of this incapacity”¹⁴.

ABS-CBN’s closure forced its news division to shift to Facebook and Youtube livestreaming, with notable results. Flagship evening newscast TV Patrol began rebroadcasting online two days after the shutdown, drawing 8 million views on Facebook and 784,000 on Youtube, and trouncing its rival 24 Oras of GMA Network, which had 950,000 viewers on Facebook and 369,000 in Youtube. While this has positive implications on the future of digital news distribution and consumption, the fate of 11,000 workers of ABS-CBN hung in the balance. The media network told the Supreme Court in a petition to stop its closure that it was losing P35 million (US\$694,000) a day¹⁵.

Journalists must collectively push back on unnecessary restrictions to preclude the possibility that some of these might become permanent post-lockdown. Beyond the lockdown, news organizations must continue to assert their roles as public sources of verified and contextualized information, as sense-makers and as watchdogs. This is by doing good journalism that sets them apart from state-sanctioned content or even propaganda, and debunking wrong information,

¹⁴ Esguerra, C. (2020, May 5). ‘Traitorous attack’: Shutdown order on ABS-CBN denounced. News.ABS-CBN.Com.

<https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/05/20/traitorous-attack-shutdown-order-on-abs-cbn-denounced>.

¹⁵ Yap, C. (2020, May 8). Shuttered ABS-CBN’s Newscast Gets 8 Million Facebook Views. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-08/shuttered-abs-cbn-s-newscast-gets-8-million-facebook-views>

misinformation and disinformation. Lockdown or no lockdown, journalists cannot abdicate on these functions to anyone, not even to the government.

Conclusions

Given these new realities, the transition to digital platforms will have to accelerate. While not all news organizations have the same resources as the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and other giants, their aggressive push for digital subscribers points to a way forward for the industry¹⁶. News organizations will have to meet readers where they are—quarantined perhaps and holed up in their homes, more predisposed to using their computers and mobile phones to get information, entertainment and news.

The same is true for journalism education. Education may be recession-proof, but is it pandemic-proof? Dans (2020)¹⁷ argues that “blended learning” or the combination of face-to-face and online teaching-learning activities will become the benchmark of pedagogy and will no longer be just an option. Journalism educators will have to focus on acquiring digital skills to be able to train aspiring reporters in doing more and effective online research, producing more video and audio content, publishing content to digital platforms, and conducting remote news coverage and interviewing.

¹⁶ Benton, J. (2020, February 10.) The Wall Street Journal joins The New York Times in the 2 million digital subscriber club. Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/02/the-wall-street-journal-joins-the-new-york-times-in-the-2-million-digital-subscriber-club/>.

¹⁷ Dans, E. (2020, April 13). The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Unleashed A Revolution In Education: From Now On, Blended Learning Will Be The Benchmark. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2020/04/13/the-coronavirus-pandemic-has-unleashed-a-revolution-in-education-from-now-on-blended-learning-will-be-the-benchmark/#6c04a547536f>.

“When this is over” became the go-to phrase of the lockdown, followed by an expression of desire to do something that was always done before people were forced to stay indoors. There is a possibility that some activities taken for granted prior to the lockdown will be difficult to do or no longer possible. It will be challenging and will take a lot of getting used to, but whether in journalism, communication, education or other fields, people separated by physical distance will have to find virtual ways to be together.

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