



CHAPTER 9

How COVID-19 Affected the Practice of Investigative Journalism in Norway and China

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike other global crises, the COVID-19 pandemic offered researchers a unique opportunity to better understand the ways in which journalistic practices in the digital era could be adapted to handle new challenges. In

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this chapter, we are concerned with practices related to investigative journalism and social media use among journalists.

By engaging with the very different cultural settings of China and Norway, this chapter will elaborate upon the global pandemic's impact on investigative practices, routines and roles. It relies on interviews with journalists, editors and other stakeholders in the field to capture thick descriptions of present conditions and shed new light upon investigative journalism's ability to meet new crises going forward. The choice of national settings for this inquiry is a response to the calls of some academics for more comparative approaches to journalistic practices between democratic countries and those that are not considered democratic (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2020; Zelizer, 2013), especially given investigative journalism's abiding interest in holding power to account. Exploring investigative journalism in China has its difficulties, however. De Burgh (2003), an expert on investigative journalism in China, advocates for simply asking reporters how they *perceive* their role as investigative journalists. This is especially relevant in a society such as China's with its strict censorship and limitations upon the criticism of authority in relation to its Western counterparts. This consideration is reflected in the approach taken in the interviews conducted for this inquiry. Despite the differences between the countries studied and the contexts in which journalism takes place, we found that productive comparisons could still be drawn.

CRISIS JOURNALISM

Information is crucial in times of crisis, which are characterised by profound uncertainty regarding what happened, how it happened and how it can be resolved (Rosenthal et al., 1989). In people's quest for understanding and meaning, journalism is a vital ally, and the various roles of journalism in crises have been explored in relation to certain media rituals (Durham, 2008), community recovery (Frances Perreault, 2021), and the stress suffered by journalists during crisis reporting (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002). Another aspect of this relation is the crisis's impact upon journalistic practice, which requires the researcher to go beyond the exploration of the routines in journalistic production (Berkowitz, 1992; Tuchman, 1973) to understand instead how journalists handle the disruption of those routines.

Previous research has shown that journalistic organisations are often able to cope with even major disruptions of this type. For example, Norwegian journalists were able to carry on with their work in the midst of a terror event in Oslo even when their newsroom was seriously

damaged by a bomb blast (Konow-Lund & Olsson, 2016). The ability of the newsroom to improvise in a crisis depends on its ability to quickly grasp new situations, as well as the organisation's history and culture (Olsson, 2009). The nature of the crisis also makes a difference (for example, is it long term, like a pandemic, or immediate and abrupt, like a terror attack?). COVID-19 is an interesting example because, relative to most other crisis events, it stretched over a number of years, which made it possible for journalists to learn and adjust practices as it unfolded. During the pandemic, as well, we saw managers trying to reshape existing practices rather than start anew (García-Avilés, 2021; Mare & Santos, 2021).

When exploring journalistic practices, one cannot ignore the use and impact of social media. Thus, a salient issue in the past decade's research on those practices has been the impact of social media and new information technologies. Hermida (2010), for example, introduces the concept of 'ambient journalism' to capture the ways in which new information technologies are transforming journalism into an 'awareness system' aimed at facilitating and regulating flows of information. In this new landscape of digital information, audiences' relationships with journalism have changed in many ways. For example, new processes of verification have emerged that derive from the tendency of social media users to question the individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism and instead engage with outside networks of expertise and authority. Research shows that related calls for transparency and verification mostly involve the correction of factual errors, while more substantive aspects of news production remain beyond this audience's purview (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). Belair-Gagnon (2015) argues that social media has posed a real challenge to the BBC in this regard, especially in terms of striking a balance between connecting with the audience and maintaining the organisation's traditional authority over content. Social media also handed tech-interested journalists a more central role in the newsroom.

In this chapter, we are concerned with journalistic practices related to social media during crisis events. Based on a study of the BBC's coverage of the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 and the Norway attack in 2011, Bennett (2016) concludes that social media use is unlikely to lead to any substantial increase in the use of nonofficial sources. Likewise, based on an examination of journalism surrounding the Norway attack in 2011, Konow-Lund and Olsson (2016) found that local journalists integrated social media to some extent but insisted throughout that traditional practices related to objectivity, autonomy and immediacy continued to guide

their work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, data-driven journalism came to represent a new way for journalists and journalistic institutions to regain or restore their authority (Wu, 2021).

When it comes to investigative journalism, we know from previous research that it is resource intensive (Hamilton, 2016) in terms of not only funding but also staffing, skillsets, experience and time spent. Yet there is limited knowledge concerning investigative journalism in times of crises. Societal reliance on government sources increases during a crisis, which means that journalists tend to report crises in a way that favours those in power (Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015). Starkman (2014) attributes the shortcomings of the business press in reporting on the financial crisis of 2008 to an overreliance on access reporting over accountability reporting, the latter of which is the traditional approach of investigative journalism. In another study of the 2011 Oslo terror attacks, Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou (2018) show how crisis journalism shied away from its critical remit in favour of presenting a consensus-based rally-around-the-flag national crisis discourse. In their study on the COVID-19 pandemic, Johansson et al. (2023) demonstrates instances of rally-around-the-flag effects in all Nordic countries. Yet, these effects were rather short lived and disappeared within a few months.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND PERCEIVED INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN TWO VERY DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

To understand how to engage with the practices, routines and roles of investigative journalism during a crisis, we must first highlight some of the literature on investigative journalism in general. Waisbord (2000) observes that many South American journalists do not have the same resources as their American colleagues to dedicate to systematic and technological investigations but nevertheless consider all their work to be ‘watchdog’ rather than thoroughly objective in nature. Here, we will identify other perspectives on investigative journalism, following de Burgh, who writes: ‘My premise is that we may learn something of value from listening to how journalists (one category of media producers) characterise their activities and see how they reflect and perhaps influence social change’ (de Burgh, 2003, p. 801). This inquiry’s point of departure encompasses two very different countries with disparate political systems and information environments. For example, Norway has consistently ranked first in the RSF’s

World Press Freedom Index during the pandemic since 2020, while China has ranked at the very bottom of the index (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Chinese investigative journalists have also faced unique challenges since 2000 regarding fast-developing technology such as the Internet, an ever-more-restrictive political environment, growing economic difficulties, and the lack of a legal system (Dong, 2009; Haiyan & Jichen, 2021; Li & Sparks, 2018; Liu, 2016; Xiao, 2017; Zhang & Cao, 2017). While other parts of this book have focused on how new forms of investigative practice arise within a Western or Global North/Global South media ecology, this chapter extends its geographical remit to the East as well.

While investigative reporters in the West strive to hold power to account, Chinese investigative journalism serves as an extension of state power to monitor or control local influence and enhance ‘socialist democracy’ by helping the party gain the public’s trust (Su, 2002; Wang & Lee, 2014). Interestingly, these journalists also see themselves as the conscience of Chinese society (Li, 2007; Wang & Lee, 2014), ‘finding aspects of society that had remained hidden; exposing them to surprise the audience and win its sympathy; using their findings to extend the moral horizons of that audience’ (de Burgh, 2003, p. 815). Chinese scholars point out that investigative journalism has a special role in Chinese society, shouldering the responsibilities of leading public opinion and propagating party ideology (Li, 2016), and that Chinese investigative journalists have a duty to maintain social stability, deliver reliable information, hinder the spread of rumours, and explain and analyse complex problems, especially in the digital age (Zhang & Cao, 2017). Ultimately, this kind of journalism reminds society of its values and signals to individuals and institutions that they are betraying those values (de Burgh, 2003). While investigative journalism in China is a fraught notion at best, reporters do view their work as investigative, especially since the 1990s (de Burgh, 2003; Wang & Lee, 2014). Therefore, we are indeed able to conduct this inquiry as a comparison between the professional perspectives of investigative journalists in Norway and China, especially in the context of the pandemic and the use of social media to spread disinformation during that time.

A SHORT HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN NORWAY AND CHINA

Investigative journalism in Norway borrows its practices and methods of gathering information from the American ‘watchdog’ journalistic tradition (Houston, 2009; Waisbord, 2000). It was therefore no coincidence that when the Foundation for Investigative Journalists was established in 1990 at Norwegian Broadcasting, a leading speaker at the event was the American editor and investigative journalist Robert W. Greene (Lindholm, 2015). Greene (<https://www.skup.no/om-skup>) worked for 37 years as editor of *Newsday*, a newspaper that won several Pulitzer Prizes for its stories. Another source of inspiration for Scandinavian journalists in general was the US organisation known as the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), established in 1976, and the coordinators of the seminar that hosted Greene were Swedish members of IRE (Lindholm, 2015, p. 286). One attendee at Greene’s lecture described the atmosphere as a revival meeting, and another remarked upon the collaborative turn in journalism which was then underway (p. 286). Importantly, Greene had just finished leading a team of volunteer investigative reporters who had come together to continue the work of a colleague who had been murdered by organised crime because of his work. By inviting Green to their seminar, the Norwegian journalists hoped to infuse some of that collaborative spirit into their own foundation.

While the diffusion of American investigative journalism into European practices has been studied by several scholars over the last two decades (Baggi, 2011; van Eijk, 2005), its impact on China is much less clear (Chi, 2016). For example, Chinese investigative journalism is not too concerned with democratic rights but instead complies with traditional Chinese values (de Burgh, 2003), meaning that its social functions and definitions are quite different from the liberal model. Nevertheless, de Burgh (2008) traces the practice back to 700 CE in China, when inspectors submitted reports to the government about the economic and social conditions they encountered on their travels around the country. Other academics locate the origin of investigative journalism in the history of the early modern press in China (Wang & Lee, 2014). Dong (2009) traces investigative journalism to *Shen Bao*, which is regarded as the ‘first modern newspaper’ in China: ‘in the 1870s Chinese journalists did not know what might be called “investigative journalism”, but in fact, their practice already constituted investigative reporting’ (Dong, 2009, p. 64).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this chapter involves semi-structured qualitative interviews with informants from both China and Norway undertaken during COVID-19 between 2021 and 2022. The first interviews in Norway took place early in 2021, approximately 10 months after the first pandemic-related lockdown. At this time, it remained very difficult to connect with reporters due to their preoccupation with the extra work which emerged during the crisis, especially because they were equally impacted by the crisis and often worked from home rather than in the office. Interaction was also hindered by the lack of vaccines and accompanying fear of infection, and, in the end, all the interviews for this chapter were conducted via videoconferences. We chose reporters, managers, developers and designers according to their work during COVID-19 or other experiences with investigative journalism. We had access to informants involved in ongoing research projects and selected new informants by asking the existing informants to refer us to others. Some had won national awards for their investigations, and they all came from different organisations, both national and local in scope. We conducted our interviews in two broad phases encompassing January and February 2021, the fall of 2021 and the winter of 2022. In the first phase, we focused on informants who could contribute to our understanding of the situation and context. In the second phase, we focused on journalistic practices which included the use of social media and raised the issue of verification of and access to sources.

In our Chinese context, we engaged with 12 informants who were producing investigative reporting during the pandemic, including eight current investigative journalists, two current editors and two former (and very experienced) investigative journalists who had departed their legacy media organisations but were still actively pursuing investigations in a non-traditional way, such as via we-media or ‘online news sources operated by individuals or collectives, who are often amateurs’ (Gao, 2018). All the participants were interviewed initially in 2021 and then asked to participate in follow-up interviews in 2022 to shed light upon shifts in their practice over the course of the pandemic. Only five of our Chinese informants agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews; the others refused, insisting that their practice had remained relatively unchanged or that the sensitive cultural and political context around COVID-19 restrictions, especially in 2022, was too threatening. In our Norwegian context, we interviewed 14 informants, including 10 investigative journalists who

were working during the pandemic, as well as three senior managers (an editor-in-chief, a news editor and a director) and one editorial developer. There were no follow-up interviews in Norway.

We initially planned to reach out to potential Chinese study participants via Weibo messages, WeChat, email or an introduction from a mutual acquaintance, but we ran into problems; for one thing, little contact information for investigative journalists in China was available online, and so many had left the industry that it became a struggle to find anyone still working. Additionally, many investigative journalists' Weibo accounts and WeChat public accounts had been shut down. Many journalists, especially the working investigative journalists, were very concerned about the risks of participating in the interviews, so they refused the requests. Thus, we eventually resorted to snowball sampling, which suited the Chinese cultural context's emphasis on existing relationships (*guanxi*)—people more readily opened up to referrals from people they trusted. The pandemic removed the possibility of face-to-face interviews with our Chinese informants, who then chose WeChat over phone calls because it was more secure. Only one informant requested a phone call, and another requested Let's Talk, an encrypted app for communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Norway

Changing Practices and Roles During COVID-19

In Norway, the practices of investigative journalism were challenged by a pandemic-driven lack of access to information, exacerbated by the difficulty of drawing upon the Freedom of Information Act. Authorities were reluctant to share information which they considered to be too sensitive, and they were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work and were unable to follow up on reporters' requests for information. These conditions did change from one phase to the next during COVID-19, and from one governmental authority to the next. As explained in the earlier discussion of VG's COVID-19 Live Tracker, VG reporters and developers were able to receive data from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health but in such a way that they had to manually enter the numbers into new forms to make use of the data digitally. Over time, VG organised and structured the data from the authorities so well that it reversed the flow, so that actors at

the Norwegian Institute for Public Health reached out to the VG developers to ask whether VG would share its data on COVID-19 with them. This was an unprecedented situation involving a media organisation which had generated data of value to the authorities. According to normal ethical standards, of course, sources should never ask to obtain information from journalists, but the Norwegian Institute of Public Health was different. This novel impact of data-generated investigative reporting during the pandemic has also been pointed out by other scholars (Wu, 2021). As we will see below, the ability to engage in data-driven journalism was to a large extent a matter of resources.

Norwegian investigative reporters did not consider their practices to have changed significantly during the pandemic. Nevertheless, their ability to work was clearly dependent upon the capabilities and resources of their respective newsrooms and media organisations (as would be the case in a non-pandemic setting as well). Through conversations with national, regional and local reporters, we soon uncovered salient differences between well-resourced and under-resourced newsrooms. For example, when pandemic-related travel restrictions and remote working arrangements limited reporters' access to sources, well-resourced legacy media organisations were able to shift to data journalism and train or hire the staff to implement it. One informant from such a newsroom also lamented how difficult it was to convince sources to engage face-to-face due to the risk of transmitting the virus. He recalled a time when his newspaper sent a team a long way to get a source on camera, but the source insisted on doing the interview online instead. The informant associated such developments with the pandemic-driven challenge of getting close enough on location—and to sources—to document a scene or verify information. Due to regulations concerning privacy, it was difficult for photographers or reporters to obtain the access they needed to do their work with, for example, photographs of hospitalised victims or even statistics about a given area or outbreak (informant, 30 March 2021). This senior reporter, for example, stressed how frustrating it could be when the authorities referred to personal data privacy regulations 'even when it came to statistics'. In other words, during a crisis such as the global pandemic, it became even easier for the authorities to deny the press access to information due to personal data privacy regulations.

In newsrooms with fewer resources, such as local media organisations, our informants confessed that they had generally held to the traditional ways of doing things because they lacked the opportunity to do anything

else. In some communities, as well, the pandemic did not even produce restrictions such as wearing masks. Reporters could go to meet sources in person, conduct their research and produce stories just like they always had. When we talked to editorial managers on a national level, they also acknowledged the distinction between exclusively digital story production and the cultivation of physical networking with sources. Their main question was whether something important had been lost in the journalistic production process during the pandemic. One editorial manager for a national newspaper, for example, stated that while many stories worked perfectly well digitally, the journalists' ability to extend their source networks suffered during the pandemic; he concluded that the digital shift, coupled with the restrictions of the times, led to the loss of information which could only arise through in-person contact in actual physical locations (editorial manager, 22 October 2021). In general, travel restrictions limited work among towns and cities but had little impact on more remote regions.

Early in the pandemic, several informants suggested that restrictions on travel and access to sources had limited their ability to access the documents which explained the government's decisions about pandemic policy (informants, 22 November 2021, 30 March 2021). One informant stated that the secrecy of the authorities in general represented the main challenge for the press.

There are many things which are kept secret. I'm not sure why. Maybe there is something to the idea that the authorities don't believe the press can handle the information in a responsible manner before a decision is made. Or perhaps the government does not want political discussions surfacing prior to decisions being made, and they want to gather as much information about the situation as possible before arriving at a decision and making it known. So, they keep the background material secret. Basically, this means that the Norwegian Directorate of Health is asked to investigate, for instance, the vaccination of children. Then, everything – like what the professionals think about it – is kept under wraps, super-secret, until the government has reached its decision on the topic. The result is that citizens are not party to the decision-making process but are simply told what the authorities decided. So, this secrecy has been a challenge for the press and still is. (Informant, 17 December 2021)

Reporters even distinguished between phases of the pandemic based on level of access to and quality of information. One informant characterised

the first phase according to the way in which authorities based their decisions on information typically coming from other countries. The second phase, in turn, still found that the general public was having great difficulty verifying research reports and scientific data, although by April and May of 2020, testing had finally produced more data (informant, 22 November 2021). Several informants independently defined the phases of the pandemic as spring and summer 2020 (first phase), fall to spring 2020–2021 (second phase) and late spring to fall 2021 (third and fourth phases). The first phase was, in general, characterised by the highest degree of uncertainty and secrecy.

From a National and Local Focus to International Interdependence

Another influence on Norwegian reporters' views of their roles as watchdogs was their degree of familiarity with working on an international level. One informant who had always preferred a national or local focus during crises suddenly found himself embracing a truly global perspective and called out several international press conferences over the course of the pandemic (informant, 21 October 2021). Some informants with experience as both investigative journalists and foreign correspondents (informants, 21 October 2021, 22 November 2022) could draw upon existing networks to fact-check information on the spread of the virus, vaccination, number of hospitalisations, pandemic-related decisions and so on. The reporters at larger newsrooms all stressed the importance of generating international sources and tapping specific and well-known institutions and experts within the field for information.

Other experienced reporters at small local newspapers likewise became interested in international issues and sources during the pandemic but found themselves limited by the local or national market of their media organisations. One local reporter pointed out that his newspaper had replaced its international news desk some years before with a desk for investigative journalism: 'You win some and you lose some', he added (informant, 21 October 2021).

The pandemic-driven reliance on data journalism was initially inspired by legacy media organisations such as the *New York Times* and *South China Morning Post*, which had long traditions of practice in this area. Well-resourced Norwegian newsrooms such as VG.no and NRK were typically able to pivot to a range of digital means of covering the pandemic's

progress and track the number of infected or hospitalised patients. On the other hand, investigative reporters at local newspapers actively relied upon the country's Right to Information Act to access information.

During the first phase of the pandemic, several reporters expressed an ongoing interest in understanding the challenges faced by the authorities, who were doing a lot of 'good' nevertheless. However, access to documents and sources was very limited at this time. One informant regretted the tension between the audience's need to know and the authorities' desire to save lives, which led to an occasional lack of transparency concerning official decisions about enormous disruptions such as going into lockdown (informant, 21 October 2021). Another informant thought that the first phase of the pandemic generally discouraged reporters and led them to be less inquisitive (informant, 22 November 2021). Still another compared the pandemic to the Norwegian domestic terror attack in 2011 in terms of how awkward it was for reporters to criticise authorities at such sensitive times:

In an ongoing crisis it is hard to partake in critical journalism delving into how the authorities have handled things. Now, we have established this investigation committee looking into how the authorities tackled the COVID-19 crisis, and these efforts will result in a report. This could trigger a new debate – when, for example, you analyse the discussions between political authorities and specialist health authorities and the choices that were made and their costs. Closures were costly in terms of money, health and the consequences for businesses and so on. You will be getting all that journalism, but it entails information we have little access to today. (Informant, 18 February 2021)

During the initial phase of the crisis, reporters stressed that one of their main dilemmas was how to generate information about a situation that required specialist medical competence and, in particular, where to locate those sources. This is one of the reasons for the aforementioned embrace of an international perspective because, they stated, much of what happened with COVID-19 in Norway was happening elsewhere in the world as well. In addition, political and expert decisions in Norway would often be based upon international data and analyses (informant, 22 November 2021). One senior investigative reporter, for example, pointed to the time he spent during the pandemic studying international reports and statistics and browsing various international websites to read about COVID-19.

He drew upon facts from websites in England, the United States, Denmark, Sweden and Germany for his own work and noted that his newspaper followed the European Centers for Disease Prevention and Control as an additional international source of important information (informant, 22 November 2021). Both investigative reporters and an advisor and researcher for the Norwegian Union of Journalists emphasised that there was less critical journalism practised and fewer critical debates conducted during the first year of the pandemic (informant, 18 February 2021).

In the interest of journalistic evidence gathering, travel (or at least some degree of professional mobility) is often needed. Early in the pandemic, however, there were many restrictions upon moving around geographically. This undermined the investigative environment in general, as it proved very difficult to mimic a real-world creative and social environment online (Olsen, Asker & Konow-Lund, 2023). One exception to this rule was VG.no's COVID-19 Live Tracker (see the previous chapter in this book), which was the result of a small expert team's fully autonomous initiative to develop a database that the audience could access itself. VG, its journalists, and its developers all thought of the live tracker as investigative journalism and submitted it for the field's annual award in 2021 as an integral part of a systematic effort to hold power to account (informant, 18 June 2021). It also led the way for other interdisciplinary, data-driven journalistic initiatives (see also Pentzhold et al., 2021):

It has been a huge boost for the newsroom, building internal competence. The authorities have held press conferences where they have presented information that, well, what they said – it was incorrect. We have the numbers to prove the errors in their information. We have also witnessed how other media organisations released news on the number of infected, etc., but their numbers haven't tallied with ours. We had to withstand pressure. Later, we received confirmation that other media organisations, relying on press conferences, got their numbers wrong. For us as a media organisation, this has been retaliation in the aftermath of Trump and all the issues concerning fake news. There is no doubt, according to my overview, that legacy media has had their comeuppance by getting their facts straight. There's no doubt that the pandemic has contributed to bolstering traditional media. Of course, there are many ways to look at this, and surely the media's coverage of the pandemic left room for improvement. But no one can fault the media for not bringing facts into the public discourse. I feel this applies on behalf of Norway; but I certainly think, too, a lot of good work has been done internationally. (Informant, 18 October 2021)

While data journalism was not new to Norway as such, the pandemic asked much more of the practice in terms of informing the audience, especially when both travelling and physical contact were so restricted early on. While the Norwegian Institute for Public Health collected data on the number of infected individuals admitted to hospitals, the authorities were not able to keep up with the public's increasing demand for information (Konow-Lund et al., 2022). Several informants considered social media to lack credibility, so they stayed away from it or simply observed rather than participated in it. One senior investigative reporter said he had dropped Facebook because it did not offer enough journalistic value, and he could find other ways of connecting with relevant users elsewhere (informant, 21 November 2021). He also pointed out that social media uses up too much time which could be better spent on developing stories themselves. He considered social media to be a place to gauge the effect of investigative stories, not a place to find stories.

Another informant agreed:

Yes, I think so. First, chaos really grabs hold on social media during such crises. So much weird stuff is written, and everyone claims to be an expert, and there is so much deliberate disinformation too, from actors trying to spread it [...] Due to this, I think that the readers fall back to reliable media. With the overview we made in our newsroom, basically consisting of numbers and graphs, we gave users opportunities to make up their own minds. That said, even then, some of the readers were sceptical, even about graphs. And typical feedback could be things like [...] 'Can the spike in known infections be attributed to a surge of people getting tested for COVID-19? Is that why we see higher numbers?' So, we see the need for more data. And since we compile massive data, what sorts of samples do we have? For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, we informed [our audience] about how many people had been afflicted, but the readers also wanted to know how many had recovered from the virus. However, there were no such statistics stipulating the number of recovered persons in Norway, individuals off the sick list after having corona. You were either automatically declared cured after two weeks or you [...] you died apparently. That's how it was. We didn't have these numbers. So, there has been a lot of fuss about the numbers and statistics which aren't collected in Norway, which readers want from us (at VG). Yet I do think that, if we can provide the public with an overview of numbers so they can make their own considerations, it boosts our credibility, as these are fact-based numbers. Absolutely no interpretations, just pure numbers. It bolsters our credibility. (Informant, VG, 30 March 2021)

Due to the abiding presence of disinformation in social media, users and the public in general have become more sceptical of ‘processed’ information. One way to address this scepticism during a crisis is to offer the audience unprocessed information, which is what data journalism can provide. Through cross-disciplinary initiatives undertaken by reporters, developers, web designers and managers, the audience can gain access to data generated not only by authorities such as the Norwegian Institute for Public Health but also by manual and traditional methods such as calls to possible sources by reporters themselves (informant, 21 October 2022).

In Norway, it was never a problem for reporters to request information; instead, the difficulty lay in whether the authorities could handle the increasing number of those requests. An informant from the Association for Editors, for example, recalled being contacted early in the pandemic by other members concerning such practicalities as how to attend virtual meetings in various locations around the country:

Reflecting upon the beginning of the pandemic, editors reached out to us and asked us to communicate with municipalities as to whether news reporters could participate in digital meetings. Particularly at the level of municipalities, digital meetings had been introduced, which also offered the possibility of closing such meetings to the public. We negotiated with mayors and managed to open the meetings to the public. (Associate director, Association of Editors, 25 January 2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the authorities’ lack of preparation, particularly in the municipalities and local areas, regarding the question of access to information during a global crisis. Norwegians, in particular, are very invested in the ways in which their officials handle freedom of speech and accommodate reporters and others.

Investigative Journalism and Social Media: Or Not

Some of our interviews took place approximately one week after the 6 January attack on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, and the topic of disinformation and fake news naturally emerged. One informant who worked as a factchecker in Norway emphasised that the pandemic proceeded in a cyclical manner, as did the information surrounding it. When professional journalists are able to identify those cycles, they can anticipate the related forms of disinformation to come. This informant also found that

disinformation was frequently imported from the United States to Europe, such as the notorious viral video known as the ‘Plandemic’, which was watched by millions before being removed by YouTube and Facebook. This video spread to Norway just hours after it was published in the United States, demonstrating the global digital ecology of conspiracy theories (informant, 11 January 2021). While the pandemic was itself global, the nations of the world responded very differently, politically and strategically, in terms of how to handle it and manage information about it. One informant thought that, following the Capitol Hill attack on 6 January, the United States might better be described as an anocratic society rather than a democratic one (informant, 11 January 2021):

There is no doubt that a small minority in society is highly focused on fake news and disinformation. They are deeply engaged in conspiracy theories and misleading [story] content which is negative about immigration and the authorities. We see examples of it daily. And things do happen, like in the USA, in Facebook groups and so on. Some of the Facebook groups generate more buzz than, for example, that which the Norwegian prime minister musters. So, primarily, it’s an intense fringe which is engaged in this. But they are very energized and contribute to the fake news, deceptive content and faulty information being disseminated in social media. The hype creates more visibility and impact. Upon consideration, we are convinced that this is a real problem in Norway even though we aren’t on the level seen in the USA [...] Of course, this involves some speculation, but we see in the data there is a substantial increase in activity around alternative media in 2020 compared with the year before, prior to the pandemic. This would be partly due to the algorithms at Facebook and how they are continuously evolving. It seems logical, at least on an intuitive level, that people have more time to spend on the internet because the pandemic has so many [of them] working from home. (Factchecker, 11 January 2021)

Our informant emphasised that it is not so much the number of people partaking in social media debates and conspiracy theories as it is the intensity of their engagement that worsens the severity of the ecology of disinformation. One of the things this informant’s factchecking company did during the pandemic was to investigative new ways of monitoring social media. They also spent more time on the analysis of social media content. In the interview, it became clear that this media company had gained a new awareness of ecosystems of disinformation: ‘We have a far better overview of this ecosystem today than what we had when the pandemic first

emerged' (factchecker, 11 January 2021). Ultimately, empirical data from Norway demonstrate the stumbling blocks around information access due to the chaos and lack of perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHINA

The Experience in China

Our Chinese informants did not perceive their roles as journalists much differently during the pandemic than they did before it. They readily acknowledged that investigative journalists need to hold power to account, expose hidden information, and present the truth to protect the public interest. They also acknowledged that what they were able to do in real life in China was quite limited, especially in terms of criticising the central authorities. Several informants used a provocative phrase to describe their situation: 'dancing with shackles within the red line' (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). This applied to their investigations as well as their publishing projects.

During the pandemic itself, the extent to which Chinese investigative journalists could work productively depended on the phase in question. At the very beginning of COVID-19 (that is, the first half of 2020), it was impossible to perform any investigative reporting because of the national lockdown. According to one informant, only a few journalists were permitted to even enter Wuhan City, where the virus initially appeared, so most interviews could only be conducted by phone (investigative journalist, 18 August 2022). Another informant recalled: 'Most investigative reporting requires on-site interviews and travelling to other places, and at that time these were quite limited. I was in Beijing then, and there was a policy that everyone returning to Beijing was asked to quarantine at home for two weeks, no exceptions' (investigative journalist, 15 August 2022).

When conditions finally started to loosen (from July 2020 into 2021), journalists' watchdog role returned but faced many limitations. China's dynamic zero-COVID policy meant that a city could be shut down anytime cases were discovered. This made it hard to travel to places without any guarantee of access. One informant described travelling to Shanghai just before it was locked down; when he returned to Beijing, the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control swiftly tracked his travel and required him to quarantine for seven days. He also noted that many of his peers had the same experience (investigative journalist, 17 August 2022). In

addition, he stated that it was quite challenging for journalists to follow the changing policies across the various regions of the country, which forced them to adjust their strategies for, reschedule or even sometimes abandon investigations (investigative journalist, 17 August 2022). One significant characteristic of Chinese investigative journalism is that most reporting is cross-regional (Guan et al., 2017), which in fact helped our informants to mitigate the interference of any particular set of local authorities. Nevertheless, they all relied on on-site interviews for investigation and verification because going to the scene of an event is a way to build trust with sources, curb misinformation, maintain the media's credibility and keep sources safe. Therefore, the changing bans on cross-regional travelling and partial lockdowns represented a heavy blow to the production of investigative journalism. One of our informants said:

I travelled to Inner Mongolia in April, but it was impossible to do any interviews when I got there because the epidemic situation was quite bad there, and it was almost impossible to go anywhere. Many places were shut down. So, you could not do any interviews even when you arrived at the site, and when you returned, you needed to do the quarantine at home. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Furthermore, as indicated, many local authorities took advantage of pandemic policies to interfere with journalists' work by restricting or monitoring unwanted activity. For example, China began using health QR codes to battle COVID-19, which record the results of PCR tests and one's travel history, including access to certain public places or forms of transportation. This makes it harder for journalists to have secret investigations or secret meetings with their sources when dealing with sensitive topics. As the previous informant observed, some work even requires journalists to hide their identities during the investigation, but that became virtually impossible:

The control over personal information was unprecedented, so at the time, everyone in China was transparent to each other because no secret would be hidden between people. Wherever you travelled, you would need to scan the QR code or be asked to check the travel history. For example, if I travel from Beijing to one place to do the interview, I would rather it not be known by others where I come from, but the travelling records will show it. Another thing is if we want to hide our identity and use a fake name but are asked to

scan the health QR code that is linked to our ID, it would be impossible to hide. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Another informant added that as the rules around the pandemic grew more rigid, it became riskier for journalists to pursue certain topics because they could be leaked so easily, bringing more interference from bans or even the local authorities:

As the possibilities of the topics being leaked increase, it greatly increases your uncertainties and sense of insecurity because you never know in what phase the work could be shut down. (Investigative journalist, 29 August 2022)

Most of our participants agreed that bans issued by the Publicity Department of the CPC had the greatest influence on the news production process. They went directly to the media to tell them what they could and could not cover. One informant mentioned that the bans were frequently issued during sensitive periods to maximise the impact of government propaganda and control the possible themes and areas of ‘public opinion supervision’ (that is, negative journalism) (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). This broad prohibition against pandemic-related stories gave rise to journalists’ self-censorship as well. For example, one informant investigated a case of fake vaccines that most of his peers considered very sensitive. There was concern over whether the reporting could be published at all, whether it would be deleted right away, and whether he would suffer any sort of pressure once it was published. When none of that came to pass, he realised that many topics probably could be taken on, but journalists were restricting themselves even more than the government was restricting them:

I always insisted that all kinds of controls and constraints consistently existed. The key thing is whether or not you want to do it. I never thought constraints were an important reason [for limiting the available space for investigative journalism]. (Investigative journalist, 15 August 2022)

Aside from its direct impact on their ability to do their work, most of our informants also pointed to the pandemic’s downward pressure on their salaries (and hence their initiative). One informant revealed that the basic salary in most Chinese media organisations was quite low, but the

payment for articles was relatively good; thus, the more stories journalists wrote, the more money they would get. Given their reduced opportunities to conduct investigations as well as the increasing number of sensitive topics, investigative journalists saw their pay drop precipitously (investigative journalist, 29 August 2022).

Later in the pandemic, policies became routinised, such as taking PCR tests regularly, especially to gain entrance to large cities; requiring the health QR code in circumstances such as cross-regional travelling; and adapting to varying quarantine policies in different regions. What made this phase different from the previous ones is that people became more concerned or frightened about the policies and punishments than about the virus itself. One informant noted:

The fear of the virus did exist at the beginning, but now it is almost forgotten. It is an infectious disease, and people certainly were afraid of it because it is deadly, especially those in Wuhan. However, when the virus became less deadly, people were afraid of being socially ‘dead’ if they were infected. That means once you got infected, people around you would show you a look of spite. Your organisation and all your colleagues would be unable to work for two weeks because of you, so they would criticise you. Your leader would circulate a notice of criticism within the organisation. For example, if you left Beijing without reporting the journey to your organisation, your leader would get punished. It has become a very terrible thing. Therefore, the situation has shifted from that you might die because of getting infected to that you might socially die because of getting infected, and it has ended up that you would be punished if you violated any policies for the pandemic. The announcements do not come from the enforcement agencies but from some measures from the organisations. Every organisation is talking about politics, your leader might be punished, and you might be fired and lose the job. I have forgotten the pure fear of the virus [alone]. (Investigative journalist, 18 August 2022)

One informant said that the government usually takes time to react to the outbreak of a catastrophe, which brings with it a buffer and creates some room for media to do related reporting, but eventually controls will be installed, leaving very limited opportunity for the media to reflect upon and criticise what the government has done (investigative journalist, 29 August 2022). Two informants thought that the effects of China’s pandemic policies and controls over journalism are becoming irreversible, at least for a long time to come, involving the news events that journalists

can cover and spurring their audience's loss of faith in the media due to the limits on their work (and therefore their impact). One informant added that the media is now more like a part of the administrative system, and politics is always the priority, so it is hard to imagine that the controls on the media would ever be lifted again (investigative journalist, 18 August 2022).

The Utilisation of Social Media During the Pandemic

Chinese investigative journalists relied more on social media than their counterparts in Norway both during the pandemic and long before it. The social media platforms which they considered most useful included WeChat, which offers multifaceted functions ranging from instant messaging to daily payment, and Weibo, a Twitter-like service. During the pandemic, WeChat was used on a daily basis for four main reasons. First, it served as an essential communications tool which was safer than the phone. Additionally, one informant said, 'You can use it to send documents, which is impossible to do through phone calls' (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021). Due to this functionality, several journalists also used WeChat for interviews via audio messages (which can be transferred immediately to texts) (investigative journalist, 3 April 2021). This platform allows for an accurate record of what sources said, although this meant that the interviews done via WeChat were restricted to less risky topics. WeChat did have limitations in terms of the ability to contact sources, one informant pointed out: 'WeChat is less useful when you are trying to contact someone you do not know. You need to add him/her as a friend, but if he/she doesn't accept your request, then communication wouldn't happen' (editor, 15 March 2021). On the other hand, limitations such as this on WeChat lead to sources with better credibility, another informant said:

Regarding the WeChat public account, relatively speaking, its dissemination relies on the chain between acquaintances, unlike Weibo, where anyone can comment or attack someone randomly. Generally, I think dissemination on WeChat is more reliable, whereas Weibo spreads a lot of disinformation, and the number of views has been false for a long time. I tend to communicate by WeChat public accounts because sources are relatively highly credible. Whoever you can chat with on WeChat, in most circumstances, their

identities have been verified, or you probably know what kind of people they are. (Past investigative journalist, 22 November 2021)

Next, WeChat was useful for locating initial story ideas and clues. The functions investigative journalists used most on WeChat were WeChat Groups, WeChat moments and WeChat Public accounts. Almost all the informants relied upon the many chat groups on their WeChat, including a group containing journalists, a group containing leaks and a group containing lawyers, all of which were filled with various clues and leaks every day. Therefore, they did not need to seek out leaks on Weibo, as they once had (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021). One informant claimed that he spent ten hours per day on average browsing different clue-sharing groups on WeChat (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). Another informant added:

We have some WeChat clue-sharing groups, and there are many reporters in these groups. For example, I have a group, and there is a person who will share various clues from Weibo every day. Now that our cooperation model has been significantly refined, different reporters from some media organisations allowed to do the newsgathering and production were gathered in a group of 500 people by some platforms, such as Tencent and TopBuzz (Toutiao, a Chinese news and information content platform), which are responsible for content distribution. The staff responsible for WeChat operation from these platforms will share clues from other social media platforms every day in the group. Basically, in my Tencent group, this staff shared clues about some trending topics from Weibo, so I don't use Weibo anymore now except for some significant catastrophic events such as epidemics or floods when many people ask for help on Weibo. When this kind of disaster occurs, I'll need to contact those victims, yet the contact details, such as phone numbers posted by many victims on Weibo, would also be shared in the group, so I just need to call them by phone directly. (Investigative journalist, 19 April 2021)

WeChat Moments was also often helpful to our informants. For example, according to one informant (investigative journalist, 10 November 2021), many lawyers posted the case they had presented, the court verdict and related documents on Moments: 'If a lawyer posted a court verdict on Moments, we would find more from it. That is the common way we find initial stories'. The WeChat Public Account, on the other hand, is sometimes used to publish long, in-depth articles and local news features and is

easy to retweet on Moments, so journalists followed some articles there to do further investigation. Additionally, some sources approached journalists on the backend of the WeChat Official Account. According to one informant, those who did not dare to call journalists directly might leave a message there (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). Finally, WeChat was used as a search engine, which might produce different results from Baidu (the main search engine in China).

Interestingly, WeChat was also used as a platform for crowdsourcing during the pandemic, although not often among the investigative journalists we interviewed. They crowdsourced clues, key sources or contact details of some sources. The problem was that using WeChat this way undermined the exclusiveness of their reporting. Once a topic was known to the public at large, according to one informant (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021), the competition from other journalists might increase, the investigation might be interfered with, or the safety of the journalist could be compromised (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021). In addition, the effectiveness of WeChat crowdsourcing was relatively low (investigative journalists, 3 April, 25 September, 20 November 2021).

Disinformation

Social media brought with it an information (and disinformation) overload, informants admitted. Nevertheless, their attitude toward this disinformation was unexpectedly blasé. They believed that they could recognise it easily, and they relied heavily on cross-checking and objective evidence in any case. The biggest problem with disinformation was the time it took to verify or disprove, particularly when video was involved. One informant said:

It is easy to use incorrect pictures and videos, especially on-site pictures and videos. It is difficult to verify the materials of an explosion – for example, a similar explosion might have happened before – especially when there are no buildings around the site for reference. It is common to see some reporters report an explosion but use video and pictures from previous years. Doesn't it increase the workload for reporters? (Investigative journalist, 20 November 2021)

With regard to trusted sources during the pandemic, our informants were hard-pressed to name one, mainly because they still relied on traditional ways of conducting verification, such as cross-checking and going to the scene themselves. However, almost all of them explicitly claimed that they trusted nonhuman sources (that is, ‘written or objective evidence’) over human sources (‘verbal evidence’). One informant claimed the written evidence was the most significant and reliable form—not an online screenshot but a legal document or medical record, for example (editor, 22 September 2021). Other informants also appreciated the objectivity of written or audio-visual evidence (investigative journalist, 8 April 2021). One informant added that verbal evidence was the weakest kind because some people would fabricate or hide things, and written evidence was a more reliable ally in court (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021).

One informant voiced the concern that some material evidence could contain errors as well (investigative journalist, 28 November 2021), and several informants (investigative journalists, 3 April, 25 September, 10 November, 20 November, 22 November, 28 November 2021) expressed their doubts about some of the written evidence provided by the authorities. One informant said it was common to discover that the authorities had lied. Another informant added that credibility would be higher if the information released by the government was not judgmental but rather descriptive and supported by the evidence (investigative journalist, 25 September 2021). One informant advocated for using different sources to verify and support these kinds of materials and for making one’s sources very clear so audience members could judge for themselves (investigative journalist, 3 April 2021). In all, our informants emphasised the necessity of cross-checking (with at least three different parties) before sharing information, governmental or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

In line with previous research on journalism in general and crisis journalism in particular, we can conclude that journalistic practices tend to follow established patterns of everyday news work. That is, journalists tended to modify rather than radically change their practices to meet the situation. In turn, differences in crisis reporting in China and Norway can be explained, to a large extent, by their everyday context and routines. Investigative reporting was rather slow to restart at the beginning of the crisis; when it did, new challenges and demands compelled new routines.

The main problem faced by our Chinese informants was their inability to criticise the government, which was also a struggle for Chinese journalists in their everyday work. During the pandemic, the Chinese authorities imposed new regulations which made investigative work even harder, such as the (frequently changing) bans on cross-regional travel. These policies also allowed local governments to undermine the journalist's role as watchdog and erode the profession's independence. In contrast, it appears that the Norwegian journalists were instead self-limiting in their analyses and criticism of the government's crisis measures due to their rally-around-the-flag syndrome, even though they also confronted challenges in both securing reliable information and physically moving around the country. The lack of investigative reporting in crisis is a real concern, as it keeps people in the dark and makes it harder for them to hold decision makers accountable.

There was also a difference between Chinese and Norwegian journalists in relation to their use of social media. In this regard, we can see how everyday practices informed crisis reporting. The Chinese journalists relied on social media much more than their Norwegian counterparts, thanks to the versatility and daily impact of WeChat in China. The journalists benefited from the convenient communication and immediate interaction with their sources, though topics had to remain generally less sensitive in this public forum. WeChat represented a means of avoiding political control and censorship in an everyday setting as well as a crisis.

In all, investigative journalism in Norway changed in character and became more data-driven in the interests of providing better information to the public. This tendency has arisen elsewhere as well (Pentzhold et al., 2021; Wu, 2021). According to Pentzhold et al. (2021), Norwegian journalists became 'knowledge brokers' during the pandemic thanks to their focus on data and visual presentations. Chinese journalists, on the other hand, lacked the same opportunity to collect and work with reliable data, which hampered this form of adaptation to the demands of the pandemic in their case.

This study underlines the larger need for joint transnational efforts in investigative journalism in times of global crisis. It was clear that the limitations upon access to information in China, which saw the first outbreak of COVID-19 in the world, impacted Norwegian journalists' ability to do their jobs as well. This, in turn, recalls the SARS outbreak in 2004, when China's initial stonewalling hindered information flow and responses at the global level (Buus & Olsson, 2006). As a global practice in

investigative collaboration takes shape, journalists will be better able to hold decision makers accountable for their management of crises at every level.

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