

INSIDIOUS, INVIDIOUS COVIDIOUS

Covid inspired an appetite for quality media but they then bored people

by Gerard Cunningham

It used to be said that no ministerial career could survive three negative Sundays in a row on the front pages of the national newspapers. Any story so big that it could sustain public interest for that long was a scandal that had to end in resignations, firings or other measures to appease voters and allow a government to move on.

So what happens when a single story stays on the front pages not for three weeks, or even for three months, but for twenty months and counting, and potentially into a third year? Indeed, for the second year running, it felt like there wasn't even the traditional respite from serious news offered by the Summer Silly Season.

The pandemic may have a deep impact on how we consume news for years to come. A new study suggests that prolonged exposure to a single political issue causes audiences to switch off, taking measures to try to avoid the news.

Clearly, this is bad news for newspapers. Many of them experienced a circulation bump in the early months of the pandemic. The Irish Times, for example, saw operating profits jump to €8.3 million in 2020, compared to €3.8 million the previous year. Reporting the results at the end of July, the paper said the increase was largely due to growth in paid subscribers in the early months of the Covid crisis. This growth compensated for falls in other areas, notably a 20 percent drop in advertising revenue.

However, the appetite for reliable information in the early months of the crisis, as disinformation spread rapidly online and new research changed public understanding of Covid almost daily,

may wane over time.

The Irish Times made a point of announcing that healthy 2020 financial results meant it was in a position to return the €3 million it received in pandemic wage subsidies. But the results also showed that overall revenues were down by over eight percent, even as costs fell even further, resulting in greater profits.

A study of Swiss news consumers and Brexit found that over time the preponderance of coverage of the issue led to annoyance, anger and boredom, and in turn to negative evaluations of the news media reporting the issue. In turn, this led to news avoidance.

The Brexit study – by Swiss PhD student Gwendolin Gurr and German professor Julia Metag – found that sustained exposure to a large news story can lead to disengagement from politics, and reduced trust in the press.

Covid would seem to be a story of a much greater magnitude than Brexit. While Brexit declines in importance the further one moves away from the UK the pandemic, is international and omnipresent. There is no aspect of life it does not affect, from education and healthcare to public transport, work patterns and work/home balance, manufacturing, food production, and entertainment.


Issues such as vaccine denial are already being used by extremist groups as recruiting tools, exploiting distrust and public anger, to the extent that some science sceptics have taken to ingesting horse dewormer to combat Covid. The longer the pandemic continues, the

more such sentiments will grow. Even if Ireland does reach close to total vaccine coverage, other countries remain at much lower levels, either because citizens refuse vaccines, or because their governments are unable to secure supplies.

The story may retreat from the front pages here, but it is unlikely to disappear completely. And that in turn may leave newspapers, broadcasters and online news media in the paradoxical position where The Brexit study – by Swiss PhD student Gwendolin Gurr and German professor Julia Metag – found that sustained exposure to a large news story can lead to disengagement from politics, and reduced trust in the press.

A second study, this time of Dutch news consumers by Marcel Broersma and Joëlle Swart in the early months of the pandemic, with a follow-up in Autumn 2020, found some users (heavy users and news junkies) consumed more news during the pandemic, while others reduced their news consumption “avoiding it based on the emotional weight and feeling of helplessness it produced”.

And in Norway, researchers Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe also found that many people started the pandemic with more intense news consumption, before cutting back due to information overload and emotional drain. However, the Norwegian academics argued that news avoidance was not a permanent reduction in information gathering, but more likely to be a strategic decision to limit news consumption to avoid overload.

The lesson again is that news media need to avoid boring the consumer. 



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