Media and Uncertainty

Introduction

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The institutions of media and journalism are troubled by uncertainty. Attacked by populist politicians and disrupted by the platform economy, the media are expected to defend democracy by disseminating reliable and meaningful information while helping citizens navigate the uncertainty brought about by difficult events such as climate change, health crises, and political conflicts. This introduction problematizes the uncertainty faced by media practitioners and journalists and discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated citizens' need for stable media institutions.

Keywords: climate change, covid-19, media precarity, risk, uncertainty

Uncertainty is engraved in human experience. While the temporality of life is certain, human action is guided by a desire to take control of the present and future. We look readily to enterprises that can reduce the uncertainty stemming from outstanding problems and that advance the perception that human beings can exercise a high degree of control over their everyday lives. The many advances in medicine that have allowed people to live longer and healthier lives are an apt example (Nowotny, 2016, p. 30). However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic reminds us of our vulnerabilities as a species, increasing our perception of risk by raising the prospect of possible loss or injury. In our postmodern world, it also reminds us of the importance of stable institutions that can help guide society at times when citizens are faced with the unknown and the uncertain.

While science and public health authorities have played a central role in keeping people safe and increasing the levels of predictability about the future, the ongoing pandemic has also made it clear how important it is to have high-quality information. Despite the many different strategies adopted by governments to deal with the pandemic, the initial period of the health crisis generated citizens worldwide

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who eagerly looked for information about the virus and its transmission online and on legacy media. Evidence collected during the early stages of the pandemic demonstrates that audiences that were disconnected from legacy media and received information mostly from social media increased their consumption of news produced by journalists and distributed by professional media outlets (Reuters Institute for the Study of Communication, 2020, p. 10). This seems to indicate that—in varying levels across countries—media and journalism are perceived as credible institutions in times of uncertainty, to which citizens turn for access to useful information that may help them deal with the unknown and unexpected.

As in other crises of the past, authorities relied on media outlets to disseminate relevant information among the population, producing narratives aimed at making sense of the new reality created by COVID-19 while urging people to adopt behaviors that would help stop the uncontrolled spread of the virus. This civic role performed by most media seems to have revived the importance of journalism across large sectors of the public. However, while the pandemic increased the numbers of individuals who accessed news content, it also exposed the fragility of media institutions.

In actual practice, in most countries the newsrooms that have been called upon to cover the pandemic are the same institutions that have been under attack over the last decade. These attacks came from both populist movements that aimed to discredit media institutions and journalism (Ribeiro & Zelizer, 2020; Van Dalen, 2021) and from the platform economy that devalued journalism for its inability to generate immediate and measurable revenue for advertisers (Napoli, 2019). Thus, when the pandemic erupted, it exacerbated the sense of uncertainty and immediate risk while creating a need for media organizations to perform their civic duty by disseminating useful and reliable information. This occurred, however, at the same time that media organizations were facing uncertainty about their own capacity to survive in a context that had been eroding their role as a pillar of democracy and eliminating the revenues necessary for survival.

The uncertainty faced by media practitioners and journalists, as well as the institutional settings in which they work, was one of the main topics on the agenda of the 2nd Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication. Convened in early January 2020, it preceded the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent emergence as a major cause of uncertainty. It aimed to address deep-seated questions that were generating angst about the viability of familiar cultural, political, and social formations and intensifying social and economic precarity and inequality. The risks and challenges posed by climate change and its reporting, for instance, were one of the major issues on the agenda.

The issues causing high levels of uncertainty about our political, social, economic, and sustainable future that were under discussion at the Lisbon Winter School have not disappeared with the pandemic. Instead, they have in many cases intensified. The incapacity to bridge the gap between North and South has not only become more visible, but the gap itself has increased, with wealthy nations experiencing privileged access to COVID-19 vaccines while poor countries are left without. And while in some geographies populist discourses seem to be retreating, they continue to be prevalent in many countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin and South America, deepening the sense of risk for individuals and communities that face threats based on their identities. Furthermore, natural disasters have continued to sweep the globe, reminding us of how uncertain the future will be in the face of climate change and extreme weather events. Therefore, even though the Lisbon Winter School was a pre-pandemic event, it focused on issues that are not only

timely but have gained greater visibility due to the challenges brought by the pandemic. The pivotal role of digital technologies in reducing a sense of risk and distance, for instance, has been matched by its role in increasing anxiety and uncertainty. This topic was addressed in many of the lectures that comprised a program put together by the Winter School conveners, who included, in addition to Nelson Ribeiro and Barbie Zelizer, Risto Kunelius, Francis Lee, and Sarah Banet-Weiser.

During five intense days, more than 40 scholars and doctoral students from 15 countries gathered in Lisbon and heard keynote lectures from Teresa Ashe, Carla Ganito, Sonia Livingstone, Fathali Moghaddam, James Painter, Victor Pickard, Esa Väliverronen, Saskia Witteborn, and Barbie Zelizer. Most keynotes were published on the websites of the Lisbon Winter School and the Annenberg School's Center for Media at Risk of the University of Pennsylvania.[1] Doctoral students also presented ongoing research dealing with different dimensions of uncertainty within and about the media. In this Special Section, we present a collection of five papers authored by advanced graduate students that capture the essence of some of the debates that took place at the Lisbon Winter School. Zöe Glatt looks into the precarity and uncertainty of the video influencer industry, demonstrating how platformization has contributed to advancing the neoliberal agenda of the cultural industries, with content producers working for different platforms having little or no legal protection while being dependent on analytics and their ability to attract attention. Based on ethnographic research, it reveals the contradiction between the success stories of digital influencers who are given visibility and the reality faced by the vast majority of content creators who try to make a living by producing and disseminating video content online. Visual content is also the focus of Anat Leshnick, whose article addresses how states use video footage to promote and legitimize their narratives in the digital ecosystem. The paper presents the case of the Israel Defense Forces, whose soldiers are trained as camera operators and produce content intended to be used in public relations videos, demonstrating the centrality of the digital battlefield. As the article notes, while social media tend to be presented as democratic tools that empower citizens and activists and images tend to be greeted with enthusiasm by activists who promote human rights due to their ability to demonstrate any wrongdoing by police and military forces, visual documentation also has the potential to legitimize violence and war.

The three additional papers in the Special Section deal with journalism and the challenges posed by the transformation of its business models and its relations with the public. Sara Torsner discusses how the restrictions imposed on journalism endanger its ability to hold political and economic institutions accountable. Drawing from Civil Sphere Theory (Alexander, 2006), the author demonstrates how journalism plays a central role in democratic culture and calls for the need to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of market and state influence that may lead to the civil diminishment of journalism. Carla Randolph Everstijn looks also into newsroom precarity but from a different perspective. Offering a study of local media in one U.S. community, the article sheds light on how media professionals navigate the uncertainty brought about by local newspapers closing down while also discussing the meaning of such events for local communities. It concludes by highlighting the importance of media professionals' community ties to ensure the future of local news reporting. The Special Section closes with Muira McCammon's paper

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[1] The Lisbon Winter School's website is https://www.lisbonwinterschool.com, and the website for the Annenberg School's Center for Media at Risk at the University of Pennsylvania can be found at https://www.ascmediarisk.org.

on the closure of *The New York Times*' "At War" section and how Twitter functioned as an ephemeral memory site used both by professionals and audiences to share their memories about a section that had disappeared from the newspaper. The author discusses how Twitter can function as a platform for media practitioners to mourn projects that have been brought to a close while also creating "connective memories" that provoke newsreaders and other news producers to engage and respond to the memories posted online. The paper also discusses how these actions of mourning on social media can impact acts of future remembrance.

These articles offer a good illustration of some of the discussions held at the second season of the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication. They make the case that even though the school took place at a time before the pandemic was impacting all dimensions of everyday life, its focus on questions, concerns, and topics have become even more relevant in the post-pandemic world. Furthermore, these articles exemplify how central the concept of uncertainty has become for understanding the new media ecology and how the media both foster and complicate how citizens can navigate uncertain times.

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