Reporting in the Age of Coronavirus:
Alternating Between "Shoe-Leather" and "Slippers" Journalism

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This research used in-depth interviews with international journalists to examine the newsgathering practices they employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building upon interview data, this study introduces the concept of "slippers" journalism, which accompanies working-from-home practices, suggesting that reporters primarily collected information for their stories online through social media, video apps, and other online sources. These circumstances prompted them to reevaluate the concept of traditional "shoe-leather" practices in newsgathering, emphasizing their relevance in times of crisis. Data suggest that although reporters embraced digital alternatives in acquiring news, they stressed the importance of being on the ground, as it allows them to witness events, verify information, talk with sources, obtain unexpected facts, provide comprehensive coverage of diverse issues, and understand the context of events.

Keywords: information gathering, newsgathering, reporting, shoe-leather reporting, shoe-leather journalism, slippers journalism

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected the way journalists collect, produce, and deliver the news. As the virus started spreading rapidly at the beginning of 2020, reporters across the globe were pressed to change their work routines swiftly and to create journalistic pieces remotely outside newsrooms. Countries worldwide went on lockdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus, creating conditions in which not only reporters but also TV anchors, such as Lester Holt, started performing their professional duties from home (Battaglio, 2020). Forced to adopt a new routine overnight, media professionals became more dependent on digital technologies.

Journalists have been adapting to the digital media ecosystem since the end of the 20th century. Among the areas of this profession that experienced changes as emerging technologies started conquering newsrooms is long-established "shoe-leather" reporting. This form of journalism, which enables news reporters to gather facts by observing events and talking to sources, has been further affected by formidable coronavirus pandemic circumstances. During the spread of COVID-19, "shoe-leather" journalism was replaced to a diverse extent across newsrooms and countries with the contemporary forms of news collection introduced by online technologies. Facing strict lockdown measures and high infection rates, reporters resorted to alternatives for acquiring information. They worked primarily from home, inspiring this research

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to assign the term "slippers journalism" to the practice involving information gathering primarily online. The opposite, thus, is "shoe-leather" reporting, which requires journalists to work in the field. Hence, journalists embraced diverse smartphone applications, video software, streaming platforms, and social media to complete assignments virtually. Zoom, FaceTime, and other video applications became major mediators in communication between reporters and their sources.

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected all professions, replacing conventional work environments with a working-from-home regimen. Acknowledging the unprecedented impact of the pandemic, this research focused on journalism practice, which is what Hanitzsch and Donsbach (2012) identified as "one of the states of manifestation of journalism culture across nations, along with ideas (values and beliefs) and artifacts illuminated in news content" (p. 262). As journalists needed to adopt new daily routines, this study's main concern was to examine how the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic affected "shoe-leather" reporting and what alternative newsgathering practices journalists embraced when faced with movement restrictions. This investigation contributes to understanding the extent to which digital tools can serve as substitutes for traditional forms of reporting, especially at a time marked by growing concerns over misinformation and fake news exposure. As COVID-19 has altered journalism practices worldwide, this research used interviews with international journalists to obtain a comprehensive perspective on their daily work practices affected by the pandemic.

Literature Review

"Shoe-Leather" Journalism

In the past two decades, media across the globe have transitioned to digital platforms, pressing journalists to adopt new practices in producing content. The shift in collecting, creating, and disseminating news has been demanding, especially for journalists who have spent years working in a traditional media environment. Accustomed to journalistic practices ingrained in newsrooms for decades before the emergence of the Internet and social media, they faced a new reality. This inspired Agarwal and Barthel (2015) to use the term "existential crisis" to explain the challenges traditional journalists needed to tackle in a digitized news environment. Among the well-established journalistic practices affected by the shift in news collection and production was "shoe-leather" reporting. "Shoe-leather" is an old-fashioned form of journalism that involves a journalist reporting at the scene, speaking with sources directly, and observing events in person (Pavlik, 2000). Being out and about also leads the way to serendipitous moments in journalism because it allows reporters to detect surprising information and acquire valuable new ideas for their stories (Bird-Meyer & Erdelez, 2021).

Collecting information by going from one place to another and having face-to-face conversations with sources has been affected by digitization, which has also led to newsroom capacity reduction. A research study that examined local newsrooms in Australia pointed to staff cutbacks that happened when the media began moving to digital platforms, resulting in fewer stories that employed "shoe-leather" practices to be produced (Simons, Carson, Muller, & Martin, 2020). A reduced number of employees due to increased reliance on new technologies was also detected in other countries, including the United States (Pavlik, 2015).

As Perruso (2011) stressed, "journalists rely more on computer searches and databases" (p. 12), which makes "shoe-leather" reporting slightly less practiced in contemporary media ecology.

The news reporting process involves discovery and examination (Shapiro, 2010). Discovery translates into searching for information, whether in documents or through conversations with sources. The examination, according to Shapiro (2010), is the process of verifying such information and organizing it within a story. One such example is embodied in a child sexual abuse scandal in the state of New South Wales, which was disclosed through this old-fashioned form of reporting (Simons et al., 2020). Specifically, the *Newcastle Herald* journalist Joanne McCarthy exposed pedophile priests in the Hunter Valley region through traditional reporting, which included inspecting documents on-site and talking to sources directly. This case exemplifies the value of in-person information collection in investigative journalism. Even though reporters are now empowered with digital tools that allow them access to public records and other information online (Pavlik, 2000), there are instances where documents, such as court files, need to be obtained in person (Tandoc, Cheng, & Chew, 2022), making "shoe-leather" journalism necessary to complete assignments.

"Shoe-leather" is not limited to reporting aimed at disclosing sexual abuse, corruption, or fraud; it is also essential for community journalism. The case of *The Manitoulin Expositor*, an island community newspaper in Canada established more than 140 years ago, shows how providing public service journalism focused on stories that rely on traditional forms of news gathering has been assisting this media organization in maintaining its operation. People behind *The Manitoulin Expositor* believe that the reason for the paper's survival is independence, courage in opening important community topics, and its "shoe-leather" tactic in news production to serve residents of Manitoulin Island (Chiarito, 2019). Traditional "shoe-leather" practices require time to be performed, but as Simons and colleagues (2020) pointed out, they are important, especially in covering topics of public concern.

"Slippers" Journalism

Even before the pandemic, "shoe-leather" faced challenges due to newsroom cuts and the increased reliance of media professionals on digital resources (Pavlik, 2015; Simons et al., 2020). Financial hurdles disrupted media routines by pressing journalists to work more, accept new responsibilities, produce news at a faster pace, and spend more time on social media to promote content and keep readers engaged (Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Ternes, Peterlin, & Reinardy, 2018). While employee reduction means that some newsrooms are covering fewer events (Bird-Meyer & Erdelez, 2021), digital tools allow many news stories to emerge from online sources, prompting a shift away from "shoe-leather" reporting. Journalists can craft newsworthy pieces deriving information solely from social media (Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Weaver & Willnat, 2016). Furthermore, journalists needed these tools to cover many events and conferences during the COVID outbreak when they moved online (Tandoc et al., 2022).

This growing use of new technologies has also brought skepticism into newsrooms, especially among experienced journalists. For example, Mabweazara (2013) examined the challenges of Zimbabwean print journalists in an era dominated by digital technologies and found differences in the perspectives of senior and junior staff with respect to "shoe-leather" practices. Juniors insisted on the importance of

immediacy in delivering news, praising new technologies for allowing them to be productive in creating stories without leaving the newsrooms. Experienced media professionals, on the other hand, lamented the lack of traditional newsgathering, stressing that journalists nowadays only generate stories on their computers and do not search for news other than on the Web.

This finding does not imply that emerging technologies should be perceived as a threat to journalism due to the dramatic shift in the journalism practices they initiated. As Pavlik (2015) suggested, they should be regarded as a means to enhance it. Journalists who work in a contemporary news ecosystem save time by not going to libraries, as they can access digital archives from their homes or newsrooms. They have been exposed to an abundance of sources on the Internet, such as news databases and Google engines, which assist them in searching for information (Perruso, 2011). Splichal and Dahlgren (2016) argue that journalistic productivity has gone up since tech innovations entered the newsrooms. However, such development has not diminished the relevance of traditional journalism. Rather, as Pavlik (2015) suggested, a good approach to news production is combining machine-supported writing with journalism produced by humans, which is reflected in going beyond what digital data enabled by new technologies can supplement and identify hidden information through traditional reporting.

Overall, scholars have detected an increased reliance on digital tools in newsrooms even before the COVID-19 pandemic, when journalists could move freely and have in-person interactions with their sources. In 2020, they faced a new reality, as countries across the globe started imposing lockdowns to prevent the spread of coronavirus and advised against group gatherings (Taylor, 2021). This disrupted established routines among journalists, making them heavily dependent on their computers and phones to keep readers engaged by supplying them with continuous updates about the pandemic (Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Tandoc et al., 2022). A North Dakota weekly newspaper, for instance, encountered a decrease in traffic once they reduced the amount of content they were publishing as the pandemic eased (Finneman & Thomas, 2021). In Singapore, journalists faced similar pressures, stating that they needed to accelerate the news production process and constantly provide updates to news consumers regarding COVID (Tandoc et al., 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic has shaken "shoe-leather" reporting and put journalists in a vulnerable position. During the health crisis, reporters were not only under pressure to provide coverage of newsworthy topics with frequently limited sources they could access in person, but they were also concerned about their health while performing work duties (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Being out in the field exposed them to the risk of coronavirus infection. Erin Ailworth, a reporter for the Chicago bureau of *The Wall Street Journal*, described field reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic as tough because "being on high alert nonstop is exhausting" (Grau, 2020, para. 15).

Journalists were in particular danger when covering anti-lockdown protests across the globe. Regardless of precautions, such as wearing masks and gloves, mass gatherings would make it difficult for reporters to maintain a social distance while covering such events, which would put them at health risk (Matloff, 2020). These and other problems that emerged in the pandemic further challenged traditional forms of news collection and appeared to have pushed reporters more toward new technologies in the process of acquiring information. However, the real extent to which journalists have abandoned "shoe-leather" reporting and embraced digital tools in their work routines during COVID-19 has yet to be

investigated. This study will shed light on developments during the pandemic by posing the following research questions:

RQ1:   What are contemporary global journalists' opinions of "shoe-leather" journalism?

RQ2:   What newsgathering practices did global journalists employ during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Social Media as an Information Source

Aside from search engines and databases that journalists resort to in their attempts to obtain information virtually, another digital artifact that continues to gain prominence in journalism and assists "slippers" journalism practices is social media. It is difficult to envision 21st-century journalism without platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. With their capacity to provide convenient access to news and allow information to spread quickly, social media has been widely embraced by diverse populations and professionals (Heravi & Harrower, 2016). Journalists rely on social media to collect information, look at what other news organizations are posting, and get ideas for their stories (Weaver & Willnat, 2016). In fact, in today's media ecosystem, journalism is assisted by citizens who serve as news sources and share ideas through social media (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). They supply news media with diverse multimedia items, opinions, and tips (Tandoc & Vos, 2016, p. 952) and provide an alternative to information journalists would collect through "shoe-leather" reporting (Simons et al., 2020).

Multiple scholarly studies that used data obtained from U.S.-based outlets and news articles published by prominent global media indicated that social media is tucked into the pores of daily journalistic routines. Ternes and colleagues (2018) surveyed 1181 newspaper reporters and found that 38% of obligations they had at work were social media and newspaper website related. Tandoc and Vos (2016) observed social media use among journalists in three online newsrooms to learn that these platforms served media professionals in marketing their stories and observing posts that news organizations and prominent sources, such as government agencies, are sharing. Furthermore, a study that investigated social media utilization in news articles among 10 prominent U.S.-based websites suggested that journalists diligently observe what is happening on these platforms, as they supply them with an abundance of information about diverse events and topics (Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020). Specifically, this research found that 40% of the analyzed articles used information published by social media sources—the finding that is in line with a study by Weaver and Willnat (2016) that surveyed 1,080 journalists in the United States and found that social media served them predominantly as an information-gathering tool.

Sources available to reporters on social media represent prominent people, institutions, and anonymous individuals. Journalists take advantage of both types of sources when producing news (Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, & Følstad, 2016; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020). Sometimes, these sources supply news producers with critical pieces of information for their stories, but the problem that arises when utilizing such content is determining its credibility (Van Leuven, Kruikemeier, Lecheler, & Hermans, 2018). For this reason, journalists primarily derive information from elite and other prominent sources; however, when utilizing information from unknown sources, they employ professional verification practices to ensure its authenticity before publication (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020).

As several studies have suggested, although they monitor news and collect information on social media, journalists are less likely to use these platforms for verification purposes (e.g., Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Weaver & Willnat, 2016). For instance, Irish journalists who have heavily adopted social media in their work refrain from verifying information on these platforms because they "believe information on social media cannot be trusted" (Heravi & Harrower, 2016, p. 1201). Leading media outlets have policies that encourage journalists to use social media, but they require caution because errors could undermine the organization's credibility and reputation (Duffy & Knight, 2019). This does not imply that reporters refrain from inspecting information accuracy through social media. Heravi and Harrower (2016) suggested that Irish journalists who demonstrate high expertise in using social media use these platforms to verify information. Their research found that one of the most popular mechanisms that served this purpose was contacting official sources to check whether the information they found online was accurate. Another study that surveyed 348 TV journalists in the United States found that the principle of information verification was highly regarded among the respondents (Henderson & Cremedas, 2017). Some of the surveyed journalists indicated that social media pressed them to be wary of the information that circulates the platforms, arguing that they would rather publish information after other media outlets and be correct than rush to publish unverified information from questionable sources first and be wrong. However, the survey also showed that about 20% of journalists admitted that they could not always engage in thorough information verification before broadcasting a story, which is likely to occur when they report breaking news (Henderson & Cremedas, 2017).

Social media can supply journalists with an abundance of information, but many challenges also accompany its use, considering that these platforms can also be disseminators of unverified stories. As the pandemic created an environment in which the movement of media professionals faced limitations and pressed them to use digital alternatives to complete assignments, it would be invaluable to learn about social media use among reporters under such circumstances. Hence, this study investigates the role of social media in the newsgathering process during the COVID-19 pandemic through the following question:

RQ3:   How did social media serve journalists during the coronavirus pandemic?

Method

This research used in-depth interviews with international journalists affiliated with diverse news organizations—from print to digital-native. Studying journalism practice internationally poses many challenges due to cultural, political, and socioeconomic factors that impact media in diverse countries and the fact that "news production is still strongly geared towards news agendas that prioritize domestic news" (Hanitzsch & Donsbach, 2012, p. 263). However, the context in which journalists produced news stories was quite distinctive during the pandemic, considering that COVID-19 imposed a single dominant news topic on the news agenda at the global level. Thus, the study focused on reporters who worked internationally because of the global nature of the changes in professional journalism that occurred during the pandemic. The international approach of the study allowed for obtaining a vast array of perspectives on reporting during COVID-19. Furthermore, "shoe-leather" encompasses practices ingrained in the journalism profession across diverse countries, regardless of their economic or political systems.

The purposive sampling method was used in participant recruitment. After obtaining IRB approval, the author, a former journalist, used her professional networks to contact reporters who worked for high-profile media companies. Only media professionals who had engaged in "shoe-leather" reporting before the pandemic started and then switched to the "working from home" mode due to lockdown measures were invited to participate in the study. Approximately 30 invitations were sent, and 30% of the journalists accepted the invitation. All interviews were conducted in English. At the time the conversations took place, participants lived and worked in Serbia (Interviewee 1), the United Kingdom (Interviewee 2), the United States (Interviewees 3 and 5), Tajikistan (Interviewee 4), Jordan (Interviewee 6), Egypt (Interviewee 7), Turkey (Interviewee 8), and China (Interviewee 9). Following McCracken's (1988) suggestion that "it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people, than more superficially with many of them," the author interviewed nine journalists for this research (p. 17). Another reason for participant selection was that the author wanted to ensure the representation of journalists not only from developed countries but also from those in transition and nondemocratic countries, especially because journalism research tended to focus on and be executed in Western countries (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017).

Data were collected from March 2021 to July 2022. Participants, among whom were six males and three females, received an e-mail with a study description. After journalists accepted the invitation to participate, the interviews were conducted via video applications, such as Skype and Zoom. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by an automatic transcription software, Trint, and then inspected for accuracy. The questions were divided into two categories: (1) Daily routines and newsgathering practices and (2) Utilization of social media in newsgathering. Each of these categories had seven to 10 questions. The interviews were semistructured, while the approach taken in the data analysis was to identify keywords in context (KWIC). Researchers use this technique to inspect parts of a text, detect keywords and phrases, and then look at the data to find other occurrences of such words and phrases (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The KWIC approach allowed for the determination of common themes and subthemes from the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

"Shoe-Leather" Reporting in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lockdown measures differed across the globe, posing large-scale movement restrictions and curfews in many countries (e.g., Croatia, Italy, China, Turkey) throughout 2020 ("COVID-19: Stay-at-Home Restrictions," n.d.). Diverse procedural newsroom policies and government-imposed quarantine affected journalists' experiences with "shoe-leather" reporting (RQ1). Interviewee 3, who was based in Washington, DC, spent more time working in the field than before the pandemic because there were plenty of COVID-19-focused and other major events to cover, including the U.S. presidential elections and Black Lives Matter protests. On the other hand, Interviewee 6, who was based in Jordan, had a different experience due to strict lockdown measures and the organizational procedure he needed to follow when covering events to minimize the risk of infection. His reporting job in Jordan during the coronavirus spread entailed a risk assessment process, where his assignments had to be approved by multiple individuals, which made him choose events he would cover cautiously and rely on wires, Zoom interviews, social media, and other platforms to collect information when working on the ground was not possible. Another reporter based in China needed special permission to visit a hospital in Wuhan, the city that was the COVID-19 pandemic epicenter.

Regardless of individual experiences with the frequency of on-the-scene reporting, journalists share the perspective that "shoe-leather" is hardly replaceable, as it presents the essence of journalism. "Slippers" journalism allows them to communicate virtually with sources, but "shoe-leather," according to them, paves the way to building stronger connections that lead to more comprehensive portrayals of events:

> Journalism does not exist without meeting people, because journalism is about people. And if you don't get to establish a relationship with a person, then you fail in your job. So, establishing relation is, of course, much easier when you see someone face to face, when you have that precious time to informally talk to someone, to establish a connection or relationship that can be useful in many ways. It can be useful for journalists to get the sense of the story, to get the sense of the issue, to check if the story is true, and to establish long-term connections and relationships that can be precious for future stories. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 1, 2021)

Shapiro (2010) suggested that communicating with sources is critical in the discovery part of reporting. This study's participants confirmed his position, explaining that "shoe-leather" enables them to acquire unanticipated information through informal conversations with sources. Random ideas and unexpected stories also pop up in a reporter's daily life while they are driving to work, riding a bus, or eating out (Bird-Meyer & Erdelez, 2021), which is what they were deprived of most of the time during the pandemic. Other layers of "shoe-leather" reporting include building new or strengthening existing contacts and having discussions with sources that lead to understanding the context of events.

To the reporters under study, face-to-face conversations are invaluable, as they appear more natural than chats via video applications and allow sources to feel comfortable sharing information. For example, before the pandemic, Interviewee 2 covered litigation and the bar in the United Kingdom for a print magazine. This form of reporting entailed attending civil hearings and events hosted by law firms or barristers' chambers or having coffee or meals with barristers and lawyers, which the interviewee described as an opportunity to build contacts. He emphasized the importance of informal conversations, explaining that a discussion over lunch, for instance, might "flow on to discussing something else naturally as part of a conversation, which is a bit more difficult over a video call or telephone call" (personal communication, May 27, 2021).

> People aren't as open on the phone or on Zoom. You don't want to sit for an hour on a Zoom call at your desk, just talking. You have to go into a meeting armed with topics and questions, whereas before you could have sort of random conversations about things to get a sense of what's going on in the market because you'd be in person, you'd either be having a coffee or you'd be talking over lunch. And it was a bit more informal. These informal chats were a bit lost. (personal communication, May 27, 2021)

Aside from building a network of contacts, other benefits of working in the field include observing events and asking questions that could lead to significant discoveries (Pavlik, 2015, p. 18). Although journalists are reassured that the products completed virtually adhered to professional standards, they believe that being in places where something is happening is still an indispensable piece of the storytelling

puzzle. A reporter from Egypt stressed, "things you are looking for will be more clear" if you see them yourself (personal communication, May 29, 2021). This further confirms that the purpose of journalistic reporting in places where events occur is to observe and witness them (Revers, 2015). The Egyptian reporter gave an example of a story of an abandoned synagogue in Egypt's Delta that she believed she could not fully convey information about to her readers if she did not go to see the place herself. Other journalists also stressed the importance of not only fact-gathering at the scene but also verifying information, which Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) identified as one of the key tenets of journalism. The study data suggest that the need for a thorough inspection of information in 2020 and 2021, due to fake news and misinformation circulating on the Web, amplified the importance of old-fashioned reporting. There were times when reporters needed to put away their slippers and tie shoelaces, convinced that there was no alternative good enough to enable them to acquire facts. Interviewee 3 suggested that unverified COVID-19-related information on the Internet and the vast array of topics the pandemic elicited prompted him to take his camera out and work frequently on the ground. He talked to people in person about their struggles during the lockdown and investigated how the pandemic affected small businesses and grocery supplies.

In Tajikistan, "shoe-leather" reporting was critical for disclosing the reality of COVID-19 infection rates. Interviewee 4, who is from this country, emphasized that on-the-ground reporting was his primary means of information collection, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Faced with limited access to information from the authorities, this reporter and his fellow journalists were on foot, walking from one source to another in their attempt to alert citizens in Dushanbe and other areas of the country of the threat posed by the coronavirus. Interviewee 4 explained that the government, along with state-run media and the Ministry of Health, was denying the presence of the virus in the country, and COVID-19-related information was non-accessible to reporters. Hence, he and his colleagues visited hospitals and talked to relatives of infected patients and other independent sources "to show the reality" of the pandemic. Interviewee 4 said that the pandemic once again demonstrated the importance of a reporter's job for the community, especially in countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, where governments are trying to hide information from the public.

COVID-19 "Slippers" Journalism Practices

Even if social restrictions did not directly impact reporters, as was the case in Serbia, where they could obtain permits and move freely during curfew, it still affected their work practices. In-person conversations with sources or gatherings with fellow media professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic were limited (Cherubini, Newman, & Nielsen, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021; Taylor, 2021). Journalists were prompted to collect information from home and embrace diverse digital newsgathering practices, hence performing what this study labels "slippers" journalism (RQ2). Surfing through websites, search engines, and social media platforms to observe events and collect information was an indispensable part of journalists' routines even before 2020. During the pandemic, however, they noticed an increase in social media use, a heavy reliance on video applications for interviews, a higher frequency of phone conversations, and remote coverage of events that occurred in online spaces, such as virtual ceremonies. Although these practices pushed reporters out of their comfort zone, they also helped them develop new skills and prepare for the post-pandemic newsroom, which, according to Trewinnard (2020), will focus on work distribution in digital spaces. Video interviews were rather random before journalists switched to "working-from-home"

mode when these became an integral part of the "new normal." Reporters benefited from them as they were able, from the comfort of their homes, to reach out to interviewees across the globe and to people whose movements were limited because of lockdown rules, age, or health issues. The challenges brought by video interviews were that they appeared less natural compared with in-person interviews and required reporters to demonstrate proficiency in virtual conversations. Interviewee 9 said, "I don't want to do video journalism via Zoom," adding that some people tended to pretend or act in front of a computer camera (personal communication, July 1, 2022).

Evidently, the dynamic of Zoom interviews differed from face-to-face conversations, which prompted journalists, especially those with jobs on television, to invest time in technical details and create an atmosphere in which an interviewee felt comfortable talking via video. Interviewee 6, who frequently interviewed sources this way during the pandemic, said that video was primarily used when face-to-face communication was not possible. He stressed that this format required some adjustment but never affected the quality of the final product delivered to the audience (personal communication, March 30, 2021). Other interviewees shared a similar perspective, as they also needed to resort to in-person information-gathering alternatives when meeting people outside of the digital space was implausible. For stories that fall within the domain of politics, Interviewee 3, for instance, relied on Skype to conduct interviews with sources via this video application. Under "normal" circumstances, he indicated that some of these interviews would be produced in their TV studio in DC.

Interviewee 8 switched from interviewing people in Turkey in person to communicating with them via e-mail and WhatsApp, while Interviewee 7 primarily relied on her phone to acquire information from sources. Similar to other forms of information collection that involve non-face-to-face communication with sources, she faced certain limitations in storytelling. For instance, she worked remotely on an article about how the coronavirus affected farmers in Egypt without being able to visit them because of the virus spread, which is why she felt she could not fully portray the struggles of this population. That story was one of many produced by and during the COVID-19 pandemic, a topic that dominated the news throughout 2020 and 2021. This topic was so dominant in the media that even journalists who covered events that were happening regularly before the health crisis, such as sports games, shifted to producing coronavirus-related stories (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). As it affected the entire global population, the coronavirus spread presented a problem of public concern, which usually required traditional journalistic methods of coverage (Simons et al., 2020). Although reporters embraced digital alternatives in acquiring news, the boundaries they faced in collecting facts made their work more complex, not just with portraying events but also with verifying information. "Slippers" journalism, as Interviewee 1 suggested, made it a bit more difficult to find reliable sources for a story because "you cannot talk to a source in person often" (personal communication, April 1, 2021). According to him, some stories needed more fact-checking and cautiousness.

Aside from limited access to sources, another occurrence that instigated "slippers" journalism was the nature of some events that would be covered in person under "the old normal." Conferences, award ceremonies, court hearings, and other newsworthy events were being delivered online, and it appeared that this practice might continue in the future. A decade ago, Perruso (2011) noted that many events in the domain of local journalism that involved covering government meetings and other live events could be observed virtually via streaming videos. Hence, a journalist does not need to be present at a meeting in

person to provide full coverage for their audience. Interviewee 2 engaged with this type of coverage during the pandemic, and he believed that gathering information this way had some significant benefits. As court hearings were delivered digitally, he could watch them online instead of attending them in person, which gave him extra time to attend more such events virtually.

Social Media Use

RQ3 examined how social media, as an integral component of "slippers" journalism, served journalists during the coronavirus pandemic. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, social media played a significant role across newsrooms, supplying journalists with critical sources and information and allowing them to distribute the news quickly to a wide auditorium (Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020; Tandoc & Vos, 2016; Weaver & Willnat, 2016). As "shoe-leather" reporting became implausible to perform at times, journalists began embracing social media to a greater extent than before the pandemic, using them to observe events, share news, collect story ideas, and establish contact with potential sources. However, the overall role of social media in newsgathering was to serve journalists primarily as a supplement rather than as a replacement for "shoe-leather" journalism. One reason for this practice is the complexity of covering COVID-19 and professional journalistic standards that require fact-checking and assessing information with great care because of fake news and rumors spread across social media. As Interviewee 9 stressed, the essence of a journalist's job is "to use every sense, your touch, your smell, your eyes, to witness something, not just (to collect information) from social media" (personal communication, July 1, 2022).

On multiple occasions, social media have triggered newsgathering on the ground. One such example is when Interviewee 3 learned from social media users about massive COVID testing happening near the place where he lived, which prompted him to go to the site, verify the information, and write a report about it. Another time when social media signaled the news was when the U.S. President at the time Donald Trump was sent to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, which was followed by a congregation of his supporters around the hospital. Interviewee 3 went out to cover the gathering, confident that such an event required reporters to see what was happening on their own rather than taking content from social media "without checking if (something) really happened" (personal communication, March 27, 2021).

With an abundance of content and users, social media has enabled journalists to contact potential sources and supplement their stories with the information they were prevented from obtaining on the ground. In countries with limited access to information, the role of social media during the pandemic appeared even more significant, as it presented one of the major tools for news collection and distribution. Interviewee 4 frequently used Facebook to communicate with sources and distribute information. He believed that because of social media, people could spread the news about COVID-19 cases in a country such as Tajikistan, where the government was trying to prevent the distribution of such news: "Without social media, especially without Facebook in Tajikistan, journalists would not be able to determine the real scale of the pandemic in Tajikistan" (personal communication, July 17, 2021). Similarly, the political situation in Turkey prompted journalists to increase their engagement with social media. Interviewee 3 indicated that the tendency of journalists and audiences to explore information distributed via social media was prevalent even before the pandemic, as it helped them obtain information they otherwise could not access because of the government's influence on the media (personal communication, May 31, 2021).

Furthermore, Interviewee 9 stressed that although he preferred witnessing events in person, social media were still beneficial during the pandemic, as they supplied him with content from areas that were impossible or hard to access, such as Wuhan.

The most frequently used social media platforms among the reporters under study were Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Interviewee 2 said that his news organization primarily used Twitter content to supplement stories. According to him, one instance where social media is beneficial is when there is an incident happening in another part of London, and "social media will be one of the first places where someone might be sharing an image or a video of it" (personal communication, May 27, 2021). Interviewee 5, who works for broadcast media in New York State, said that they started using Facebook more to gather information for stories that would run on their TV channel by asking people questions on specific issues and events.

> Also, when we're doing those questions or reposting stories, we're farming from those people that are commenting and finding people for our stories. So, like, say, we're doing a story about people who got COVID vaccines and had bad reactions. We post a question, we post a story, and then we can go through and find people and reach out to them. There's been a big push for that. And it's been successful because we've found a lot of people that we probably wouldn't be able to find just like going on the street trying to find random people. (personal communication, April 9, 2021)

Journalists resort to social media to obtain information from eyewitnesses and other sources (Heravi & Harrower, 2016). Platforms such as Twitter allow them to potentially connect to valuable expert sources (Perruso, 2011), but they also employ unofficial sources when creating stories. In fact, while previous research emphasized the utilization of prominent, official sources in news production (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018), interview data from this study show that the use of unofficial sources expanded during the pandemic. Along with the limitations reporters faced while gathering news in person, the pandemic itself triggered this trend. This was especially the case when journalists were producing coronavirus-related stories that required establishing connections with social media users. For instance, Interviewee 1 contacted people on social media for stories that dealt with a new reality instituted by COVID-19. Hence, he produced stories about people who found creative ways to spend quality time in quarantine and used social media to get in touch with those people and find the content they produced, such as pictures and footage. He said that using both official and unofficial sources is important because "you would need the official sources as a way of gathering information that is state-confirmed, but you always keep an eye on unofficial sources for some extra meaning or extra layer of the story" (personal communication, April 1, 2021). Interviewee 5 found it beneficial to connect with unofficial sources on social media while performing "slippers journalism." She explained that under "old normal," she and her colleagues would go to local Walgreens or a gas station and try to find people who fit into the story they were working on. However, social media made it easier and faster to connect with people who would be strong interviewees for their stories, not only because they had some interesting experiences to share about the topic at hand but also because people recruited via social media were those who would also be willing to speak publicly. One such example was when her organization worked on a piece about nursing homes in New York and used social media platforms to find and interview people whose loved ones died in these facilities in 2020. Similarly, Interviewee 2 used social media for a report he was putting up about

the Euro 2021 soccer tournament. As many stadiums had limited capacity for the games, this created a problem with tickets that were allocated pre-pandemic to people via a ballot.

> A lot of people weren't happy that they received emails from UEFA saying that tickets were canceled because of the limited number of people in stadiums. So, we had the information, and I wrote that story, but I used Twitter to search for tweets about people being unhappy about it. (personal communication, May 27, 2021)

While performing "slippers" journalism and utilizing social media content in news production, journalists' main concern was the authenticity of the information collected via these platforms. Such a problem is not native to the COVID-19 pandemic solely, considering that media professionals have been advised for years to demonstrate vigilance when collecting information online. Based on the social media policies of news organizations in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, journalists are urged to be cautious on social media not only when searching for news and sources for their stories but also when sharing content and engaging in debates that could pose threats to objectivity (Duffy & Knight, 2019). Evidently, the issue of trust in social media content still lingers in the minds of media professionals as they search for alternative sources of information to supplement their stories. The interviewees suggested that they had to be particularly cautious when dealing with social media content during COVID-19 because there was fake news, especially about coronavirus, spreading across these platforms. To steer clear of misinformation and fake news, it is necessary for journalists, Interviewee 6 stressed, to verify social media content at least once and "even for the third time" if needed to make sure what they acquired is accurate. In line with this, Interviewee 1 said that content distributed via social media could be attractive to use, but it needs to be followed by thorough verification. Other journalists' statements were along the same lines, confirming that the principle of verification remains what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) identified as one of the key tenets of journalism. Accuracy of information is critical in delivering the news, as "without accuracy, or at least a concerted attempt at achieving accuracy, a news report becomes misinformation or disinformation" (Russial, Laufer, & Wasko, 2015, p. 309).

Using social media more frequently to collect information and recruit interviewees has assisted reporters in advancing their digital skills. Nowadays, journalists are armed with more verification tools than a decade ago when social media started conquering newsrooms, allowing them to use unofficial sources with more confidence. For example, to ensure that the person she would interview was authentic, Interviewee 5 would schedule a Zoom interview and talk to them to help determine if they truly were a good fit for the story. Similarly, when Interviewee 6 could not cover demonstrations in Jordan, he would find information about them on social media from an activist involved in protests and then check through Google and other platforms who the person was before using their content or contacting them for his report: "When you deal with news from social media, it's a bit risky because if you don't verify, it might be the end of your career if you make a mistake" (personal communication, March 30, 2021).

This study's data affirms earlier scholarly research findings that there is no unique model across news organizations with respect to the mechanisms they use to inspect information accuracy. Rather, the process of verification combines journalistic skills with new technologies that help journalists determine what information to trust (Backholm et al., 2017). Interviewee 8 shared how the increased use of digital tools,

including social media, prompted reporters to be "more experienced in detecting false reports." Similarly, Interviewee 6 said that the verification process was slower at the beginning of the pandemic but sped up over time as he became more versed with the shortcuts of verifications. Several interviewees pointed to various "cross-checking" techniques to inspect information found on digital platforms. Interviewee 5 explained that before using photographs found on social media, she would check with other sources if the information depicted or a person portrayed was authentic. Hence, she would contact a police source, firefighters, or an individual who is a family member of the person to whom the story was connected. Furthermore, there are media organizations that have a technical procedure that allows them to verify photos, audio, or video files, while there is also "a standard way" of verification where a journalist looks at who is the creator of the content, the content details, talks to people further about it, and crosschecks with other sources if the information is correct. Whichever technique they used, statements from journalists imply that advanced expertise in social media use, along with increased awareness of potential misinformation that can be easily distributed online, assisted them in being more efficient in employing these platforms to acquire information.

Conclusion

This study investigated the experiences of international reporters performing "shoe-leather" practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the extent to which journalists could engage with traditional information collection varied, the data showed that both journalists who performed "shoe-leather" to a greater and lesser extent found this type of reporting essential to journalism. The reason for this is that being on the ground arms them with an opportunity to witness events, verify information in person, establish and maintain contacts with sources, obtain unexpected facts, provide comprehensive coverage of diverse issues, and understand the context of events. In addition, "shoe-leather" reporting is a means of revealing the truth, especially in countries where media professionals have limited access to information and where governments try to prevent citizens from obtaining the information they need through the media.

Data also show that reporting events and issues happening on digital platforms is becoming increasingly important in the contemporary media ecosystem. As intensified communication online has become a new reality, journalists have engaged in covering phenomena that occur on social media and elsewhere online. This new trend also explains why informal sources on platforms such as Facebook have been used more frequently than before the pandemic. In addition, various digital tools, including video applications, have gained prominence over the course of the pandemic. Although in-person communication that is ingrained in "shoe-leather" reporting provides a more in-depth understanding of sources and events, video interviews have become an integral part of the new routine among media professionals. They believe that, with some practice and adjustment, this virtual interaction could establish an atmosphere that would make interviewees more comfortable talking. Furthermore, savviness in using social media and the availability of multiple digital tools to cross-check information have assisted journalists in becoming more efficient in distinguishing accurate from potentially false information on the Internet.

Similar to other professions that place employees in a hybrid workplace, allowing them to perform their duties both from home and in the office, journalism in the near future is likely to become a combination of "slippers" and "shoe-leather." In areas where in-person interactions are irreplicable, such as having

informal conversations that lead to discoveries or witnessing events, fieldwork remains a priority for journalists. However, as they continue enhancing their digital skills and become knowledgeable about diverse online tools to collect and verify information, they are likely to opt for "slippers journalism," as it allows them to speed up news production because they are saving time by not going to places to obtain some information that is available to them electronically.

These conclusions are derived from the data collected for this study and should be assessed within the scope of its limitations. First, the findings of this study could not be generalized because of the small sample of interviews. Second, the majority of the interviewees spoke English as a second language, which might have affected the richness of their expressiveness during Zoom and Skype conversations. Finally, studying journalism cultures across the globe is complex, making methodological errors likely to happen (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). Future research should expand the sample and focus on examining in more depth digital tools that are becoming part of the routine among reporters and introducing them to journalism students, thus preparing them for a smooth transition to a contemporary work environment.

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