



Another COVID Causality: Global Journalism

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Abstract. This study investigates the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global media landscape and its consequential effects on journalism. Utilizing the secondary data analysis method, this study explores how the pandemic affected journalists worldwide. The study argues that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated media commercialization globally due to the ensuing global recession. Simultaneously, there was a noticeable push by politicians to exert greater influence over the media, seeking to conceal their misdeeds and shortcomings, as well as to propagate their narratives through the press. This encompassed discussions about the coronavirus's origin, transmission, and containment efforts, often as a means to gain advantages over domestic and international political adversaries. Many outlets, faced with fiscal and political adversity, unwittingly became conduits for such political propaganda, a consequence both of their struggle for survival and their lack of preparedness to navigate a crisis of such magnitude. Consequently, a surge of disinformation and misinformation regarding the virus's origin and mitigation permeated media outlets, resulting in a crisis of credibility. The aftermath reveals a disheartening decline in public trust in mass media that significantly impeded vaccination initiatives.

Keywords: Covid-19; commercialization; propaganda; misinformation; disinformation; trust; vaccination.

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1. Introduction

The decline in revenues poses substantial challenges for media outlets, compelling them to efficiently manage operational costs (Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic-related recession in 2020 triggered an estimated 11% decrease in the overall revenue of the US\$ 112.4 billion global media business (Nel & Milburn-Curtis, 2021). This downturn led to widespread layoffs and job cuts for journalists worldwide, resulting in acute financial strain and inflicting psychological and emotional trauma on two-thirds of journalists globally (Posetti et al., 2020).

In addition to heightened financial pressure on both media outlets and journalists' livelihoods, the pandemic period witnessed an increase in global political pressure on journalists. Since the declaration of the global pandemic in March 2020, political leaders sought to claim credit for COVID-19 mitigation programs by exerting control over the information dissemination process (Amnesty International, 2021). Simultaneously, political

leaders attempted to leverage the pandemic to gain advantages over their rivals in both local and global politics (Greer et al., 2021; Franck, 2020). This trend coincided with national and regional-level elections held in at least 76 countries and territories across the globe during the prolonged two-year pandemic period (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021).

The political dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic became particularly evident in the immediate aftermath of its emergence in China in December 2019. Countries such as the United States and Taiwan publicly criticized the World Health Organization and its director-general, accusing them of failures and having too close a relationship with China (Greer et al., 2021). The virus was initially labeled as the 'China virus' or a 'hoax' in global media outlets, citing Western political leaders, which downplayed the risks associated with the virus (Franck, 2020; Rupar, 2020). In response, China initiated a massive propaganda campaign, utilizing the global media landscape to disseminate widespread misinformation and disinformation regarding COVID-19 (International Federation of Journalists, 2021; Cook, 2021). The politicization of COVID-19 for political gains of leaders contributed to the global circulation of misinformation and disinformation (Ferreira et al., 2021; Motta et al., 2020).

Notably, the Corona Virus Facts Alliance (2020) documented 3,800 coronavirus-related hoaxes circulating worldwide until April 2020, with 500 reported in the United States. In the midst of the extensive dissemination of COVID-related misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic, Posetti & Bontcheva (2020), commissioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, provided definitions for these terms. They described misinformation as 'false information shared by people who do not realize it is false and do not mean any harm,' while disinformation was defined as 'deliberately engineered and disseminated false information with malicious intent or to serve agendas.' The article highlighted that despite calls from U.N. bodies such as UNESCO and the World Health Organization for state parties to support journalists in disseminating accurate information, some governments chose to implement measures that restricted freedom of expression instead. Such measures had a detrimental impact on news reporting and the ability to inform citizens (Posetti et al., 2020).

These developments encourage this study to investigate the profound impacts of COVID-19 on journalism. It seeks to explore potential interconnections among revenue decline, heightened political pressures, and their effects on journalism, influencing journalists' ability to fulfill their expected roles as disseminators of information and watchdogs of society (McQuail, 2010). Additionally, the study aims to address gaps in the existing literature, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the developments induced by the pandemic throughout the years 2020 and 2021. This study is unique as it incorporates the counter-narratives of both Western politicians and press, as well as Chinese scholars and press, on COVID-related controversies. It explores how these controversies contributed to the spread of misinformation, eroding public trust in global mass media.

The analysis of these developments will be framed within the context of four theoretical frameworks: market theory of news production, authoritarian theory of the press, credibility and the public role of media, and social constructivism. These frameworks guide the formulation of research questions: 1. To what extent has the amplification of media commercialization during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation by media outlets? 2. To what extent have media outlets encountered increased influence from politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic to

disseminate misinformation and disinformation? 3. To what extent has heightened media commercialization and the influence of political forces during the pandemic impacted the credibility of the media? 4. To what extent has the erosion of media credibility resulting from commercialization and political propaganda amid the pandemic impacted journalists' ability to fulfill their societal roles? The details of theoretical frameworks and constructions for those questions will be explained in the literature review. To analyze the research questions, this study will employ a secondary data analysis method for data collection.

2. Methods

This study employs the principles of secondary data analysis (SDA) to address the research objectives and extract insights from diverse datasets, providing a comprehensive understanding of trends, challenges, and impacts within the field of media and journalism. The focal points of the study include themes such as trust, financial and political pressures on media outlets, and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the global context and the breadth of issues under investigation, obtaining primary data for all aspects proves impractical. Therefore, the study leverages pre-existing data without necessitating new primary research and logically adopts SDA as its central method for data examination.

SDA, an established analytical approach rooted in utilizing data collected by other researchers, holds prominence in the domains of medical and social science research (Wickham, 2019). This method involves repurposing existing datasets, originally amassed for distinct primary studies, to investigate fresh research inquiries, thereby addressing novel perspectives (Castle, 2003). It enables the exploration of a wider array of variables than might be feasible in smaller studies and serves as a tool to tackle impactful research questions by amalgamating primary datasets, often beyond the original researchers' scope (Tripathy, 2013).

This study draws upon survey reports produced by esteemed institutions, namely the Pew Research Center, Reuters Institute, the International Center for Journalists, Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and the International Federation of Journalists. These sources were selected due to their consistent publication of studies on global or local journalism, including analyses of financial issues faced by journalists, challenges encountered during the pandemic, and media trust. Additionally, articles and reports from the platforms of journalists and individual scholars related to media funding by superpowers were scrutinized to discern their inclinations in influencing mass media during the pandemic.

The methodologies, sample sizes, respondents, contents, locations, and timeframes of the survey reports exhibit considerable diversity. Pew Research Center's surveys, conducted exclusively with American respondents in 2021, stand in contrast to the International Center for Journalists' global survey in the same year. Surveys by Reuters Institute and the International Federation of Journalists, conducted in 2020, featured respondents from diverse countries worldwide. Given these dissimilarities, no median or average calculations were performed. Instead, findings from similar variables were compiled to provide indications of the ranges of financial pressures, political pressures on outlets, and the impacts of trust.

Pew Research Center Surveys (2021). Four survey reports from the Pew Research Center, a U.S.-based nonpartisan think tank, conducted in 2020 and 2021 on American journalists, scientists, politicians, and common people contributed significantly to this study for collecting data on the impact of the pandemic on media finance, the livelihood of journalists, political influence, and trust in news. These reports, including ‘Coronavirus-driven downturn hits newspapers hard as TV news thrives’, ‘Partisan divides in media trust widen, driven by a decline among Republicans’, ‘Two-thirds of U.S. adults say they’ve seen their own news sources report facts meant to favor one side’, and ‘Trust in medical scientists has grown in U.S., but mainly among democrats’, focus on American respondents. The first report analyzes the financial performance of U.S.-based newspapers and TV channel companies for the second quarter of 2019 and 2020, utilizing data from the Securities and Exchange Commission. The other three studies explore American opinions on media trust, with over 10,000 respondents in each survey in 2021, yielding a cumulative response rate of less than 3%, and a margin of sampling error of around 1.5 percentage points.

Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report (2020). This report, conducted in 2020, collected data from approximately 80,000 online news consumers across 40 countries from five regions, including 24 European countries to understand their trust in media, two North Americans, four South Americans, two Africans, and eight from Asia Pacific region following the COVID outbreak. An online questionnaire was employed to analyze news consumption patterns. Samples were assembled using nationally representative quotas for age, gender, region, and education in each country.

Journalism and the Pandemic Project. A collaborative effort of the International Center for Journalists and Columbia University’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism project titled ‘Assessing and Responding to COVID-19’s Long-Term Impacts’ spanned two survey phases during the pandemic. The first phase, in late 2020, involved 1,406 journalists from 145 countries responding to a structured questionnaire in English. The second phase, conducted in 2021, covered 2,073 respondents from various linguistic backgrounds. Respondents included individuals aged between 25 and 49 years (65%), with 63% as full-time employees, 25% freelancers, 6% part-time employees, and 6% unemployed.

International Federation of Journalists’ Report. The International Federation of Journalists, a global union federation of journalists’ trade unions representing more than 600,000 media workers from 187 organizations in 146 countries, published a report in 2021 titled ‘Exposed: The Crisis Facing Journalism in the Face of COVID-19’ based on a survey from 1,308 frontline journalists from 77 countries across six continents. Respondents provided insights into the challenges faced during professional duties, pressures from state machinery, and the support received from their employers. Demographically, 42% were female, 58% male, with 57% employed and 43% freelance. In a separate report titled ‘The COVID-19 Story: Unmasking China’s Global Strategy’, the International Federation of Journalists conducted an analysis. This report is founded on a survey administered to respondents affiliated with its 54 unions spanning 50 countries. The primary objective of the analysis was to scrutinize how China strategically utilized media outlets across these nations to reconstruct its international image, particularly in light of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country in December 2019.

3. Literature review

The market theory of news production will be employed to analyze the financial pressures on media outlets and journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the authoritarian theory of the press will be utilized to understand the political pressure on the press. The study will assess the effectiveness of journalists' expected roles within the theoretical framework of credibility and the public role of media, and social constructivism.

3.1. Market theory of news production

The market theory of news production, as coined by McManus (1994), posits that news departments driven by market forces compete to provide the least expensive mix of content, prioritizing the interests of sponsors and investors to reach the largest audiences advertisers are willing to pay for (McManus, 1994: 85). According to this model, market forces influence the micro-levels of journalism, with investors, advertisers, sources, and consumers driving news production at various stages (Cohen, 2002). This dynamic extends to media owners aiming to enhance commercial revenue, while editorial decisions align with advertising interests (An & Bergen, 2007). The profit-driven commercialized strategy of media outlets, also termed as media commercialization, fosters substandard journalism, as the system compels media outlets to prioritize entertaining politicians, businesses, and public relations agents over the public interest (McChesney, 2003).

The 21st century has presented increasing challenges and competition for journalists globally, marked by successive recessions, political tensions, and heightened competition with the advent of online news and social media platforms (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Hanusch et al., 2020). Non-journalists challenging journalists by posting on public interests on social media platforms further adds to this complexity. The growing popularity of online-based media and social media has not only altered the news and operational strategy of conventional press but has also influenced viewer preferences, impacting their content and strategies (Chadwick, 2013). This shift has also intensified the distribution of misinformation and disinformation on both social and mass media (Newman et al., 2020; Anspach, 2017).

Recent studies highlight the increased financial pressure on global journalism to sustain itself in the market amid the COVID-19 recession (Posetti et al., 2020). Journalists, facing the unprecedented task of providing timely updates on the newly emerged pandemic, grappled with a lack of validated references and guidelines, contributing to the rapid spread of misinformation (Ferreira et al., 2021). The article further notes that this information dissemination crisis, spurred by both genuine confusion and malevolent intent, underscores the critical need for clarity and accuracy.

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to address the following research question (RQ1): to what extent has the amplification of media commercialization during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation by media outlets?

3.2. The authoritarian theory of the press

The authoritarian theory of the press, as postulated by Siebert et al. (1956), delineates a landscape in which the state exercises authoritative control over the press, curtailing its freedom to critique government policies. This theory characterizes the influence of autocratic regimes on the media, suppressing dissent and imposing censorship (McQuail, 2010). In

such contexts, the press is unconditionally expected to support the authority, when ideally the press is expected to serve the public interest. Ward (2014) further notes that repressive governments in many countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America regulate and censor media outlets, which are mostly private enterprises.

In the era of digital media, the state machinery not only endeavors to coerce the press into serving as propaganda tools but also engages in the distribution of disinformation through social media platforms as it happened in recent times during the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and leading up to the U.S. national election in 2016 (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The article further notes that the dissemination of state-patronized news through media undermines institutional legitimacy and destabilizes democracy, which ultimately develops mistrust among the citizens. This phenomenon is observed as governments, despite assuming power through elections and professing liberal or democratic core beliefs, sometimes attempt to control information similarly to autocrats (Berry et al., 1995). Glasius (2018: 527) defines authoritarian practices as patterns of actions embedded in an organized context that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or voice.

Recent studies and news reports reveal that politicians capitalized on the pandemic since its emergence in December 2019 to target political rivals both domestically and internationally, utilizing both social media and mass media systems (Greer et al., 2021). Western leaders and press labeled it the 'China virus' and attempted to link its origin to the consumption of bats by the people of Wuhan, China, or suggested it as a 'bio-weapon'. Such narratives were circulated in both mass and social media platforms and misinformed citizens (Greer et al., 2021; Motta et al., 2020). Greer et al. (2021) note that U.S. President Donald Trump blamed both China and the World Health Organization for COVID-19 becoming a pandemic while accusing his local political rival of using the virus as a 'hoax' to damage his administration (Franck, 2020). Hu et al. (2020) characterized the inclinations of Western politicians and the press to associate the coronavirus with Chinese culture as deliberate disinformation. This characterization highlights a stigmatized bias toward China and the Chinese people. In counter to the Western narratives, the Chinese state-run agency Xinhua (2021) comments that a coordinated anti-China smear campaign was 'gaining steam in the Western press' thanks to the 'flagrant information manipulation by Western media'. *The South China Morning Post* (2020, March 13), citing a tweet from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian, reported that the U.S. military brought the coronavirus to Wuhan during a drill in 2019. Cook (2021) observes that China invested a significant amount of money in circulating state-sponsored propaganda amid the pandemic, utilizing global media platforms and disseminating disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

These developments prompt the study to pose the following research question (RQ2): to what extent have media outlets encountered increased influence from politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic to disseminate misinformation and disinformation?

3.3. Credibility and public role of media

Media credibility has been a central focus of mass communication studies since the mid-20th century, particularly highlighted by Hovland & Weiss (1951) in their seminal work on source credibility (Gaziano, 1988). Credibility, or trust in the press, stands as a fundamental principle in mass communication, shaping the operation of the press (Golan & Day, 2010). Moreover, it contributes significantly to fostering political and social awareness among

citizens (Thussu, 2007). From a journalistic perspective, providing authentic and advisory information during any disaster is a primary purpose of journalism in a democratic society, as the press 'functions as an independent mediator between the government and the citizens by providing them information on the latest developments' (Habermas, 2006). A decline in public trust in the mass media hampers a nation's ability to inform its citizens and hold political leaders and government agencies accountable (Gaziano, 1988).

Some scholars contend that media outlets across the globe are losing credibility due to over-commercialized approaches, particularly when the media focuses more on promoting certain political leaders for their business interests (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Ariely, 2015). For lack of credibility, many people did not care about safety guidelines circulated by the mass media during the pandemic (Nelson, 2020).

The credibility literature motivates this study to address the following research question (RQ3): to what extent has heightened media commercialization and the influence of political forces during the pandemic impacted the credibility of the media?

3.4. Social constructivism

The term social constructivism was initially introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and later adapted into a mass communication theory by Couldry and Hepp (2018). Social constructivism posits that as society continuously undergoes a process of recreation or reproduction, mass media plays a crucial role in the restructuring of various sectors of life, particularly in the functions of social and public institutions (Deuze, 2020). In light of the theory, the press is hypothesized to impact various aspects, including consumer behavior, political campaigns and voting, public service announcements, ideological propaganda, and social control rituals (McGuire, 1986). The author also notes that media can contribute to the formation of rigid and biased mentalities. In the 21st century, it has become evident that the media not only influences societal reformation processes but also has a profound impact on social institutions (Deuze, 2020). The author further notes that social constructivism has played a role in addressing concerns amid the global pandemic.

Social constructivism literature motivates this study to pose the following research question (RQ4): to what extent has the erosion of media credibility resulting from commercialization and political propaganda amid the pandemic impacted journalists' ability to fulfill their societal roles?

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis portrays a somber landscape for the media industry. The pandemic has caused widespread financial hardship, increased political influence, and a decline in public trust. This analysis underscores the complex interplay between global events, media outlets, political dynamics, and societal trust, shaping the media's role in an evolving world.

4.1. Revenues of media decline

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, media outlets, particularly newspapers, confronted an unprecedented business downturn due to the sharp decline in circulation and advertising revenues resulting from movement restrictions and the pandemic-induced economic recession. The International Federation of Journalists' survey,

titled 'Exposed: The Crisis Facing Journalism in the Face of COVID-19', reveals that 37.69% of their 1,308 respondents across 77 countries reported a drop-in media outlet revenue. Additionally, 5.81% indicated that media outlets had to cease operations due to substantial financial losses. Among full-time journalists, about 7% experienced job losses, while freelancers faced either non-payment or job losses.

Findings from the joint study conducted by the International Center for Journalists and Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism indicate that 67% of the surveyed 1,406 journalists from 145 countries expressed concerns about financial hardships. Among them, 17% noted a staggering revenue reduction of over 75% since the pandemic's onset, and 43% reported a revenue decline exceeding 50%. In response to the financial challenges, 89% of the respondents' media outlets resorted to cost-cutting measures, including job and salary reductions, and even outlet closures. A further 7% suspended print editions, and 11% reduced newspaper print runs due to budgetary constraints. Remarkably, over 70% of respondents reported experiencing psychological and emotional impacts stemming from the pandemic, while 30% highlighted their news organizations' failure to provide protective equipment.

The Pew Research Center's survey titled 'Coronavirus-Driven Downturn Hits Newspapers Hard as TV News Thrives' underscores the substantial challenges faced by media outlets. Advertising revenue witnessed a substantial drop of 42%, while circulation revenue experienced an 8% decline. Among specific outlets, Fox's revenue increased by 41%, contrasting with CNN and MSNBC, which experienced losses of 14% and 27%, respectively. Local TV channels collectively grappled with a 24% decrease in revenues. The Reuters Institute's 'Digital News Report 2020' indicates that online news subscriptions increased in certain countries, such as a 20% rise (+4) in the United States and a notable 42% (+8) in Norway. However, despite increased online news engagement, profitability remained elusive due to the overarching economic recession.

4.2. Political influence on media increases

The International Federation of Journalists' survey, titled 'Exposed: The Crisis Facing Journalism in the Face of COVID-19', reveals that since the pandemic's onset in 2020, 73.9% of respondents experienced heightened restrictions, with 16.38% encountering legal constraints in their professional pursuits. Approximately 2% reported facing lawsuits or detention due to COVID-19-related reporting, while 2.95% experienced assault by politicians for their pandemic-related coverage. Almost a quarter of journalists encountered challenges in accessing government sources. Surveyed journalists from 77 countries commonly used terms such as 'precarious', 'terrible', and 'restricted' to describe the state of media freedom. Constraints extended to press conferences, where journalists experienced difficulties in posing questions, relying more heavily on government-issued press releases. Moreover, 73.9% of respondents noted increased professional restrictions due to the pandemic, while 59.19% reported experiencing heightened anxiety.

The joint study by the International Center for Journalists and Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism reveals that 20% of respondents faced elevated levels of abuse, harassment, threats, or attacks, surpassing historical norms. Politicians and elected officials emerged as prominent sources of disinformation, identified by 46% of respondents, along with government agencies and representatives (25%), and state-linked troll networks (23%). Nearly half (48%) of the respondents indicated that their sources expressed fear of retaliation for collaborating with journalists. Alarming, 10% of respondents reported public

abuse by politicians. State-backed censorship emerged as a common occurrence across the surveyed 145 countries, with 7% revealing government surveillance, and 3% reporting instances of forced data disclosure.

The IFJ survey report titled ‘The COVID-19 Story: Unmasking China’s Global Strategy’ highlights China’s successful effort to rebuild its tarnished global image within a year of the onset of the COVID pandemic. This transformation was facilitated by a more interventionist approach, as noted by nearly one in five countries reporting frequent comments from the Chinese embassy or ambassador on local media coverage of China. The report further reveals China’s proactive measures in intensifying its news offerings and customizing domestic and international content for each country in non-Anglophone languages. This strategic approach significantly contributed to an improvement in China’s global coverage, evident in the increase from 64 percent to 76 percent of nations acknowledging China’s prominent presence in their media ecosystems within a year. However, concerns about disinformation in national media were expressed by over eighty percent of countries. While China was attributed responsibility for the surge in disinformation by over a third of respondents, 58 percent of countries remained uncertain about its origin.

4.3. Trust in media declines

According to the Reuters Institute’s ‘Digital News Report 2020’, global trust in the news media experienced a decline in 2020, attributed to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Comparing the data with 2019, the report reveals a four-percentage-point drop in people’s trust in news, reaching 38% in 2020. Notably, only 46% of individuals who subscribe to news expressed trust in their subscribed sources. Trust levels vary significantly from country to country, with examples such as 56% in Finland and Portugal trusting news, while only 23% of people in France share the same sentiment.

Across the 40 countries surveyed by the Reuters Institute, trust levels exceed 50% in merely six of them. Hong Kong experienced the most significant decline in trust at -16, followed by Chile (-15), the United Kingdom (-12), Mexico (-11), Denmark (-11), Bulgaria (-7), Canada (-8), and Australia (-6). The United States saw trust levels drop by three percentage points, securing the 40th position. The survey attributes false and misleading information to politicians (40%), followed by political activists (14%), journalists (13%), common people (13%), and foreign governments (10%). Social media emerged as the primary source of concern regarding misinformation (40%), surpassing news sites (20%).

Pew Research Center’s survey report titled ‘Partisan Divides in Media Trust Widen, Driven by a Decline Among Republicans’ notes a seven-percentage-point drop in trust in the news among Americans within slightly over a year, decreasing from 65% in November 2019 to 58% in June 2021. Pew Research Center’s report titled ‘Trust in medical scientists has grown in U.S., but mainly among democrats’ shown that public confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public has increased among Americans, rising from 35% in 2019 to 43% after the onset of the coronavirus outbreak. Respondents expressed the view that medical doctors maintain very high ethical standards, and a majority of U.S. adults believe that the outbreak underscores the importance of scientific developments. Additionally, respondents believe that scientists have played a significant role in advising government leaders and informing the public about the course of the pandemic. The survey report also highlights a rise in partisan divisions among Americans regarding the perceived risk of the novel coronavirus to public health, as well as public confidence in the scientific

and medical community and the role of such experts in public policy. Furthermore, the report indicates that trust in the military among American adults remained unchanged, while trust in journalists declined. A separate 2020 survey report from Pew Research Center, 'Americans Blame Unfair News Coverage on Media Outlets, Not the Journalists Who Work for Them', indicates that 79% of Americans believe media outlets exhibit partisanship favoring their supported political parties. Additionally, 83% of respondents attribute news organizations as the source of media bias, and 66% perceive media support for political parties to be driven by political bias, with 20% linking it to financial interests.

5. Discussion

The recent survey data from reputable organizations indicate that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in new challenges for global journalism, i.e. declining revenues and escalating political pressures. The profound impact of these external forces on media outlets worldwide as they grappled with the complexities of the pandemic and the public's insatiable demand for information, revenues plummeted, exerting immense pressure on media sustainability (McChesney, 2003; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

Survey findings reveal that media outlets experienced a significant drop in revenues, compelling them to implement cost-cutting measures, including salary reductions and layoffs. While online news subscriptions surged in specific regions, such as a 20% increase in the United States and a remarkable 42% rise in Norway, this trend did not alleviate the financial challenges faced by media outlets. The preference for free news sources remained widespread across the globe, driving media organizations to seek alternative sources of funding. Consequently, media outlets often resort to compromising their editorial policies to attract investors and advertisers, leading to heightened commercialization of news content, aimed at capturing readers' attention and catering to advertisers (McManus, 2009; Picard, 2004).

In the context of the pandemic-induced recession, media outlets confronted intensified financial losses, pushing them to explore diverse funding avenues, including investments from China (Cook, 2021). The media outlets, which have been incurring losses due to the lack of advertisements amid the COVID-19 recession welcomed such funds distributed as advertisements and offshore statements for running positive news on China and Chinese investments in different countries. Cook (2021) further notes that several other state-run media outlets of China such as Xinhua, China Global Television Network, CCTV, and others have signed contracts with media outlets of many countries like Australia, Italy, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, Mozambique, Thailand, Vietnam, Belarus, Laos, Portugal, Brazil, and Mozambique. As done by the Russian agents during the 2016 elections in the United States, the article notes that China invested a huge amount of money to circulate disinformation regarding counter-narratives on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Media outlets, which have been incurring losses due to the lack of advertisers amid the trade slump created by COVID, welcomed such funds distributed as advertisements and offshore investment for running positive news on China and Chinese investments (International Federation of Journalists, 2020).

International Federation of Journalists (2021) frames China's effort to increase its national image by using media outlets across the globe as a large-scale propaganda war against the West. The report states that Chinese envoys in different countries increased their

media presence as part of their soft power, while China-funded media outlets in different countries published reports featuring Chinese exceptionalism in the handling of normalcy in COVID-19. The report further notes that such stories celebrated China's success in mitigating coronavirus, and also criticized Western interventions, all while providing minimal scientific data. China, according to the report, strategically invested in the global media market, using advertisements and offshore investments to improve its tarnished image at the onset of the pandemic. This interventionist approach led to a 12% increase in positive news coverage about China within a year (International Federation of Journalists, 2021). However, this intervention also raised concerns about misinformation and disinformation circulated in national media, with instances of fake or hijacked social media accounts promoting pro-Chinese government messages related to the pandemic (International Federation of Journalists, 2021; Cook, 2021). These instances indicate that heightened media commercialization might have contributed to the circulation of misinformation during the pandemic.

China may have employed such strategies against Western narratives blaming the country for the pandemic (Hu et al., 2020). Several studies reveal that Western politicians and media politicized the pandemic from local and global political perspectives (Greer et al., 2021). The press provided more coverage to politicians than scientists during the pandemic, increasing the distribution of misinformation and disinformation in the public sphere (Ferreira et al., 2021; Motta et al., 2020; BBC Online, 2020).

Beyond the blame games between Western powers and China regarding the origin and spread of the coronavirus, authoritarian countries like China, Russia, Niger, Egypt, Venezuela, Turkey, India, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, Tunisia, Palestine, and others increased censorship, leading to a significant rise in journalist restrictions, denial of access to information, and arrests and harassment of critics (Amnesty International, 2021). Journalistic freedom, akin to a potent 'vaccine' against disinformation, encountered obstacles in over 130 countries during the pandemic (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). These measures had a detrimental impact on news reporting and the ability to inform citizens (Radcliffe, 2021; Posetti et al., 2020; International Federation of Journalists, 2020). The Committee to Protect Journalists' report titled 'Number of journalists behind bars reaches global high' revealed that in 2021, 302 journalists were arrested across the globe, primarily while covering reports on the pandemic, marking a significant increase from the 280 journalists arrested in the previous year.

The influence of political propaganda propagated through media outlets significantly affects people's perception of news credibility (Anspach, 2017). Prolonged debates concerning COVID-19 origin in mass and social media have fostered negative perceptions of China among Americans and promoted conspiracy theories. This is exemplified by former U.S. President Donald Trump's accusations against the World Health Organization, where he criticized its handling of the pandemic and questioned the organization's alignment with China (BBC Online, 2020). The circulation of misinformation and disinformation through social and mass media platforms further influences people's risk perceptions (Deuze, 2020). As misinformation spreads, organizations like the World Health Organization and UNESCO express concern over the 'infodemic' or 'disinfodemic', highlighting the adverse impact of widespread misinformation and disinformation (World Health Organization, 2020). The data suggest that media outlets have encountered heightened pressure from politicians to circulate political propaganda, contributing to the decline in media credibility.

In the midst of these challenges, media organizations are grappling with a decline in trust in journalism, business vulnerabilities, and the proliferation of fake news. Despite heightened public interest, trust in media declined further due to the rampant circulation of misinformation and disinformation (Nelson, 2020; Reuters Institute, 2020). The Pew Research Center's surveys further confirm the decline in trust among Americans in both news and journalists (Pew Research Center, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2021). These findings collectively underline the complex interplay between media commercialization, political pressures, and the decline in public trust, impacting media's ability to fulfill its expected role effectively.

Of utmost concern is the influence of misinformation and disinformation on the vaccination program. Misinformation has been focused on vaccine development, safety, and effectiveness, leading to hesitancy and the loss of lives (UNICEF, 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Small groups intentionally spread misinformation to manipulate public sentiment and discourage vaccination efforts, perpetuating mistrust and hindering life-saving interventions (CNBC Online, 2021). This highlights how the decline in trust in media's reliability can have dire consequences, impacting public health initiatives.

6. Conclusion

This study asserts that global journalism has been adversely affected, with its credibility eroded in the public domain due to the heightened commercial approaches of media outlets and the politicization of the pandemic. The challenges faced by journalists, including trade slumps and political pressures, have collectively hindered their ability to fulfill their expected roles of informing the public and acting as watchdogs of society. The media landscape has encountered unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from declining revenues to escalating political pressures. The convergence of these factors has exacerbated media commercialization, driven by both financial survival imperatives and political agendas. The repercussions of this convergence are evident in the widespread dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and the erosion of public trust, with significant implications for public health and democracy. The ability of journalists to effectively play their crucial role as disseminators of accurate information and watchdogs of power hinges on addressing these multifaceted challenges.

External pressures have compelled media outlets to circulate politically motivated interpretations of pandemic developments, often resembling political propaganda. This situation has been further exacerbated by global superpowers like the U.S.A. and China engaging in a propaganda war through mass and social media outlets, disseminating narratives about the origin, spread, and mitigation of the pandemic. Many media outlets have become unwitting participants in such political propaganda for short-term gains, resulting in the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in society. This, in turn, has contributed to public reluctance in adopting COVID vaccines and adhering to health guidelines, leading to an increase in coronavirus-related deaths and a prolonged pandemic in various parts of the world.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Its primary reliance on the analysis of published journals, reports, and textbooks lacks firsthand examination of the impact of media commercialization and politicization during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for society. To comprehensively understand the effects of

media commercialization and politicization on society, larger-scale quantitative and qualitative studies are warranted. Such endeavors will provide insights for developing sustainable business practices, especially in the face of multifaceted challenges confronting media outlets.

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