

Media sustainability in the pandemic conflicting world: Reflections from diverse perspectives¹

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Understanding media sustainability

The notion of media sustainability is quite contestable. There is no universal definition. This is perhaps because of diverse political and socio-cultural contexts within which news media operate. One aspect of media sustainability can be assessing it through the quality of content it produces. However, media do require enough resources of time, money, technology, and experienced professionals who are expert in producing quality content as per the public needs and demands. This implies that resources lie at the heart of maintaining media sustainability (Kluempers & Schneider, 2015).

Media sustainability is the news organization's capability to function effectively under stable political, legal, and economic conditions (Frere, 2013). In a sustainable environment, 'journalists and media organizations perform their roles without any intervention or fear of violence, and media organizations have stable legal and business conditions that make them enable to pay their staffs good salaries', gain institutional legitimacy by discouraging corruption,

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and foster overall media industry's integrity (Centre for International Media Assistance, 2014). Media sustainability also reflects itself in the ownership structure, which is pluralistic and that give ensure representation of all members of society regardless of any discrimination (Kluempers & Schneider, 2015).

Moreover, media operates at an intersection of three resources: technology, economics, and law and policy (Jamil, 2020). Conceptually, media sustainability is underpinned by an operating framework that encompasses all three areas of resources. For production and distribution, media organizations require technology that is cost effective and efficient, and that can efficiently distribute the produced content to the public. This means it necessitates a business model and an economic system that drives enough revenue to produce quality media content, as well as it requires a legal and policy framework that supports independent and free media. But it is crucial to recognize that business models may vary in different economic systems and socio-cultural settings, and thus a universal concept of media sustainability is not possible.

It is crucial to recognize that media have the capacity to survive even on minimal resources because of the unique financial attributes of information (Friedrichsen & Kamalapouri, 2017). In many developing countries, especially in the Global South, media organizations do operate with minimal resources as well and still they survive and operate (Gladkova & Jamil, 2021). Nevertheless, media sustainability is not just all about survival with minimum available resources, but it requires to focus on sustaining quality media. This means it necessitates to consider political, economic, technological, and social aspects together. This helps not only to ensure sustainability, but as well as enhances media's contributions to transparent, democratic governments that are responsive to their people, support human rights, are not corrupt and enable economic development.

The challenge of measuring media sustainability

Monitoring the sustainability of media systems is challenging because the issue crosses political, economic, and social factors. In countries that lack a strong market economy, advertising-supported news media is difficult to establish or sustain. In some countries, financially and technologically weak media organizations houses are supported either by businessmen with other commercial interests, or politicians with an agenda other than providing independent news and information. The International Research & Exchange Board (IREX) has created a 'Media Sustainability Index' to measure sustainability and to compare results across countries and over time. It is useful to measure the

sustainability of media across a wide range of factors ranging from economic, socio-political, and cultural environments, technological resources, plurality, independence, journalistic freedom, impartiality, safety, level of censorship and self-censorship (International Research & Exchange Board, 2016). However, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic has affected the operation media organizations in many parts of the world, especially in terms of business models and the used technologies. Therefore, new aspects would be needed to focus on to assess the broader impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainable operation of media in different contexts of the world, to mention a few: changing patterns of business models and resources' requirements; emerging news production and distribution techniques; shift in audience's choices and demands; the issues of media plurality and credibility.

Media sustainability in the pandemic world

The global economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are by now taking shape, as markets tumble, and countries take emergency actions to respond to the pandemic (Gladkova, Vartanova, & Ragnedda, 2022). As measures to contain COVID-19 spread around the world and millions of people are quarantined in their homes, reliable, fact-checked news is more important than ever. News audiences are growing in record numbers, but for many media organizations, income is falling (Cotter, DeCook & Kanthawala, 2022).

Many businesses that are affected by the economic situation are suspending their advertisements, and public events and conferences have already been canceled through May – and possibly longer. Some media report that their subscriptions and memberships are growing, but in the face of so much uncertainty, they already fear that readers may soon cancel.

'As measures to contain COVID-19 spread around the world, reliable, fact-checked news is more important than ever. News audiences are growing in record numbers, but for many media organizations, income is falling' (Warner & Cirelli, 2020). While news consumption has increased during the pandemic, the revenue has not followed. Instead, as the global economy is gutted, news outlets around the world have laid off staff, cut salaries and furloughed workers while journalistic conditions have worsened the COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting every industry.

For the media sector, coronavirus creates both opportunities and challenges. The current disruption may be unprecedented, but the media industry has been upended many times before in different parts of world (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Since the turn of the century, digitization of content, the rise of social

media and acceleration in mobile consumption have all forced changes to the way media companies monetize content (Jamil, 2022; Pavlik, 2021). In an era of digital change, media needs to find ways to secure their long-term survival and independence, which prompts scholars to investigate the notion of media sustainability from various perspectives.

Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increased discussion of what does media sustainability mean and how can it be achieved? Media Sustainability refers to the ability of media to play its vital role as the 'fourth estate' (Matschke/kh, 2015; Starosielski & Walker, 2016). In other words, it relates to a media system that provides citizens with 'useful, timely and objective information', and as well to a media system that can operate free and independent without political, legal, social, or economic restrictions (Matschke/kh, 2015).

Media sustainability in a pandemic world is the *World of Media's* first ever Special Issue. It emphasizes media industry needs financial models, as well as enabling socio-political and cultural environments that help media organizations to be able to keep fulfilling its diverse roles, which appear evermore important during times of COVID-19.

Articles featured in Special Issue

Articles included into this special issue focus on national or regional peculiarities of the COVID-19 influence. In the array of the articles there are presented the case of Algeria, the Cyprus case, the cases of Bangladesh and Southern Africa, "The Greek "success story", the case of India and the research of Russian public discourse. The main aspects of the academic research on the Coronavirus pandemic are psychological impact, evaluations of mass media and social media coverage, audience perception, communication patterns, including novel patterns of news use, the use of social networks, and changes in educational systems. Scholars conducted multi-stage studies based on conventional and novel approaches and used advanced computer instruments for the analysis.

The group of articles examining Bangladesh, Algeria, India, and Cyprus cases (Simons et al.; Loucif; Rani; Spyridou & Danezis) consider such research questions as media role during the health crisis, people's perceptions about news related to the COVID-19 pandemic, communication patterns and the patterns of news consumption, the level of trust to media sources and the traits of information concerning to its sufficiency or insufficiency and the level of clarity.

Researchers from Bangladesh pay attention to the media's role during the pandemic. This research issue is also brought up by Loucif in the article

'Assessment of media and risk communication during COVID-19: The case of Algeria'. Scholars discuss not only the assessment of media or the important role of risk communication in times of crises but also people's perceptions and the changes in media consumption during COVID-19. The patterns of news consumption are more precisely considered in the article 'News consumption patterns during the coronavirus pandemic across time and devices: The Cyprus case' (Spyridou & Danezis). Results of these studies confirm the increase of information at the beginning of health crises that caused information overload or even 'news fatigue' and 'news avoidance'.

The next aspect of research interest is the ratio between digital / online news portals, and mainstream sources of information. The case of Algeria presents that the respondents use many sources to get news about the COVID-19, and the traditional media such as TV was becoming more important 'in times of confinement in Algeria' (Loucif). While the case of Bangladesh demonstrates that people got more news from online portals than mainstream media but the majority of respondents trust mainstream media as a credible source of information. The situation in Cyprus (Spyridou & Danezis) shows that the pandemic 'reminded people of the value of the legacy outlets' but the increase in mobile news consumption is a strong tendency.

The article 'The Greek "success story" on the international media representations concerning the pandemic of COVID-19' carries out interdisciplinary research that combines social concepts and media studies. Stampouli and Vamvakas take into account 'the realization of social structure' through language and considers the coverage of pre-pandemic and pandemic situations in Greece in English- and Spanish-speaking media in the refraction of three concepts orientalism, europeanization, and globalisation. To reconstruct the traits of the reality, authors resort to metaphors through conceptual metaphor theory which supports metaphors as 'vehicles for understanding'.

Aslanov and Kotov examine in this special issue the case of Russia. They also refer to the theory of conceptual metaphor as it allows to research significant linguistic aspects and social and psychological ones in connection. Having examined metaphors in Russian media pandemic-related content, the authors described the influence of coronavirus on the audience's opinion in terms of the virus and the willingness to take a vaccine. After detailed analysis, the authors conclude that the used conventional metaphors ('flash' and 'wave') have a limited effect on the respondents and, in particular, the existence of the influence of metaphorical framing depends on the status of groups: vaccinated or unvaccinated.

The case of Russia was also examined in another paper approaching Russian context (Smirnova et al) in the article ‘COVID-19 public discourse in Russia: Semantic mapping’. It is another interdisciplinary research that represents ethnocultural and psychological features of media. As an important part of the media agenda pandemic-related mems are the research issue while semantic change (or semantic shift). Using new methodological approaches and NLP designs scholars identified the dynamics of changes in social perception of COVID-related phenomena in the first and the third waves.

‘Journalism pedagogy and ICTs in a time of pandemic: A case study of selected journalism schools in Southern Africa’ written by Mbongeni Msimanga, Lungile Tshuma, and Trust Matsilele is devoted to educational challenges during the COVID-19 that continues the researches on the changes in educational systems. Although it approaches the previous articles in an attempt to describe the social and political aspects (Aslanov, & Kotov; Rani; Stampouli & Vamvakas). The group of researchers argues a transition to Africanization of education in Southern Africa and the challenges it faced in time of COVID-19: a difficulty of configuration teaching and learning caused by a lack of ICT infrastructure and ICT literacy among the lectures, network coverage and inefficient face-to-face communication. The situation varies from university to university, and yet there is a strong challenge – the digital divide in society.

The last but not the least, Rani shows in the paper how the Kannada Newspaper organizations operated during the pandemic. Using in-depth interviews with the management and the editorial team, scholars focus on recent trends, challenges and opportunities media faced during an uncertain, rapidly transforming period.

Conclusion

The articles, featured in this Special Issue, address diverse issues that have posed challenges to the sustainable operation of media in the pandemic world. However, it is crucial to recognize that news industry was already unstable even prior to the onset of COVID-19 pandemic given revenues were down, and news organizations were shrinking in many parts of the world. The global health crisis has only made these issues worse. Despite multi-facet challenges for news organizations, still the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded some new opportunities for viable media operation amid the global health crises. As the online news consumptions has increased during the pandemic, now in many countries, newsrooms are adapting and innovating. Digital journalistic practices are being emphasized considering the evolving nature of news production and

consumption in the digital news ecology. The financial sustainability of news media remains a prime concern amid pandemic, but what we observe is the emergence of new sources of funding. There is a growing inclination towards the use of subscriptions' revenue and donor funding in addition to attracting advertising revenue and seeking government's subsidies where national economies can afford to support the news media.

Overall, the purpose of this special issue is to emphasize building an independent, enduring and financially sustainable news media system that can serve in the public interest. Therefore, we do not just focus on highlighting diverse issues and opportunities when addressing the media sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather we also emphasize to identifying the news content that can serve the public and societal good given not all news organizations define and practice the core mission of serving the society through promoting inclusive public dialogue on issues of common concerns and fostering democratic values. Hence, we envisage media sustainability not just in terms of financial sustainability of news media, but we recognize the social sustainability of news media through maintaining its credibility and public trust.

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