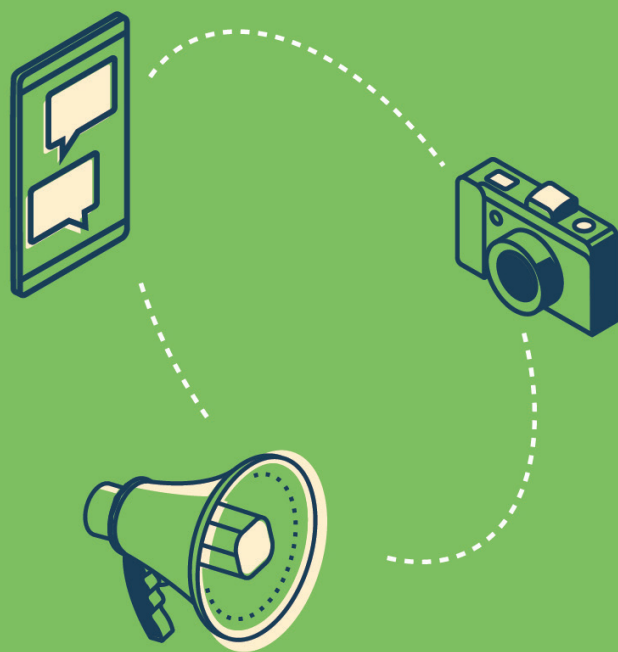


An Unlikely Bright Spot

Networked Investigative Journalism in the Age of COVID-19

By Miranda Patrucic



As the 2016 Panama Papers, 2017 Paradise Papers, 2017 Azerbaijan Laundromat, and 2020 Luanda Leaks have shown, collaborative investigative journalism initiatives are key to linking the complex pieces of information that help explain and expose transnational kleptocracy. While many traditional media outlets have struggled in recent years to adopt journalistic models capable of responding to the multifaceted nature of cross-border kleptocracy, the collaborative platforms have demonstrated their impact in this regard.¹ When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, investigative journalists all over the world launched efforts to track and expose potential avenues for corruption, given the vast amounts of aid to be disbursed in very short order to meet emergency public health needs. The potential for the conditions associated with the pandemic to turbocharge kleptocracy is considerable.

The pandemic undoubtedly will have some negative consequences for collaborative journalism platforms. As the economic impact of the virus reverberates across the world, traditional funders of independent media may become stretched or turn their attention elsewhere. However, investigative journalists also may be able to take advantage of unexpected opportunities for independent media involvement in the exposure of transnational kleptocracy, particularly those operating in kleptocratic countries. As the new coronavirus swept across the world, collaborative platforms such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP),² as well as the independent investigative outlets that support them, saw new prospects to hold governments to account. They went out of their comfort zone, moving in part from long-form journalism to daily news and using their investigative skills to probe official responses, expose failures, and provide the public with reliable information.

Fact-checking has always been an integral component of quality journalism, but public facing fact-checking became a vital resource to citizens worldwide as mis- and disinformation around the new coronavirus flourished. In one example, the Serbian outlet KRIK (The Crime and Corruption Reporting Network)³ has used its fact-checking arm, RaSKRIKavanje, not only to debunk misleading news about the COVID-19 pandemic in the media and on social networks, but also to conduct traditional reporting. Building on the public trust it developed through fact-checking, it informed citizens about a range of topics, from the emergency measures being implemented in Serbia to incidents of citizens being arrested for violating isolation requirements (even though they were not subject to mandatory quarantines).⁴

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In Kyrgyzstan, the popular news website Kloop⁵ turned its focus to engaging the audience and providing critical statistics and explanations on pandemic-related topics that the authorities failed to provide. Kloop's journalists used their data analysis skills to probe the official numbers and show when the official statistics were misleading. They used the power of visual storytelling in important ways. For instance, Kloop presented short documentaries featuring the work of medical professionals who lacked essential protective equipment and used these reports to appeal for safer working conditions for the country's healthcare providers.⁶ Crucially, in a difficult time for the country, their reporting also showed how ordinary Kyrgyz people joined together to help each other during the peak of the pandemic by bringing groceries to those in need and providing food and other supplies to doctors and other public service workers. Other investigations also looked into how money from donations and international grants was spent.

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In Russia, another group of reporters established a new outlet called Important Stories, or iStories,⁷ during the height of the pandemic. As they were preparing to launch, the reporters realized they needed to drop all their carefully planned investigations and focus on COVID-19-related stories. The outlet's first investigation exposed how the authorities allegedly procured ventilators through bogus companies who sold them bad equipment.⁸ Their other reports told stories many other outlets did not cover, including about how lockdowns implemented to stop the spread of the virus have led to a rise in domestic violence and substance abuse.

The outlets that have demonstrated this flexibility and responsiveness in their reporting are reaping the rewards. Many have reported significant, if not historic, increases in traffic since the beginning of the crisis. KRIK alone had a tenfold jump in views, from one-hundred thousand a month to more than a million. This explosive growth has revealed the extent to which there is public demand for reliable sources of information they can trust. Such demand can often be masked in authoritarian settings in which the authorities seek to dominate and manipulate the media environment.

Investigative journalism sites also have reported a significant rise in donations. Just before the Serbian elections in June, the government gave each citizen 100 euros to help them get through the crisis. Many people saw this one-off payment as an attempt to buy their votes and mask the state's inability to fight the pandemic, so they decided to donate their money to KRIK and support the outlet's award-winning investigative reporting.

With the growth in traffic and funding has come an equally remarkable growth in citizen activism. Some new outlets turned to crowdfunding to support their activities and saw a rise in interest among the public to contribute to independent journalism. The reporting for the stories started to be crowdsourced, too. Newsrooms began to receive tips in large numbers from ordinary citizens experiencing problems in their day-to-day lives, such as police harassment and medicine shortages. Journalists even began to receive documents, images, and videos from people who wanted to contribute to their investigations and trusted them to use this information responsibly. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that these collaborative forms of journalism are well positioned to continue their work and even raise it to new heights. Even though health precautions forced reporters and editors to work from home,

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their newsrooms were able to initiate extensive investigations into how their countries were dealing with the new coronavirus, pulling together large teams to expose new stories at a rapid pace. They also found ways to develop new sources without meeting them in person.

But the ultimate opportunity the COVID-19 pandemic has provided is a change in the way people see the role and the effects of journalism in their lives. The pandemic showed that corruption is not merely an abstract concept that rarely impacts people's daily affairs. It kills and it deprives people of their basic rights. The pandemic makes the human cost of theft and corruption all the more obvious. In a time of rampant misinformation and propaganda, it also shows the value of independent media. Organizations like OCCRP and other collaborative outlets ensure that populist leaders and demagogues who claim to operate effectively during a crisis are held to account. Now the challenge is to keep the gains that have been made and engage people even further.

One way to encourage ongoing public engagement—besides the well-reported stories and solid sourcing that are the hallmarks of good journalism—is to develop new ways to present information in clear and comprehensive ways. Part of the innovation lies in technology and web design. New approaches to journalism include providing the public with the original documents behind each publication. Some viewers simply may want to see a list of key findings and share it with their friends. Others, such as professional journalists, officials, or investigators, want to dive into every minute detail of each and every offshore company involved in a complex story. Another aspect involves improving storytelling skills to translate complex kleptocracy-related stories into digestible information. Pairing investigative journalists with professional writers enables the finished product to reach incredible, never-before-possible levels that resonate with audiences at home and abroad.

One critical concern is the need to protect independent media themselves, especially from financial uncertainties when it comes to donor funding. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, a number of donors, especially private foundations, understandably shifted their focus from funding the media to providing COVID-19 support. That led to a number of media organizations facing unexpected shortfalls at a time when their work was more important than ever. It is true that independent outlets in poorer countries will always have to rely on donors in some way. But they need to find ways to adapt, protect their core activities, and survive at times when money is running short. Those that are able to survive will have a vision, long-term planning, and efficiency in spending. They also will need to shift their funding from project grants and conference-style events to core funding and focusing on strengthening their key activities—developing their journalists and publishing stories that matter.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a reckoning among journalists, particularly those who investigate corruption and kleptocratic behavior in environments that are unfriendly to media inquiry. Media outlets that are flexible—both in terms of the type of news they cover and the ways in which they cover it—are able to capitalize on unexpected opportunities presented by the pandemic to continue exposing transnational kleptocracy and its devastating impact on people's health and well-being.

Endnotes

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