

Journalism, Economic Uncertainty and Political Irregularity in the Digital and Data Era

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BY

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Introduction

This book explores the transformation of journalism in the face of economic uncertainty and political irregularity in the digital and data era. It looks into how journalism has changed under the influence of news media's financial difficulties and recent developments in society and technology, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the application of cloud computing in news media, declining media freedom and profound social divisions.

In the 2020s, while many countries' economies have not truly recovered from the financial crisis of 2007–2008, economic uncertainty has been worsened first by the COVID-19 pandemic and later by the Russia–Ukraine war. With audiences and advertising significantly migrating to online platforms, news media have experienced steep declines in revenue. Adversity in the economy may mean less demand for advertising space and time and less affordability of subscriptions, potentially further exacerbating the unfavourable situation for news media.

Recent political irregularities in countries such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Northern Ireland and China have baffled observers. The world has seen the (re-)surge of populist politics as exemplified by the influence of Donald Trump in the US and the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. The UK's Brexit vote in 2016 suggests that British society is deeply divided. In the UK, in the 2021 by-elections, Conservatives' victory in Labour's red-wall heartlands and Liberal Democrat's success in Tories' blue-wall heartlands reflected changes in British politics and voters' will and sentiments. However, shortly after in 2022, the wind changed direction. The Conservatives suffered a massive blow in local elections and lost hundreds of seats to the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats due in no small part to the 'Partygate' scandal. In the US, in 2021, Trump lost the 2020 presidential election but allegedly rallied his supporters to attack the Capitol in Washington D.C.. Despite all he had done and said, his US support base remained high at the time of writing (between 2020 and 2022). Voters' tolerance of politicians' mistakes and abhorrent behaviour or remarks has been shown in countries such as the US, Romania (Mares & Visconti, 2020) and Brazil. In 2020, violence and riots in Northern Ireland were rampant for several days. In 2022, the Sinn Fein party, which stands for the unification of Ireland, won the most seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time. In 2022, China even presented signs of closing up to the world with its zero COVID policy and relevant measures such as strict and long quarantine requirements for people travelling to China from abroad while the rest of the world has reopened.

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The world has also seen the rise of authoritarianism in authoritarian countries like China and democratic countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has not only resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe but also caused international worries over the possibility of a third world war and a disaster for media freedom in Russia.

These political irregularities are accompanied by the decline of the dominant globalisation discourse and the rise of nationalism. Domestically, as shown in the UK and the US, social divisions have become a significant feature of societies at the time of writing – not only polarised societies but also ones split into different segmentations associated with race, ethnicity and class. All these suggest that the world is politically turbulent and volatile, full of tensions and conflicts between social groups with different political ideologies, religious beliefs and cultural values. The question for journalism thus is how quality journalism has changed in response to this politically tumultuous and economically uncertain world to meet audiences' needs while maintaining its role in democracy.

All of these happen in a world that has been dramatically – though not entirely – digitalised and datafied by the broad application of digital technology, such as the Internet, portable digital devices and related infrastructures, making digital communication possible. The wide application of digital technology has significantly changed the communication environment into interactive, de-territorial, immersive and virtual, with information transmitted instantaneously. Although this new environment started to emerge in the late twentieth century, news media and journalism are still adjusting to it today. The need for continuous adaptation is partly because the changes are relentless and ongoing. It is partly because, as established organisations and institutions, news media and journalism have their inertia, resulting from their previous success and conventional routines and potentially preventing them from fully embracing the new opportunities created by digital technology.

Despite these adversities, we have heard good news from the media. In 2020, *The New York Times* celebrated its milestone in its subscription rates: the number of paid digital subscribers had increased to seven million, with its net income doubling to US\$33.6 million (Lee, 2020). The newspaper generated more revenue from digital subscribers than from its print readers for the first time. The newspaper commented: 'There is little doubt that Donald J. Trump's presidency has helped lift *The Times*' subscription business, and the readership numbers have risen steadily during his years in office.' *The New York Times*' achievement is a joyous surprise. Its success conveys some positive signs that news media may still be able to turn the corner by making the best of political irregularities and the opportunities digital technology offers. However, how has news media's endeavour to survive and thrive shaped journalism? What can journalism offer our democracies after all the changes in journalism? And to what extent are journalistic principles such as objectivity still valid?

The current literature has extensively explored the transformation of journalism in an age of economic uncertainty and digital technologies. The discussions in the literature (such as Franklin, 2012; Fenton, 2010; Carson, 2020; Saridou, Spyridou, & Veglis, 2017; Picard, 2014; Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020; Tong,

2017; articles in *Journalism Studies* Special issue ‘Future of Journalism: In an Age of Digital Media and Economic Uncertainty’, 2014) focus on the severity of the financial crisis news media have suffered, how it has impacted journalism’s ability to serve democracies, and how digital media can help soothe the problem. The existing literature (such as Singer, 2011; Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, & Charalambos, 2013; Tong, 2022c) has also explored the changes in journalism practices, the emergence of new forms of journalism such as data journalism and the development of digital journalism. Scholars have also started to reflect on the implications of political irregularities, such as the Trump presidency, for journalism (see, e.g. Jacobs, 2017; Gutsche, 2018; Zelizer, 2018; McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018; Parks, 2020; Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021). These discussions rightly outline the challenges journalism faces and how journalism as an occupation adapts to the changes in its ecosystem. Contextual changes, such as economic challenges, technological advances, or political dynamics, can reshape and remodel journalism in terms of its practices and norms. However, the existing literature seldom considers the joint influence of all the three forces: commercial, political and technological forces on the transformation of journalism, which is however worth exploring. In addition, the latest developments in the media environment and journalism require more up-to-date discussions about the topic.

This book takes these discussions further to answer the questions specified above. It discusses the transformation of journalism under a confluence of technological, political and economic factors. It focuses on the most recent developments after the middle of the 2010s, including the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although examples from different countries are discussed, the discussion in this book is more focussed on journalism practised in the UK and the US than in other countries. It explores how the pressure to reinvent journalism and engage audiences pushes news media to make the most of digital technologies, including algorithms and cloud computing, and the role such pressure plays in the relationship between journalism and politics. It discusses whether, and if so, to what extent, the combination of commercial, political and technological influences strengthens the prominence of tabloidisation in news media, amplifies the tensions between journalism and politicians, and results in partisan journalism outperforming objective journalism. Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the book’s main text is organised into six chapters, each addressing one aspect of journalism’s transformation. The research presented in this book is drawn from several research projects the author has been conducting, and the related explanations of research methods and data will be given in relevant chapters, respectively.

Chapter 1 discusses the news industry’s troubles in the media market. These troubles result from the changes in the communication environment and the prevalence of the attention economy, which is closely associated with the popularity of social media platforms and the rise of tech giants. It looks into the decades-long financial crisis of news media and journalism and how the attention economy has worsened the situation with a profound impact on journalistic practice, threatening the survival of journalism.

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The digital and data age has witnessed the profound penetration of digital technologies ranging from algorithms to cloud computing into journalistic work. Chapter 2 examines the continuity of newsrooms' digital transformation and explores recent developments in news media moving onto the cloud. It analyses how the adoption of digital technologies in journalism has influenced journalism, the role of news media and its relationship with audiences.

Chapter 3 discusses the increasing importance of data journalism during social and political turmoil, particularly since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the power and problems of data for journalism in times of crisis and corruption. The proliferation and availability of digital data enhance journalists' capability to hold power accountable and to inform citizens about what is happening in the world. Data journalism has the potential to engage the audience. Nevertheless, problems with the available data and its quality and the ability of journalists to clean, analyse and present it have created new problems for data reporting. The case of the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed to illustrate the opportunities and problems associated with data reporting.

Chapter 4 discusses tabloidisation in news media in the digital and data age. It unpacks the concept of tabloidisation and discusses how it works as a dominant logic of the digital world. The last part of this chapter offers a case study analysing the content published by selected British news media accounts on Twitter. The case study displays signs of convergence between quality and tabloid press in relation to tabloidisation, although the boundaries between the two are still distinctive.

Chapter 5 discusses an increasingly contentious relationship between journalism and politicians in the Western contexts in general and, in particular, in the United Kingdom and the United States. It discusses the recently flourishing publication of media exposés, leaks and relevant news stories before examining tightening media control in these countries – where media freedom is supposed to be protected by law – and journalists' responses to such control. It also evaluates the role played by commercial pressure and digital technology in intensifying the antagonism between journalism and politicians.

Deepening social divisions have led to an increase in audience fragmentation. Chapter 6 discusses whether and to what extent the concept of objectivity is still relevant to journalism in the context of audience fragmentation. It examines the rise of partisan, advocacy journalism and its promise, problems and implications for quality journalism.

Chapter 1

The News Business in Trouble

In 2021, the book author interviewed 18 UK audience members about their reading of data visualisations in COVID-related news. They were a group of people who were well educated with at least a university degree. Four were university students, and one was a retiree who used to research for and about news media. The remaining interviewees had a job in their professional fields, such as medicine, data analytics, education, media and the information industry.¹ I started the interviews by asking them to talk about their daily news consumption with the question: ‘How do you read news every day?’ I asked. To my surprise – or maybe I should not have been surprised, the majority (more than 70 per cent) of them only randomly read the news online but did not buy newspapers or subscribe to any particular news outlets. Only five of them subscribed to or purchased one or more newspapers at the time of the interviews. The rest either read free news fed in by news aggregators such as Apple news on their mobiles or read free news online. It is not new that today’s audiences may not pay for news. What surprised me was that this group of interviewees were well educated and well off with good jobs, as most of them, being professionals, were presumably able to afford subscriptions if they were interested in reading quality news. Therefore, the question is, if this group of audience members were unwilling to pay for and read the news, who would? How can news media survive without attracting sufficient paying audiences?

What is described above well captures the trouble news media have been experiencing in the media market for quite a while, at least since the turn of the new century. This trouble is the decline in the subscriptions and sales of print copies of newspapers, which means they are losing readers, viewers or listeners. With the loss of audiences, news media have also been enduring the pain of losing advertising revenue. This chapter will look at the decades-long financial difficulties faced by news media and unpack the main reasons for the problematic situation. It will

¹According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS)’s classification. Accessed on 6th August 2021, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecbasedon-soc2010>.

discuss the troubles caused by the paramount importance of attention in the digital and data era and the fierce competition between news media and other diverse players in the media markets. The last part of the chapter will evaluate news media's responses to the challenges and their new funding models. The material base of journalism discussed in this chapter is the foundation and context for the changes in journalism.

The Collapse of Traditional Funding Models

News media have been suffering chronic, severe financial difficulties following huge advertising and subscription revenue losses, starting from the turn of the twenty-first century and getting worse since the 2010s. Traditionally, news media sell two types of products – news content (and journalism) and audiences of news content, with the former sold to audiences and the latter to advertisers. Both products profit newspapers, although news content and journalism are not as profitable as advertising (Bainbridge, Goc, & Tynan, 2015). In the history of the press, for example, by 1930, almost 75 per cent of British newspapers' revenue came from advertising (Esser, 1999). Traditionally, news media's funding comes from two types of sources, corresponding to the two types of products. The first is subscriptions. For the press, subscription is the number of copies they sell. For commercial broadcasting media, subscription refers to the number of subscribers to their channels. The second is advertising revenue generated from selling advertising space and media audiences/readers to advertisers. However, neither of these funding models works in the digital and data era, as news media have lost subscribers and advertisers.

News media's losses of audiences and advertising have led to a plunge in revenue. In many countries, news media live a troubled life as their income has been in decline for decades. In 2018, US newspaper circulation dropped to its lowest level since 1940, the first year such data was available (Barthel, 2019). In 2020, US newspaper revenue continued to dramatically decline, with advertising income falling to US\$14.3 billion from US\$37.8 billion in 2008 (Grieco, 2020a). In the same year, all UK newspapers' circulation dropped drastically (see Fig. 1), and their revenue generated from selling newspaper copies had shrunk by two-thirds since 2000 (Mayhew, 2020). In 2021, Spanish media groups reportedly lost millions of advertising and newspaper sales revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Negredo, Vara, & Amoedo, 2021). In Brazil, newspapers had a relatively comfortable life in relation to advertising revenue in the 2000s but saw a fall in revenue from the 2010s. Their share in the national advertising market shrank from 21.5 per cent in 2000 to 11.4 per cent in 2014 (Carro, 2016). In countries like China, news media's revenue deficit emerged almost one decade later than their counterparts in the West. Despite enjoying blossoming media markets for nearly 20 years from the 1990s, entering the 2010s, the Chinese news media started to suffer revenue losses, which reached crisis proportions in 2016 (Tong, 2017; Wang & Sparks, 2018). India is an exception as its news media were still profitable in the 2010s. However, evidence of decline has also been shown in recent years. As of

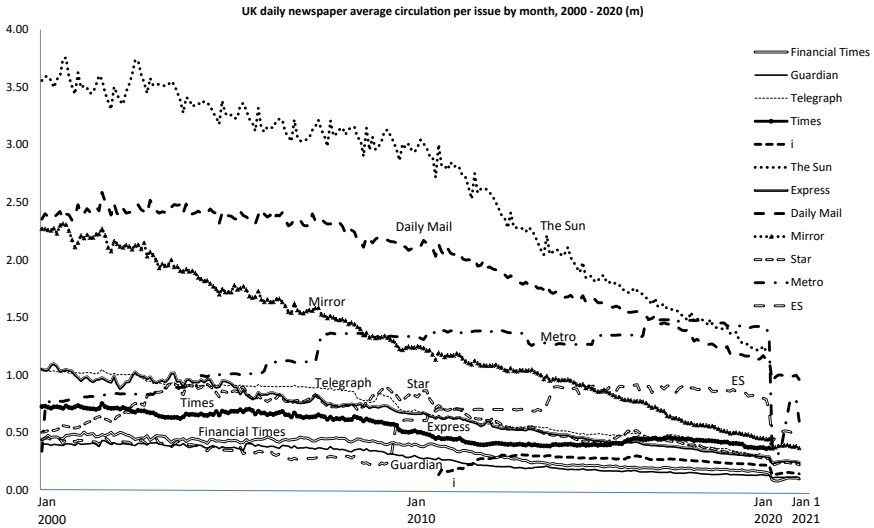


Fig. 1. UK Daily Newspaper Average Circulation Per Issue by Month, 2000 – 2020 (1st January 2021) (m) (Data Extracted from Tobitt & Majid, 2021).

2020, the Indian print media saw a 41 per cent decline in advertising revenues and a 24 per cent plunge in circulation profits, with the TV sector’s advertising income falling 22 per cent (Lidhoo, 2021). At the time of writing (in 2022), the influence of the most recent Russia–Ukraine war on the income of news media in related areas had not unfolded yet.

In addition to huge revenue losses, job cuts and news outlets’ closure spread like wildfires. Scholars describe the severity of job losses and newsroom closure in Anglo-American societies as ‘haemorrhaging’ (Curran, 2010; Franklin, 2012, 2014). Pew Research Centre’s analysis of Bureau of Labour Statistics revealed that the number of US newspaper newsroom employees in 2019 was only around half of those in 2008, with overall newsroom employment in the United States down by 23 per cent between 2008 and 2019. The data for this analysis was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened the situation (Grieco, 2020b). The author’s own analysis of Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) data (US Bureau of Labour Statistics, n.d.) shows that for the sectors of ‘Newspaper, Periodical, Book, and Directory Publishers’ and ‘Newspaper Publishers’, jobs in the ‘News Analysts, Reporters, and Journalists’ category was 63,140 in 2020, falling from 110,580 in the corresponding categories of ‘Broadcast News Analysts’ and ‘Reporters and Correspondents’ in 2012. All sectors had 556,160 jobs in this category in 2020, slightly down from 696,570 in 2012. The analysis also shows a gradual reduction in newspaper employment, with the newspaper sector’s employment in this category being 71,520 in 2019, down from 74,931 in 2018, 80,430 in 2017, 86,630 in 2016, 92,550 in 2015, 98,760

in 2014, and 104,680 in 2013. The closure of news outlets has accompanied job cuts. The situation in other countries such as the UK, China, Australia and Brazil is similarly bleak.

All in all, news media urgently need to find a viable way to boost their market income and shares as the traditional funding models of news media have collapsed and are not quite feasible in the digital and data age.

The Reasons That Explain the Trouble

Several reasons explain the news media's trouble in the media markets. They are associated with the changes in audiences' news consumption behaviour, time scarcity, and the fact that tech giants have lured audiences and advertising away. Before discussing these reasons in detail, the views and experiences of audience participants in the research discussed above will be introduced, as they well epitomise these reasons.

The opening of this chapter discussed the author's research with audience members, most of whom primarily read free news. The question is, why they did not buy newspapers? They did give their reasons in the interviews. Lacking time is the first reason. Most of them did not have the luxury to sit down, hold a copy of the newspaper and read from the front to the back page. The main reason for their news consumption was the convenience of reading (free) online news on computer screens or using smaller screens such as mobile or tablets.

The second reason is that most of the interviewees read the news merely for information. They still wanted to receive information to understand what was happening in the world. Most of them were not necessarily loyal to one particular news outlet but were happy to come across the news published by various news outlets, which may have opposite political leanings and provide different points of view. News articles from diverse (free) sources fed by online news aggregators already satisfy this basic need. As an 18-year-old participant said, social media and Apple news were their primary sources, and they did not feel it necessary to read news from other sources or pay for it.

The interviews point to the prevalence of the pyramid-like hierarchy of needs in news consumption. At the bottom of the pyramid lies humans' fundamental need for information to be aware of what is happening in the world, which is most audiences' basic need. More complex needs, such as interests in gaining a deeper understanding of events or situations and looking for truth, sit at the top of the pyramid. With the popularity of the Internet, mobiles and news aggregators, audiences' basic need for information has already been satisfied by free information. Thus, there is no need for them to pay for the news and make efforts to look for more news – they would do so only if they have interests to know more about particular events. Only if they do want more, audiences will turn to paid news content – particularly those news analyses, features, investigative, in-depth reports, and literary articles, to fulfil their interests and gain a profound understanding of events.

The third reason is social change. Human societies have changed and continue to change. The changes in participants' news consumption reflect those changes