

# The innovation response to the Covid-19 crisis

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## Learning from a crisis

The pandemic has given you a master's degree in navigating crises, so break out the old drawing board and start executing for the next 12–18 months of disruption and opportunity.

This quote from an *Editor & Publisher* magazine commentary published during the late stage of the Covid-19 crisis in August 2022 encapsulates key characteristics of the current news media landscape: News media are in a constant state of flux where disruptions and crises go hand in hand with opportunities for innovation. Confronted with such uncertainty, there is considerable learning potential in the Covid-19 pandemic for academics as well as the media industry. This global health crisis has provided unique opportunities to explore and understand news media's ability to respond to external shocks and create new and improved value for audiences, society, and their own business operations.

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Solvoll, M. K., & Olsen, R. Kr. (2024). Introduction: The innovation response to the Covid-19 crisis. In M. K. Solvoll, & R. Kr. Olsen (Eds.), *Innovation through crisis: Journalism and news media in transition* (pp. 7–18). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.  
<https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855923-i>

In this edited volume, we delve into crisis-driven journalism innovation and value creation, providing new knowledge on how news media change and adjust during times of unprecedented uncertainty. We revisit the tumultuous years of the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance our understanding of news media's adaptability and resilience amid the crisis. Such research is important in order to gain a deeper understanding of crises as both threats and opportunities for journalism. Although there has been considerable growth in research concerning journalism and news media during the Covid-19 crisis, there remains a dearth of contributions offering a comprehensive overview of how this crisis affected the news media's capacity to innovate and create new value. Examining the multifaceted experiences and responses of news media within a specific national context, where the industry was notably well-positioned to handle the crisis, holds the potential to provide a more nuanced depiction of how news media generate novel ideas and address emerging issues in challenging times.

Based on empirical research among legacy news media in Norway, this book poses the following overarching research question: How did Norwegian news media respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of innovation and value creation?

Our empirical research originates from the "Media Innovation Through the Corona Crisis" project at the BI Norwegian Business School. This project, conducted from 2020 to 2022, explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Norwegian news media and what possibilities there are for legacy news publishers to develop and grow during times of crisis.

The Norwegian context provides distinctive opportunities to glean insights from digitally advanced news media operating in a well-functioning media system. Consequently, this book offers a different perspective than the dominating Anglo-American research tradition where commercial news media have faced a more profound economic crisis and the pandemic had more severe implications. As we describe in more detail later in this Introduction, Norwegian news media have managed the ongoing digital transition of the media landscape well compared with many other countries. The many news outlets scattered throughout the country have remained remarkably stable over time, not least because of substantial state subsidies channelled to the country's most economically vulnerable news publishers. Thus, Norway serves as an exemplary case of a media welfare state system (Syvertsen et al., 2014), which allows us to explore how news media under comparably favourable social, political, and economic conditions cope with a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. During the Covid-19 pandemic, additional state support was offered to assist commercial news operations through the crisis. Such state support recognises news media's essential role as key knowledge-producing institutions and democratic infrastructure in society.

Our perspective on innovation is inextricably linked to this normative understanding of journalism's value for people and society, while simultaneously recognising how journalism is a business that creates economic value for the news organisation. Value creation – be it by means of new journalistic services, new journalistic working processes, new revenue streams, or any other way that news media improve the way they operate – lies at the heart of our understanding of innovation in this book. Innovation, from our perspective, is not solely about adopting new technology or introducing flashy new things (Posetti, 2018). Instead, it revolves around materialising novel ideas that generate value for the key stakeholders of news media. It entails crafting solutions to problems in innovative ways, thereby creating value. This was particularly relevant for news media amid the Covid-19 pandemic, when the crisis created huge problems by disrupting people's everyday lives, threatening their livelihoods, and spreading fear and insecurity in communities around the globe. The crisis presented opportunities for the news media, akin to numerous other organisations, to foster creativity and devise novel solutions capable of alleviating some of the problems induced by the pandemic. The surge in news consumption, particularly during the early phase of the crisis, demonstrates how news media had an important role to play. News media provided news and information that could contribute directly to citizens' potential for self-protection and safety. Simultaneously, the Covid-19 crisis disrupted journalistic practices and processes and exacerbated the revenue crisis among commercial news media. It significantly diminished advertising investments, adding another blow to commercial news media's fractured business model. In this sense, it compounded an already complex crisis context for the news media.

## **Exploring responses to opportunities and threats**

We take this Janus-faced aspect of the Covid-19 crisis as our point of departure in this book, recognising how the pandemic represented both opportunities to solve new problems and create new value with innovative solutions, as well as threats to the practice and business of journalism. In essence, our goal is to explore Norwegian news media's ability to seize the opportunities and navigate the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Seizing opportunities through innovations is one of several strategic responses to a crisis. Other options may involve discontinuing a company's business activities, implementing retrenchment through cost-cutting measures that might reduce the company's scope, or maintaining the status quo of the company's operations (Wenzel et al., 2020).

Discontinuation and cost-cutting have emerged as common crisis responses within the newspaper industry, which has been deeply affected by the virtual collapse of advertising revenues in the twenty-first century. Previous research

has shown that in certain countries, like the US, the newspaper industry's revenue crisis has resulted in the closure of numerous news outlets, particularly at the local level (Abernathy, 2018). In other media systems, like Norway and other Nordic countries, the newspaper industry has responded with a combination of relentless cost-cutting (Ohlsson et al., 2021) and a strategic shift from an advertising-centric revenue model to one reliant on reader revenue (Olsen et al., 2021). The latter approach indicates a status quo-oriented response, as newspapers have reproduced their traditional print-subscription model online by implementing paywalls (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018). Nonetheless, substantial innovation has also been involved in this strategy, as newspapers have shifted from traditional print operations to becoming multiplatform service providers building new customer services around advanced technology and developing digital value propositions for their audiences (Bakke & Barland, 2022).

These observations, suggesting the relative success of Norwegian news media in navigating threats and seizing opportunities, provide relevant context for our empirical investigation in this book. The Covid-19 crisis might have acted as a catalyst in the digital transformation of news media by prompting innovative responses to emerging or latent audience needs. Conversely, it could have slowed down ongoing innovation processes, even terminating experimentation and the development of new digital services due to retrenchment strategies or the preservation of the status quo in times of heightened insecurity. The latter two approaches are often seen as beneficial for an organisation in the short- and mid-term, while innovation during crisis is considered a more effective long-term strategy (Wenzel et al., 2020).

## **Taking a normative view on innovation and value creation**

Analysing media innovation could take several directions depending on which aspect of news media's multifaceted value creation we choose as our research object. In this book, we are interested in journalism innovation that creates value for audiences and society as well as for news organisations. This is an explicitly normative position, which perceives journalism innovation as beneficial for news media and their key stakeholders. Moreover, we perceive innovation that creates value for key stakeholders as a prerequisite for the sustainability of the news business in the future. Taking this position may need some explication, considering the different strategic crisis responses outlined in the previous section. While we appreciate that innovation is not the sole or even the preferred route for a news organisation in times of crisis, we do believe that innovation that creates new and improved value for key stakeholders, like audiences and the broader community, could play an essential role in sustaining news organisations as businesses as well as social institutions serving public interests.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that such value creation can be intricate and ambiguous. The pursuit of innovation to meet the economic interests of news media may inadvertently de-prioritise the news media's civic responsibilities. For instance, utilising technology to cut costs might not always result in elevated journalistic quality (Trappel, 2015). The prevailing emphasis on innovation often prioritises a market-oriented vision for the future of journalism, sidelining normative concerns about the democratic role of journalism (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Trappel, 2015). While we acknowledge this conflict of interest, we argue that the pandemic yielded opportunities to bridge this divide with initiatives that provided new and improved information value to the public while simultaneously generating economic value for news organisations (Olsen & Furseth, 2023).

Another instance of a potential conflict of interest arises when innovation, which is perceived to create new value for the public, may not be equally advantageous for news workers. Studies in journalism have shown that innovations, particularly the growing reliance on new digital tools, have led to mental and physical burnout among journalists working within online and digital platforms (e.g., Bossio & Nelson, 2021). During times of crisis, these conflicts of interest can be especially challenging as news professionals work under immense pressure to fulfil the public's constant need for news and information.

When investigating innovation within Norwegian news media during the pandemic, our objective is to sensibly address the challenges posed by divergent stakeholder interests and value perceptions. We perceive innovation as a concept that yields varied value for different stakeholders within a crisis context. News media consistently grapple with challenges in balancing stakeholder interests and reconciling conflicts in value creation (Olsen, 2021; Picard, 2010). With that in mind, we echo the sentiments of scholars who advocate for guiding innovations in news media by fundamental journalism values, including truth, accuracy, social responsibility, and high ethical standards (Pavlik, 2013). By adopting this normative stance, our focus is on crisis-driven journalism innovations intended to enhance editorial processes and products, ultimately aiming to extend the reach and impact of journalism in the public interest. The best way to innovate would then depart from the notion that media innovations should contribute to the quality of news as well as the lives and development of citizens and society (Pavlik, 2013). It is within this context that our research emphasises crisis-driven innovation, aiming to create value for both audiences and wider society. Simultaneously, we remain attentive to the professional interests of news workers and the economic interests of news media.

## Research objects and terminology

When examining journalism innovation and value creation during the Covid-19 crisis, our particular interest lies in the digital transformation occurring as physical news products are replaced by digital services, with increasing consideration given to audiences' evolving needs and preferences. Termed as an audience turn in journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020), this transformation aligns with the ongoing service shift of the newspaper sector transforming news organisations into digital service providers rather than manufacturers of physical goods (Cestino & Berndt, 2017). Our research primarily focuses on legacy newspaper organisations navigating this transformative phase.

The emphasis on the newspaper sector is primarily motivated by newspapers' important role in providing journalism that is generally regarded as a necessity for a well-functioning democracy (Nielsen, 2015). Consequently, these media's ability to adapt and innovate during times of crisis is ultimately about securing an important democratic infrastructure in society. Serving audience needs and generating subscription revenues has become the backbone of the newspaper industry's business model (Olsen et al., 2021). While advertising revenue continues to hold a central role in the newspaper economy, there is a noticeable trend toward audiences becoming the primary funders of journalistic production. This shift is particularly evident in the increasing reliance on audience payment for digital services. In a competitive news and information landscape, newspapers are required to attract audiences with digital services that meet evolving customer needs. The adaptation to digital service provision is pivotal for newspapers to maintain their relevance and, therefore, their sustainability as commercial entities (Villi & Picard, 2019). The creation of engaging digital services, valued and supported by audiences, is essential for newspapers to sustain their crucial civic function as knowledge-producing institutions in society. Given this context, the research presented in this book delves into the influence of the Covid-19 crisis on the transformation of Norwegian newspapers into digital service providers.

Our empirical investigation integrates theoretical perspectives from multiple research fields, including journalism studies, media innovation research, management, organisational research, and innovation theory. This interdisciplinary approach encourages a flexible terminology framework. For example, when writing about audiences as stakeholders in innovation, we use this term interchangeably with media users as well as citizens and customers. Although there is an extensive scholarly debate regarding the different meanings of these concepts (see, e.g., Picone, 2017; Syvertsen, 2004), for our purposes, these are labels with one key characteristic in common – they all refer to people that media aim to reach and engage. Whether these people feature as customers in the innovation literature or as citizens of the democratic order in journalism research, they are ultimately individuals who utilise news media to navigate and engage with the public world.

Internal stakeholders are individuals or groups within an organisation. Regarding internal stakeholders, our scope includes various individuals such as journalists, developers, newsroom managers, and senior news executives. In our research, the term news workers is commonly used to refer to the broader group involved in news production.

Our terminology for newspapers varies. News operations, newspaper businesses, newspapers, or news organisations, as well as broader concepts like news media, the media sector, or the media industry, all refer to institutions which provide journalism in society.

## **The Norwegian case**

As mentioned earlier, we consider Norway to be an especially compelling and relevant case for researching innovation and value creation during the Covid-19 crisis. This assessment is based on both the characteristics of the Norwegian media system and the country's resilience in weathering the most adverse effects of the crisis.

### **Norway and the Covid-19 pandemic**

Several characteristics of Norway, such as its robust economy reliant on oil and gas, a well-established welfare state, a strong public sector, and high levels of trust in the government within a transparent political system, shed light on the country's success in managing the crisis (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020). In addition, Norway is among the top-ten healthiest countries in the world (Ursin et al., 2020) and the population density is low (14 people per square kilometre of land area). The country boasts a robust publicly financed national healthcare system that offers universal coverage for all residents, primarily funded through general taxation. Notably, the country experienced lower Covid-19 cases and death rates compared with most European Union countries (EU, 2021).

On 12 March 2020, Norway implemented its most far-reaching measures ever experienced in peacetime to curb the spread of Covid-19. These measures aimed to limit and delay the outbreak, accompanied by policies addressing the pandemic's economic impact, such as offering loan guarantees to the private sector and implementing a work furlough scheme. These policies were adjusted (scaled back or revised) depending on the development of the pandemic. The governmental recommendations involved significant restrictions on social contact and movement, encompassing measures such as emphasising hand hygiene and cough etiquette, advising on social distancing by limiting gatherings to a maximum of five people, discouraging the use of public transport, promoting remote work where feasible, restricting leisure travel within Norway, avoiding visits to health institutions with vulnerable groups, and closing Norwegian borders to foreign nationals. By law and

with enforceable sanctions, various establishments – including educational institutions, restaurants, bars, fitness centres, cultural venues, and personal care services – were mandated to close. Organised sports, competitions, and cultural events were uniformly cancelled or rescheduled. Furthermore, individuals returning from abroad were mandated to undergo a 14-day quarantine period, while those experiencing respiratory tract infection symptoms were required to stay at home. Confirmed Covid-19 cases were instructed to self-isolate at home. Many restrictions remained in place throughout 2020 and 2021. This was in response to recurring waves of infections and the emergence of new versions of the virus. However, in February 2022, the Norwegian government removed all regulation-based measures against Covid-19, including the requirement for face masks, one-meter distancing, and the obligation to isolate when sick. In November 2023, the Ministry of Health and Care Services decided on an amendment to the regulation concerning contagious diseases, removing Covid-19 from this list of diseases.

### **The Norwegian media system and newspapers**

In Norway, as in other Nordic countries, newspapers and news media have been instrumental in establishing and upholding the welfare system. The intertwining of media and welfare state interests has been conceptualised as a media welfare state model characterising the media systems in the Nordic region (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Within this framework, the press operates based on egalitarian ideals, resulting in content and readership that show fewer elite versus mass distinctions and reduced class and gender differences. Central to this model is the principle of equal access to public broadcasting. Additionally, key features of the media welfare state include freedom from editorial interference by politicians, a cultural policy that extends to the media, and collaborative efforts among major stakeholders such as media representatives and politicians. This type of media system is also characterised by the high level of direct and indirect public subsidies to commercial newspapers (Kammer, 2016). According to MediaNorway (2022), the public service broadcaster NRK and the biggest online news site VG (owned by Schibsted) were the most frequently used news sources during the Covid-19 crisis. These were also the most used news sources prior to the pandemic.

Norwegian newspapers are characterised by diversity and advanced digitalisation. The sector responded to digital innovation challenges early on and offers an extraordinary opportunity for gaining insights from pioneers and early adopters of digital innovation (Sraml Gonzales & Gulbrandsen, 2021). The Norwegian population is among the most digitally literate in the world, with high access to both broadband and digital services (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2021). Norwegians are also among the world's most avid newspaper readers, although the country's newspaper circulation plummeted from the turn of the century onwards. The

circulation downturn has been less steep for small local newspapers than for the big national and regional titles (Harrie, 2018). Since the newspaper industry started rolling out digital paywalls and introducing online news subscriptions in 2011, the country's newspaper industry has become world-leading in charging for news. By 2019, nine out of ten newspapers had some form of reader payment in place (Høst, 2019), and Norway has consistently ranked at the top of lists showing people's willingness to pay around the world (Newman et al., 2023). Most Norwegian newspapers are small (circulation 2,000–5,000), published less than six days a week, and serve one or a few local communities (Østbye, 2019). The newspaper industry is dominated by three media groups – Schibsted, Amedia, and Polaris – but there are still a considerable number of newspapers with local ownership.

## **The structure of the book**

Chapter 1 and the Conclusion of this book closely interrelate, acting as bookends and presenting a cohesive synthesis of its entirety. In Chapter 1, “Theoretical perspectives on crisis, resilience, and innovation”, we introduce the theoretical framework for our research, delving into the concept of innovation by emphasising its value creation aspect alongside improvements and novelty. In the chapter, we introduce a framework of six pivotal factors that influence journalism innovation, identified as building blocks of journalism innovation: resources, technology, organisation, management, culture, and business model. These building blocks manifest in diverse ways and constellations across the subsequent empirical chapters, which unfold as follows:

Chapter 2, “Innovations in resilience strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic”, is based on a mapping survey among 24 managers in Norwegian news organisations. By combining the innovation framework of Francis and Bessant (2005) and three ways of conceptualising resilience, Mona K. Solvoll provides an analysis of how news media coped and recovered from the crisis through different innovations and initiatives. Three strategies for coping and recovering from a crisis are identified: bouncing back, bouncing forward, and bouncing beyond.

Chapter 3, “Positive renewal in newsrooms through crisis in crisis”, presents an ethnographic study based on interviews with 15 managers and journalists from three news organisations. In this chapter, Gudrun Rudnigen focuses on key themes of crisis-as-event and crisis-as-process, resilience, and sensemaking as she sets out to capture narratives of the experience of “a crisis in crisis”. She identifies three practices of resilience in a crisis: flexible working conditions; creativity and collaboration; and increased trust, autonomy, and solidarity that derived from restricted working conditions during the pandemic.

Chapter 4, “The digital shift in the news media’s revenue streams during the Covid-19 pandemic”, focuses on the economic resilience of the Norwegian media businesses, focusing on revenue development among newspapers, in particular. Starting with the newspapers’ two-sided business model as a foundation, Jens Barland and Ragnhild Kr. Olsen explore the pandemic’s influence on both advertising and reader revenues. Utilising revenue data from the Norwegian Media Authority, alongside industry reports and expert interviews, they identify winners and losers in the context of the pandemic’s impact on newspapers’ financial dynamics.

Chapter 5, “Crisis-driven newsroom innovation”, delves into the intersection of technology, professional cultures, and organisation, aiming to uncover the pivotal factors that foster newsroom innovation during a crisis. Drawing insights from 13 qualitative interviews conducted across leading Norwegian news organisations, Junai Mtchedlidze employs the “social shaping of technology” approach, and she identifies rapid pace as a central aspect of crisis-driven innovations. Specifically, the chapter highlights four key facilitators of swift newsroom innovations during crises: the audience’s demand for information, employee-driven initiative, technological expertise, and collaboration between data journalists and developers.

Chapter 6, “Exploring telework innovation’s value for news workers”, focuses on how telework was perceived to generate value for news workers during the pandemic and introduces a structured framework for analysing the innovation’s perceived benefits and challenges. Through an examination of telework literature and in-depth interviews with journalists, programmers, and managers, Ragnhild Kr. Olsen, Cecilie Asker, and Maria Konow-Lund unravel the nuanced aspects of working remotely solely via digital technology. They discuss insights derived from telework experiences, providing guidance for news organisations in effectively organising physical, digital, and hybrid newsrooms in the future.

Chapter 7, “The effects of an external crisis on the prioritisation of innovations”, investigates the shifting innovation priorities among news media executives following the Covid-19 crisis. Arne H. Krumsvik and David L. Francis introduce a novel research typology – the 8 × 2 model – to offer detailed insights into decision-making dynamics regarding media innovations. Drawing on survey data, their findings suggest that in times of crisis, leaders and managers are inclined to reassess and optimise existing resources rather than immediately pursue radical innovation initiatives. The study identifies three distinct clusters of media executives, each exhibiting varying priorities for future innovation endeavours.

Finally, in the Conclusion, the insights gained from these empirical studies are synthesised and the overarching theoretical perspectives established in Chapter 1 are engaged with. The Conclusion thus serves as a summary as well as a discussion of the six building blocks of innovation. Specifically, three

overarching themes are identified that encapsulate the impact of the crisis on news media's ability to innovate and generate new or enhanced value during times of exceptional uncertainty: the crisis as a catalyst for innovation, an amplifier of value creation, and a critical test of resilience.

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