

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF MEDIA COMPANIES AND THEIR WORKING STRUCTURE THROUGH THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic formed a devastating condition that dramatically changed our lives, regarding our daily routine but also our business presence and state. Throughout the last years, media companies in Greece but also worldwide, faced a variety of challenging problems that cost them corporate earnings, employees, status and credibility. The increase of internet usage, affected the traditional media as Television and Newspapers, while the constant trap of Fake News and clickbait articles seem to alienate the users from mainstream websites. Covid 19 could be a deathblow for the Media Companies, as the lockdown and the social distancing measures, hold back the sales of newspapers from the newsstands and quite a few shows on Television were forced to stop their presence. During the pandemic, more than

36.000 media workers have been fired or had their salary reduced, only in the USA as New York Times state. Although citizens are demanding more and more information towards Covid-19 and the visitors of the websites keep rising, the main problem occurs through the advertising drop. Companies, frightened from the progression of the pandemic, ceased the advertising expenses, keeping stock for possible harder times. Unfortunately the media couldn't influence businesses to attract more advertisements during the outbreak while also had to respond to a bigger challenge, with changing the working structure complying with the hygiene measures. Nonetheless, the media system appeared to have an alternative working model for each of the news and entertainment assets, starting immediately after the first shock of the pandemic. The newsrooms of the websites, replaced the physical presence of the journalists with remote work status as applications like Zoom, Telegram and Webex thrived helping the employees. Reporting

during the pandemic in risky locations as hospitals and pharmacies, shaped a totally new journalist “outfit” with face masks, gloves and social distance between employees and interviewee. Entertainment shows continued their production having forbidden every form of audience. Media companies were forced to change their working status with radical moves that affected employers, employees, society. But the changes didn’t stop at the workplace, as the government gave the opportunity also to media companies to proceed to temporary suspension of employees. This unprecedented law was used in the majority of the media, having consequences regarding the salaries, the work overload and the restructuring of the working model. All the above have formed a different landscape in the media sector that still is unknown if it will be modified again after the exceed of the pandemic. The technical tools that the media imperatively learned and started to use in order to keep the employees connected and business running well, would be an irreplaceable factor for the future workplaces. Noteworthy is that without the key role of technology and digital applications, the transformation of Media Companies wouldn’t be reachable.

Keywords: Media, Newsroom, Social Media, Coronavirus, Management, Digital Media

1. The next digital transformation wave for Media companies

Over the last decades, traditional Media (1) faced a desperation time with radical changes shaping a new reality for companies, employers and employees. Media as newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television, went through a shift while people started to trust more and more the digital media and the social media platforms for their information and entertainment as well. Traditional and mass media, lack of engagement with the users, don’t allow interactivity or targeted marketing so the digital media, easily took advantage of the opportunities and conquered the media sector. Nowadays, mass media are shrinking relative to their human resources, income and production while the digital era rises. Media all over the globe face similar difficulties and especially through the pandemic the drawbacks were magnified.

Especially regional media suffered from economic suffocation as local shops were forced to shut down due to lockdown(2). This specific problem impacted more than 40 local newsrooms in the USA, as journalist Kristen Hare describes on www.poynter.org. Although the media suffered all the mentioned challenges, 54% of U.S. citizens claim that the news media have done an excellent or good job responding to the coronavirus crisis, according to a survey of Pew Research Center’s. The global coronavirus crisis that hit the media sector as well didn’t affect only the job losses but also the media freedom.

A survey published by the International Federation of Journalists underlines that three out of four journalists face restrictions, while covering the coronavirus crisis. The survey included the answers of 1,308 journalists in 77 countries. Two-third of journalists said the experience worse working conditions, pay cuts and work losses after the pandemic. "These results show a worrying trend of declining media freedom and cuts to journalism at the very time when access to information and quality journalism is so crucial," said Anthony Bellanger, the IFJ general secretary. In addition, one in four journalists struggle to access information from official sources. Meanwhile, another survey conducted by the International Federation of Journalists, finds that Coronavirus increased gender inequalities in the media. The survey asked more than 500 women journalists in 52 countries and was published on 23 July and conducted between 19 -30 June. The resulting consequences reflected on the survey were problems between work and private life (62%), responsibilities (46%) and salaries (27%). The survey of 558 women journalists, also imprinted that the three out of four respondents experienced stress increase and sleeping problems. Also, only 4 in 10 women journalists received protective equipment from their organisation.

The coronavirus pandemic would be a final strike for the media area but until now, companies seem to know how to face the difficulties and overcome the results of the unpredictable phenomenon of Covid-19. Media companies had to choose fast and wisely about the path that would follow regarding the future of their companies and the status of their employees. The unbearable decline of the advertising income (3), would justify numerous dismissals and redundancies, while the worldwide shock didn't allow any plans for the businesses future. Facing the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic, the majority of media companies, decided to commence a digital transformation(4), changing nearly every aspect of their business model. Digital transformation, refers to a business model (5) shaped by "the changes associated with the application of digital technology in all aspects of human society" (Stolterman and Fors, 2004, p. 689). Media had to overcome any lack of technological equipment or knowledge weaknesses from every part of the organisation. The project of the digitalisation undoubtedly was a necessity for media companies in order to support the future needs and the security of every operating unit inside the business structure. In Greek media market where the global economic crisis, affected the existence of media companies, the coronavirus pandemic was a frightening obstacle for employees and employers. Since the financial crisis hit Greece(6) a downsizing in advertising revenue made it harder for the media to survive. The revenue turnover of Greek advertising firms fell from €1bn in 2007 to €250m in 2014 having as outcome the death of various news outlets, newspapers and television channels. The imploding economy and the continuous economic crisis turned popular television channels as Alter and Mega to dead signal while leading newspapers as

Ethnos, To Vima, Ta Nea, Eleftherotypia also to economic suffocation.

The endless loans that employees used to ask from the banks and the questionable investments in media products led major titles to bankruptcy. It is estimated that 4,000 jobs in the media have been cut after the recession hit. Meanwhile Greece ranks just 70th in press freedom in a list by the Reporters Without Borders, increased by 40 places in the past years. All the mentioned problems that greek media faced, didn't allow the companies to develop as the technological structure is concerned. Media outlets didn't have the opportunity to invest in better and faster internet connections that would help teleworking(7) or upgraded equipment. And that was a drawback when the pandemic hit and found the media quite unready for any form of technology collaboration. Moreover, through the recent years, Media didn't have the necessity of the digital transformation as Greece is a small country and the readers or viewers of the content were quite satisfied from the offered product. For example the servers of the websites were never full in order for users to experience slow connection. On the other hand, taking the example of the public sector(8) the digitization was and probably still is an urgent necessity for workers and citizens. The vast databases that include contacts, sensitive data and all kinds of public information, do need the finest technological input in order to maintain a fast and secure way of service and assistance from the public sector. In the private Media sector, the digitization was delayed but instead some companies invested on digital skills of their executives.

The digital transformation has as a main target the support of the operational issues as far the internal but also the external matters are concerned. Especially in the media sector, where the communication between journalists, editors in chief but also users is essential the unobstructed collaboration is vital. Through the coronavirus crisis, many companies commenced their digital transformation towards the business structure, the work flow, the user experience, the working model, the marketing process and the external affairs. As mentioned above, the media companies couldn't take the risk not to apply the digital transformation so the modernization (8) of the business process was determined. One of the drawbacks that the media faced is that the unpleasant status that the global economic crisis brought, didn't allow broad investments on technology and equipment. Nonetheless, free applications and digital tools, allowed media to change the working processes, facing the covid 19 pandemic. It is noticeable that this was not the first time that media had to apply the digitalization theory as the digital era necessarily brought in the media area terms as online subscriptions and paywalls for print content and hard copy productions. The industry had to "ride" several waves of the digital impact but this particular transformation process was forced by an epidemic that didn't actually an option to the companies. The recent transformation had to be applied in order not only to reach new audiences

but to comply with hygienic measures and to keep all the employees safe but also productive. Additionally, a focus point on which the media have to invest in, is the innovative digital structures that would lead on solving the survival issues and the working balance for the next decades. The digital transformation is a major issue that the media are facing problems on executing and may be helped by the solutions described below.

2. Technological applications, systemic analysis and the new media working culture

In order for the digital transformation and the new working models(9) to be correctly and efficiently adjusted on media companies, the systemic thinking(10) is more than needed. The systemic approach, could lead to the solution of major modern problems as the slow paced procedures on media, bureaucracy, traditional and not effective structures. Among others, the media need the executives that would apply quick and wise decision making through innovative tools, dynamic approach and funds exploitation.

Through systemic analysis on media the different approaches could be combined (the traditional era of newspapers and physical presence, with the pandemic changes that occurred in the newsroom). In media where humans are the centre of the profession, systemic solutions offer a managerial advantage that helps the educational procedures, creativity and finally the digital transformation.

Coronavirus pandemic kept the majority of the human mankind isolated during the lockdown and the nationwide business structure had to change in order for balance to be found. As newsrooms had to adapt to the new reality with social distancing measures and teleworking, technological applications had to be used in order to help structures. Tools that provided assistance for remote collaboration, communication, virtual meetings and correspondence as the coronavirus stopped every normal procedure as for the present. In addition, the usage of new technologies would also help media to build a more attractive and profitable property as the Knowledge Assets and the Knowledge Capital(11) is long lasting and exploitable. While training journalists on new media, technologies and innovative methods, the employees transform into an intangible asset of the organisation. The knowledge and its pursuit, would also lead to a new form of collaboration while the media seek education institutions and organisations to train working groups. All forms of knowledge assets for the media executives are capitalised for the majority of the decision making and especially in the area of expertise for each one of them. Executives that have the expertise experience and combine it with knowledge assets, are capable of even increasing the product and content variety of the company. The European and worldwide technology culture and system is meant to be used in media companies of Greece, in order for a

digital environment to be implemented and help the media overcome any relevant problems. Nowadays a variety of tools are accessible and ready to use in order to maintain, broadcast and distribute content regarding news but also entertainment channels of communication. While putting into execution the educational and digitisation plan of media employees, the European working models regarding the workplace balance and respect between management and colleagues will come a step closer as all employees may become equal regarding their skill sets. Using the digital tools that may breakdown the users profile that interact with their content, media would also be able to understand deeply the status and the figure of the citizens that trust the specific outlet. Informed for that, media are able to specify the news towards age, education, financial status and many other aspects, bringing the users closer to the news outlet, increasing

This type of shaping for the media structure, will allow companies to gain feedback through the communication channels with users, where everything as value and surplus value can be monitored.

Numerous technological giants, launched or relaunched products that would help businesses regain their work presence. Microsoft Teams from the Microsoft company, assisted teams in order to maintain chats, meetings and schedules all in one place. Their application showed an 500% increase of usage in China, after January 2020, while the premium package of the product was given free to companies for six months. Regarding video conferencing and online meeting, Webex filled the gap of screen sharing and webinars(12), while helping educational organisations but also media institutions. The product designed and launched by Cisco, offered a free three month trial to all users. Zoom, was the main application that was used in order to offer an “unlimited” number of participants in a video meeting (up to 100). Besides the mentioned apps regarding video calls and collaboration, apps such as Telegram, Viber, Whats app, gathered the majority of users, in order to exchange messages and information, towards business aspects. Newsrooms have shifted into a totally different workflow culture, introducing remote working for journalists, reporters, social media managers, but also accounting and human resources departments. The conversion didn't occur suddenly as the majority of newsrooms had to find an alternative and easy way for starting teleworking. Main examples led journalists to work alternately from home or working for some hours of the day from their PC. Employees had to be equipped with the necessary electronic devices such as PC, laptops, tablets, even internet connection via usb portable stick for better connection. This had as an outcome the even bigger expense for the companies as they had to reassure that the journalists would have every needed equipment to carry through their daily responsibilities. While the employees were getting used to the new reality of teleworking, social distancing and applications that were connecting them with

their coworkers, the pandemic appointed a series of new media products. The need of people for news and accurate information about the unprecedented pandemic, led to technological tools that already existed to become the center of the newsrooms. A recent study held by the University of Canberra found that news consumption had increased during the coronavirus outbreak, with 70% of questioned persons saying they were accessing news at least once a day, compared to 56% of the last year's study. For example, newsletters, as a recent survey states, were launched from 55% of the media companies. Furthermore, the media had to invest in infographics that lead to better social engagement, video and live blogs. Working from home led to a totally different reality for employees around the world, for nearly all the professions. Especially for journalists that had to face a 24 hour news cycle, the separation between home and office seems tricky. In addition, physical reporting during the pandemic shaped a new journalist "outfit" with face masks, gloves and social distance between employees and interviewee. Media, were forced to change their working status with moves that affected employers, employees, and society. A case study given from Greece, formed a new employment status as the government gave the opportunity to proceed to temporary suspension of employees bringing mixed consequences regarding the salaries and the restructuring of the working model. As far as the newspapers and their distribution is concerned the 73% percent of the asked companies in the relevant survey, claim that the pandemic did not affect the ability to publish and distribute its properties. The procedures changed, with temperature screenings and sanitisation of the most touched point areas but in general newspapers kept being distributed. Especially in Greece, as the lockdown started being inflexible, newspapers were also sold in grocery stores, making it easier for people to buy their newspaper.

3. Journalists work - life integration during and after Coronavirus

The essential role of the media sector and the journalist profession around the world, led to allowance of the media employees to continue working and going out even during the lockdown. Despite the restrictions, the majority of the journalists had a special document that allowed them to visit specific locations in order to carry through their work. News organisations enforced hygienic measures by reducing any exterior reporting activity but for the most significant issues, journalists had to attend, always keeping the hygienic protocol. Working from home, formed a particular workplace, that partially ruined the work - life balance as the physical entity of home became also the office space for the majority of employees. Newsrooms transformed to empty spaces, working with online applications as journalists work from home and that seems to work well, as actually the physical presence of a media worker is not always necessary. Meetings have been replaced from Zoom appointments, fact checking is completed via telephone and innovative

tools from the world wide web. Real time reporting, changed the multi-member filming crew with Facebook live, Instagram live coverage that became reality with even one person and a tripod holding a mobile phone. Technology is evolving and offers the Media industry a series of tools in order to develop part of their work putting social distancing and anti - coronavirus measures into consideration. The transformation that the media are experiencing led to knowledge management systems (13) that bring employees to the center of attention. Journalists are forced to learn living with digital tools in their daily life as without digital applications, they may not be able to carry through their responsibilities. The management of the new knowledge that they gained, should be in a complete balance with the company's culture and mentality as it should be rewarded in a certain way that administration and workers will decide together. The Reward system (14) is vital as employees may experience a not expected career tipping point that changed nearly every aspect of their day to day work. Being able to gain a reward either it is a money bonus type or more days of vacation would be a type of recognition for the collaboration between company and employee through the difficult times of coronavirus.

Companies may be concerned about rewarding employees because the financial status through the coronavirus era may be unstable. But taking into consideration the model of "hybrid politics" that is based on the principle that "when giving surplus value you should also collect surplus value" (Allan Marshall, Chief Information Officer, Telegraph Media Group UK, 2013), companies will have the opportunity to recollect their investment on employees. The transformation affected all the members of the media structure as well as the administration that now are supposed to combine printed editions, digital and mobile applications in order to extend their content and forms of information for the public.

Citizens are also changing the way that they need and search data for coronavirus and news towards the pandemic, so it is time for the media to change the way of charging their web content as paywalls are still not broadly used in Greece. In addition, as a new lockdown is not ruled out, newspapers have to turn their printed existence into digital forms with a light and easy way that can be found in order for citizens to have a quick way to get subscribed.

Vasilis Kanellis, head of the leading website of Greece "www.in.gr" when asked about the present and future of newsrooms states: "The pandemic in Greece, totally overturned the daily routine in workplaces. Undoubtedly, the changes also affected the newsrooms of websites. The teleworking rapidly became the normality and we had to create new channels of communication between the administration, management and employees. We faced a variety of problems and drawbacks while we had to cope with the distancing between colleagues. Video calls and video meetings could not replace the physical contact between journalists and news sources so we also

had to find a way to communicate with other people in order to carry through any form of reporting. Furthermore, the need of the public for more and more news for the current affairs and the pandemic, drive us to change the layout of websites with adding special widgets for live coverage of coronavirus cases, deaths and recoveries. As far as the future is concerned, my belief is that new measures will be needed in order for employees to return to the physical newsrooms. Better cooperation between colleagues, new innovative communication tools will be necessary and probably a more ease teleworking condition will be in the list for journalists. Certainly, calmness will be an ally in all workplaces in order to overcome the fear and the agony of new covid cases around the world. We shouldn't also forget that around us we may have coworkers that belong to vulnerable groups and they now need more than ever our caution."

Conclusion

The media industry is being reformulated, as the coronavirus cases still appear all around the world . Companies seem to succeed overcoming the first wave of the pandemic as far as the workflow is concerned. Although we could not claim the same for the stability and the financial balance of the business aspects. Plenty of news outlets face financial challenges, practical issues while implementing remote working and the insecurity for the unknown future won't let them proceed to any major investment . Distributed teams seem to be the new working status instead of the physical newsroom. Journalism characterized by the diverse accessibility, adapts easily to working from home systems.

Meanwhile, while reporters and journalists face the same problems, risks and dangers as all the other people in the world, that made them write and comment in a more humane and friendly way towards coronavirus. One could also assume that the coronavirus gave a chance to newsrooms to learn and get used to distributed journalists in order to be ready for future unfortunate circumstances as natural disasters or pandemics, or even major events as elections and unexpected demonstrations. Surveys and statistics brought out the reality where media organisations face a critical occasion that will put their existence in doubt but the positive output brings the public closer to the news outlets, as an aid for information towards dangerous situations such as coronavirus.

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