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Journalistic Continuity and Variability in South Korea's COVID-19 Coverage

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ABSTRACT

There have been contradictory observations and discussions on journalistic roles in covering public health crises, such as media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization or public mobilizers and educators. This paper investigates the journalistic roles and practices in South Korea during 2020, focusing on the differences and similarities between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 news stories. As part of the second wave Journalistic Role Performance (JRP) Project, we conducted a content analysis of news stories collected from television and radio broadcasts, newspapers, and online news media ($n = 3959$). The study found that while the tendency of media hype/mediatization and political polarization were partially persistent in COVID-19 stories, the public mobilizer and educator role became significantly higher in COVID-19 coverage. The results indicate that while journalists adhered to habitual journalistic practices structured within the highly competitive and politically polarized South Korean media system, they also adopted different practices when covering the pandemic, regardless of their ideological affiliations. This study contributes to understanding how journalists exhibit both continuity and variability in their roles and practices within specific contexts, such as during the pandemic.

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people became more dependent on information supplied by the mainstream media. According to the Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2020), mainstream news consumption substantially increased in 2020. There was a significant rise in the use of television and online news sources, and more people identified television as their main source of news (Newman et al. 2020, 9). As a result, professional journalism in mainstream news outlets played a crucial role in the ability of individuals and society to understand, assess, and respond to the possible risks of the pandemic. However, there have been criticisms toward mainstream news media in their lack of ability for delivering the accurate information, promoting the awareness, educating the

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precautious actions, and countering the false information (Basch et al. 2020; Jonah et al. 2022; Mach et al. 2021; Rabilu and Nasidi 2021).

This paper questions how professional journalism in mainstream news outlets performed their professional roles during the pandemic. Generally, journalistic roles have been understood as a shared occupational view of how journalism and the media should operate in society (Mellado 2015, 599; Cohen 1963). While earlier studies focused on how journalists conceive of and/or perceive their professional roles as important and legitimate (Weaver 1998; Weaver and Willnat 2012), more recent studies adopted a holistic approach to exploring journalism culture by focusing on how journalism performs different roles in practice (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Hellmueller and Mellado 2015; Mellado 2021; Mellado et al. 2023a; Mellado et al. 2023b; Stępińska et al. 2016). As the conceptions or perceptions of journalists toward their roles cannot be assumed directly to be manifested in their practices, it was critical to examine the journalistic roles performed in news practice.

Through reviewing more than five decades of research on journalistic roles, Mellado (2015) proposed the operational and methodological framework to measure journalistic roles in the news based on three different domains: the “journalistic voice” domain, the “power relations” domain, and the “audience approach” domain. The journalistic voice domain, which deals with the presence or absence of a journalist’s voice in a news story, is associated with the interventionist or disseminator role.¹ The power relations domain, which deals with the relationships between journalists and those in power, encompasses the watchdog and loyal-facilitator roles.² Meanwhile, various other approaches to audiences are associated with the civic, infotainment, and service roles depending on how journalists perceive their audience, be it as citizens, spectators, or clients (Mellado 2019, 13). All of these roles except for the interventionist and disseminator roles, which are part of a one-dimensional structure, are independent yet related and can co-occur or be combined in different ways within a single news story. Mellado and colleagues have conducted the cross-national and collaborative Journalistic Role Performance (JRP) project since the mid-2010s, using a standardized content-based measure of journalistic roles.

Based on the theoretical and methodological JRP framework, this paper investigates how the South Korean news media covered COVID-19 in 2020. The South Korean media landscape is highly polarized with political parallelism (Choi 2020; Park 2020; Rhee et al. 2011). Citizens have a notoriously low level of trust in mainstream news outlets in South Korea (Newman et al. 2020, 101).³ However, the South Korean public was relatively compliant with the COVID-19 measures implemented by the government and health officials. This suggests that South Korean journalism might have functioned differently in the issue of public health crisis. In this article, we focus on differences and similarities between journalistic roles performed in COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 news coverage. By analyzing the consistent and/or shifting practices of South Korean journalism, this paper aims to explain the fluidity of journalistic roles and practices sensitive to the specific context such as the COVID-19 with a more nuanced and detailed observation.

Contradictory Observations in Public Health Crisis Coverage: Media Hype/Mediatization, Politicization, and Polarization vs. Public Mobilizer and Educator

Public health crises have been discussed widely in media and journalism scholarship in terms of concerns regarding media hype/mediatization, politicization, and political

polarization (Briggs and Hallin 2016; Hallin et al. 2023; Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020; Mellado et al. 2021). The term mediatization has a broad meaning including a process through which the media influence the functioning mechanism of non-media actors and institutions like politics and religion (Hjarvard 2008; Kriesi et al. 2013). However, we focus on the commercial character of “media logic” in the concept of mediatization in this paper, following what Hallin et al. (2023) called as “media hype/mediatization.”

Mediatization is the process of increasing the influence of the media and the logic under which it operates. The most explicit manifestation of the news media following its own logic is that the selection and framing of news are guided by the media’s own news values and desire to attract audiences (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013, 343). While media outlets seek to expand their audiences, public issues such as health crises can be mediatized as eye-catching, sensationalized stories by using fear-inducing expressions and capitalizing on panic and uncertainty (Kilgo, You, and Johnson 2018; Krishnatray and Gadekar 2014). For example, it has been said that traditional news organizations contributed to public fear and panic over the 2014 Ebola outbreak by emphasizing risks and uncertainties through sensationalist discourse (Kilgo, You, and Johnson 2018), emotive photographs, and fearmongering news headlines (Halsey 2016). Media outlets sometimes take advantage of public health crises to instill fear, uncertainty, and panic, which, in turn, urges people to consume more news.

Politicization is a concept that has also been commonly discussed in science and health research (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Fowler and Gollust 2015; Nisbet and Huye 2006). It refers to the prominence of political actors in the news coverage on a given issue (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Chinn, Hart, and Soroka 2020). It has been argued that health issues frequently typify a competitive framing environment, where opposing arguments compete in the public sphere and reporters following journalistic norms often emphasize competition and controversy in their portrayals of events (Fowler and Gollust 2015, 157). Competing political actors endeavor to attract media and audience attention for political reasons and become actively engaged in discussions of health controversies. Media coverage of public issues can become highly politicized when it focuses on conflicts from the perspective of different political camps. Although politicization is not inherently negative, accompanying the desire to draw audience attention with, “biases in newsroom norms” can lead to the greater politicization of content and, therefore, highly polarized coverage (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020, 682).

Polarization has become a significant phenomenon in today’s world (Newport and Dugan 2017). It would be understandable for partisan audiences to split along partisan lines. However, when polarized political messages are amplified by the media, the public can take that polarized attitude further in a way that is incompatible with and hostile to their political opponents (Iyenger et al. 2019). The US citizens have had divided perceptions and attitudes toward the government’s response to COVID-19 and the introduction of preventative measures. Hart, Chinn, and Soroka (2020) argue that politicians appeared in US newspaper coverage more frequently than scientists and that coverage of COVID-19 in both newspapers and network news was highly polarized, which may have contributed to polarization of the US population.

However, there have been different observations and discussions on the media’s role from the perspective of crisis communication. In times of crisis, whether about disasters, epidemics, and concerns about mass-casualty terrorism, media, and government are arms

of the public, which share a common goal for saving lives, mitigating property and social damage (Vultee and Wilkins 2012, 11). By conducting in-depth interviews with reporters in Germany and Finland, Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019) figured out journalists, when covering health crises, perceived their roles as public mobilizers, mobilizing self-protective behaviors and social responsibility. Journalists also adopted more co-operative attitude to authorities in their efforts to contain crises (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019, 10).

Although Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019) analyzed the self-report of journalists about their journalistic role perception in specific situation—health crisis, Hallin et al. (2023) largely verified their arguments by conducting a comparative content analysis of TV, radio, online, and print news in 37 countries, focusing on journalistic roles performed in COVID-19 coverage in comparison with non-COVID-19 news stories. While the infotainment role, which is related to media hype/mediatization driven by commercial logic, and the watchdog role showed a lower performance in pandemic coverage, the service and civic roles, addressing audiences as clients and as citizens, showed a higher performance in COVID-19 stories. In this study, it was more supported that the media are more co-operative with authorities and functions as “educator and mobilizer” (Hallin et al. 2023, 1995). Thus, the criticism of media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization in the previous studies might be seen as context-sensitive findings depending on the characteristics of disease, time and place of the outbreak, and the characteristics of the media studied. However, it has not yet been fully explored how the seemingly contradictory findings and discussions in covering public health crisis are co-existing.

Public Health Crisis Coverage in South Korean Journalism

In South Korean journalism scholarship, similar concerns have been raised regarding media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization. When conducting frame analyses on COVID-19 news stories, researchers have focused on the polarized coverage of conservative and liberal news outlets. Under the liberal government in 2020, conservative media blamed the government, local governments, and China for COVID-19, while liberal newspapers attributed responsibility to a more diverse array of actors, including hospitals and individuals (Park 2020). Park found that conservative media focused more on conflicts and employed more sensationalist expressions, while liberal outlets focused on preventative measures and civic life-related issues (Park 2020, 73).

Liberal and conservative newspapers’ portrayals of the liberal government that was in power at the time also varied widely. When citing international news stories on South Korean COVID-19 measures, conservative media tried to foster an image of a “criticized government” while liberal media advanced the notion of a “trusted government” (Han and Kim 2021). However, conservative media gradually softened their stance once international media outlets began to consistently praise South Korean COVID-19 measures (Han and Kim 2021, 124). This shows that political parallelism and polarization of the media landscape are still influential in news coverage but not in a consistent way when it comes to public health crises.

South Korean journalism scholars have also pointed out that news stories on public health focused on damage or harm rather than preventative measures. For example, in the case of the H1N1 pandemic, the media frame “confirmation of damage” was more conspicuous than the “preventative measure” frame (Ju and You 2011). During the

2014 Ebola and 2015 MERS outbreak, it was also pointed out that the South Korean media mainly reported on the spread and impact of disease and did not properly function as a public sphere for discussing preventative measures and public policies (An 2016). In addition, South Korean news outlets have been criticized for their exaggerated and sensationalist coverage of the pandemic, although there has not yet been an empirical study to support this criticism (Kim 2020).

Previous research on the news coverage of COVID-19 and other public health crises suggests that South Korean journalism, which is highly polarized with political parallelism and sensational in the competitive media environment, exhibits a high degree of media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization. However, the South Korean public showed relative compliance with the “3T” (Testing–Tracing–Treatment) measures, social distancing, and masking policies, which included government run mask production and distribution (Fisher and Choe 2020). This leads us to wonder whether the ordinary mediatized and polarized reporting style changed during COVID-19 as Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019) argued the journalistic role shift toward public mobilizer in health crisis coverage. Hallin et al. (2023) also pointed out the educator and mobilizer role were found relatively consistent globally in the COVID-19 coverage. In this mixture of contradictory and complicated observations of role performance, such as media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization, or educator and mobilizer in reporting of public health crisis, it is still “worthy of more detailed study since there are significant differences among countries” (Hallin et al. 2023, 1995). By focusing on South Korean journalism, this research shed lights on journalistic roles and practices, which are shifted in specific situation—public health crisis or consistently performed regardless of the situation, in a journalism culture highly media hyped/mediatized, politicized, and polarized.

Hypotheses

This paper proposes three main hypotheses, respectively focusing on media hype/mediatization, political polarization, and public mobilizer/educator.

In South Korea, the COVID-19 coverage was criticized for their hyperbolic and sensationalist expressions (Kim 2020). In particular, the conservative media focused more on conflict and employed more sensationalist expressions in their news stories than liberal outlets (Park 2020). Although Hallin et al. (2023) found a lower level of media hype/mediatization in analysis of 37 countries, a highly competitive media market, such as that of South Korea, could have a consistent journalistic practice of eye-catching regardless of the issues. Thus, we propose a hypothesis that the level of media hype/mediatization in COVID-19 coverage is the same or similar to that of non-COVID-19 coverage (*H1*).

As introduced in earlier section, previous research found that political actors in competing political camps have incentives to be actively engaged in discussions of health controversies, and media coverage can be highly politicized in a polarized media environment (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Chinn, Hart, and Soroka 2020; Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020), such as the South Korean media environment (Choi 2020; Park 2020; Rhee et al. 2011). Although Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019) and Hallin et al. (2023) pointed out that there are journalistic role shift from watchdog to public mobilizer, a highly polarized journalism can show a slightly different picture, showing a consistent level of watchdog. For example, in South Korea, the conservative newspapers blamed the governing

liberal authorities—government and local governments for COVID-19, while liberal newspapers attributed responsibility to a broader actors and citizens (Park 2020). Thus, we set the second hypothesis as the level of politicization and polarization in COVID-19 stories is the same or similar to that of non-COVID-19 coverage (*H2*).

In covering public health crisis, journalists perceived their role as public mobilizers, mobilizing self-protective behaviors and a socially responsible treatment of others (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019, 9). Hallin et al. (2023) also found journalistic role performed in COVID-19 coverage among 37 countries was public mobilizer and educator, advice-giving and health educating rather than watchdog. Although South Korean journalism was problematized with its lack of functioning as a public sphere for discussing preventative measures and public policies (An 2016; Ju and You 2011), the role of public mobilizer and educator might be higher in the specific circumstance such as the unprecedented public health crisis, COVID-19. Thus, we propose the third hypothesis as the level of public mobilizer and educator role is a higher in COVID-19 coverage (*H3*).

H1 The level of media hype/mediatization in COVID-19 coverage is the same or similar to that of non-COVID-19 coverage.

H2 The level of politicization and polarization in COVID-19 stories is the same or similar to that of non-COVID-19 coverage.

H3 The level of public mobilizer and educator role is a higher in COVID-19 coverage.

These three hypotheses presume the complicated picture of journalistic roles performed in public health crisis. Although media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization may appear to be contradictory to the image of public mobilizer and educator in the journalistic role, it might be possible to be manifested simultaneously. There could be journalistic practices that are sensitive to the context—COVID-19, yet at the same time, the inertial tendencies in journalism culture, somewhat structured by media system and political system historically constructed in a given society, may also be displayed.

Method

This study used the methodological framework proposed by Mellado (2015) and validated in subsequent studies (Mellado 2021; Mellado et al. 2017; Mellado and van Dalen 2017) to measure journalistic roles in news content. The six professional roles—interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic—are characterized and composed by different indicators of professional practices, reporting styles, and narrative schemes (Table 1).

Among six journalistic roles, this study will give particular attention to several roles and indicators to test hypotheses. First, media hype/mediatization is measured using the indicators of infotainment role: “personalization,” “private life,” “sensationalism,” “emotions,” and “morbidity.” These indicators measure the news media’s desire and efforts to attract audiences with eye-catching stories and expressions. Secondly, political polarization in COVID-19 coverage is measured with the indicators of watchdog role. Particular attention will be given to the indicators of doubting and criticism by journalists or others (sources), as they can be pronounced in a highly politicized and polarized media environment to attack and antagonize different political groups. Lastly, public mobilizer and educator

Table 1. Role performance indicators.

Role	Indicator
Interventionist	Journalist's point of view Interpretation Call for action Qualifying adjectives First person
Watchdog	Information on judicial/administrative processes Doubting by journalists Doubting by others Criticism by journalists Criticism by others Uncovering by journalists Uncovering by others Reporting on external investigation
Loyal-facilitator	Investigative reporting Defense/support activities Defense/support policies Positive image of the elite Progress/success Comparison to other countries National triumphs Promotion of the country Patriotism
Service	Impact on everyday life Tips and advice (grievances) Tips and advice (individual risks) Consumer information Consumer advice Personal Assistance
Infotainment	Personalization Private life Sensationalism Emotions Morbidity
Civic	Citizen reactions Citizen demands Credibility of citizens Local impact Social community impact Educating on duties and rights Citizen questions Information on citizen activities Support of citizen movements

Mellado (2021).

role are measured using selected indicators of interventionist, service role, and civic role in JRP; "call for action" in interventionist role, "impact on everyday life" and "tips and advice (individual risks)" in service role, and "local impact," "social community impact," and "educating on duties and rights" in civic role. These indicators evaluate the journalistic efforts in mobilizing, advising, and educating citizens to assess risks and take precautionary measures against COVID-19.

Sampling

As part of the second wave of the JRP project, we collected a representative sample of news stories from different media outlets across television, newspaper, radio, and online outlets in 2020. The criteria for choosing the specific sample units were as

follows: for television, we chose the most watched newscast within each selected channel; for radio, we used the news program with the largest audience; for newspapers, we used the full issue of the most representative outlets; and for online news, we analyzed the entire homepage of the most accessed news websites.

For television, we selected two news programs, *KBS News 9* and *JTBC Newsroom*. *KBS News 9* is the flagship news program of KBS, a South Korean public broadcaster. *JTBC Newsroom* is the representative news program of JTBC, a commercial broadcaster, and it was rated the most trusted and influential news program in 2017 and 2018.⁴ In 2019, it became the most watched cable television news program (Nielsen Korea). For radio news programs, we selected *7 Morning News* of CBS and *8 Morning News* of TBS because they air just before or in between the most listened to commentary news programs.⁵ Newspapers *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh* were selected as South Korea's representative daily papers. *Chosun Ilbo* is known for its conservative political stance, and *Hankyoreh* is known as a liberal and progressive paper. For online media, OhMyNews⁶ and Dailian⁷ were chosen to represent online-only news outlets. OhMyNews was selected as the representative liberal online media outlet, while Dailian was chosen as the representative conservative outlet. Dailian and OhMyNews have different approaches to managing news coverage, such as Dailian's "aggressive marketing with profit in mind" and "business-wise" approach and OhMyNews' "voluntary pay system," which advances the notion of "advertisement as a necessary evil" (Yoo 2004) with the ideal of civic journalism.

Using the constructed week method, a stratified-systematic sample of two weeks was selected for each media outlet from January 1 to December 31, 2020. All news stories were collected, excluding editorials, opinion columns, weather forecasts, horoscopes, film (or other cultural) reviews, puzzles, social pages, supplements/magazines/special features, and headlines on newspaper front pages and at the beginning of TV and radio newscasts. The final sample consisted of 3959 news stories.

Measurements

The unit of analysis is a news item. For each news item, the individual indicators comprising each journalistic role were measured on a presence (1) or absence (0) basis. Based on confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) conducted in the Journalistic Role Performance project, the individual indicators were combined to generate a final role score for each item. For descriptive purposes, we calculated raw scores based on the total points divided by the number of indicators in each role. A higher score (mean) expressed a higher presence of each journalistic role in the news and vice versa. Additional detailed information on the JRP methodology, including CFA result and the full codebook, can be found in Mellado (2021) and the Appendices in the Methodology section of the JRP website (<https://www.journalisticperformance.org/methodology>).

The content analysis also included measurements related to the news outlet and type of medium in which a news story was published (newspapers, online, TV, and radio); the news topic; sourcing patterns; and COVID-19-relatedness. Specifically, we coded as COVID-19-related for "stories that are driven and presented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic or related to the impact of the pandemic on any topic." To control for the potential overrepresentation and/or underrepresentation of specific types of media in the sample, the data were weighted by medium for each country to ensure

that each media type—TV, radio, online news, and newspapers—within each country would have an equivalent weight in the analysis.

News item collection and coding were conducted by three coders. Coders were extensively trained to obtain a shared understanding of the operational definitions for all variables of the codebook. Training sessions were conducted in person during 2019. Coders coded the news stories directly into a specially designed online interface. The corpus of news items in each country was randomly divided among coders to reduce bias and avoid a situation in which a coder would code an entire outlet. Based on Krippendorff's alpha (K_a), the final intercoder reliability was .80 for role performance.

Table 2 presents general information regarding the selected South Korean news outlets and number of news items, categorizing news items as non-COVID-19 and COVID-19.

Findings

Mediatized COVID-19? Focusing on the Infotainment Role

We identified differences between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage in three journalistic roles. The watchdog, service, and infotainment roles exhibited a lower performance in COVID-19 coverage (Table 3). However, the differences were not meaningful based on the low associations observed when looking at the global role scores. To test for similarities or differences between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage in the performance of the infotainment role, the indicators of the infotainment role should be scrutinized in detail.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the infotainment indicators in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage. Although the percentage of the infotainment indicators is not particularly high in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage, among the infotainment

Table 2. Selected news outlets and the number of news items in South Korea.

	Outlet	Total number of news	Non-COVID-19 news	COVID-19 news
Television	KBS	314	186	128
	JTBC	427	264	163
Radio	CBS	126	72	54
	TBS	76	38	38
Newspaper	<i>Chosun Ilbo</i>	712	510	202
	<i>Hankyoreh</i>	588	430	158
Online	Dailian	1,121	800	321
	OhMyNews	595	398	197
Total number		3,959	2,698	1,261
% of the total number		100	68.14	31.85

Table 3. Journalistic roles in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (mean and standard deviation in parentheses).

	Non-COVID-19 news Mean (SD)	COVID-19 news Mean (SD)	Significance/Association
Interventionist	.110 (.156)	.107 (.157)	$p = .517$
Watchdog	.050 (.079)	.025 (.058)	$p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$
Loyal-facilitator	.007 (.032)	.006 (.038)	$p = .226$
Service	.016 (.070)	.023 (.074)	$p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .00$
Infotainment	.040 (.101)	.022 (.077)	$p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .01$
Civic	.040 (.100)	.042 (.092)	$p = .659$

role indicators, “personalization” and “morbidity” showed a significantly lower frequency in COVID-19 stories. In contrast, “private life,” “sensationalism,” and “emotions” did not show statistically meaningful differences in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news stories (Appendix 1). Given that reporting with sensationalist expression and emotional description is the essential element of media hype/mediatization to catch the audience’s eyes, the level of media hype/mediatization in COVID-19 coverage is the same or similar to that of non-COVID-19 coverage. Thus, *H1* was supported, meaning that a tendency to mediatize reporting was consistent in COVID-19 coverage in South Korea.

Among the four different media types, television outlets showed a higher level of “sensationalism” and “emotions” in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (Appendix 2). This means that sensationalist and emotional expressions tend to be more prominent in broadcasting which captivating images are important. Except broadcasters, *Chosun Ilbo*, the conservative newspaper, scored higher for “sensationalism” than other media outlets in COVID-19 coverage⁸ ($\chi^2 = 25.15$, $df = 7$, $p < .001$, $V = .133$). This supported the analysis of Park (2020), as the conservative newspaper tended to utilize more sensationalistic expressions in COVID-19 news stories than the liberal newspaper.

Political Polarized COVID-19 Stories? Focusing on Conservative and Liberal News Outlets

Political polarization has long been a concern among media and journalism scholars who study South Korean journalism. In this section, we compare newspapers and online news outlets to explore the differences in journalistic role performance between conservative and liberal outlets given that there is a more apparent differentiation in these types of media concerning the political spectrum compared to television and radio in South Korea.⁹ Although watchdog role showed a lower performance in COVID-19 coverage, as shown in Table 3, the results also need to be carefully scrutinized by the indicators of watchdog.

Newspapers: Polarized Reporting with “Criticism by Other”

How ideologically different newspapers perform their journalistic roles? Before meticulously checking each indicator of watchdog, we compared the performance of six journalistic roles between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news stories focusing on newspapers.

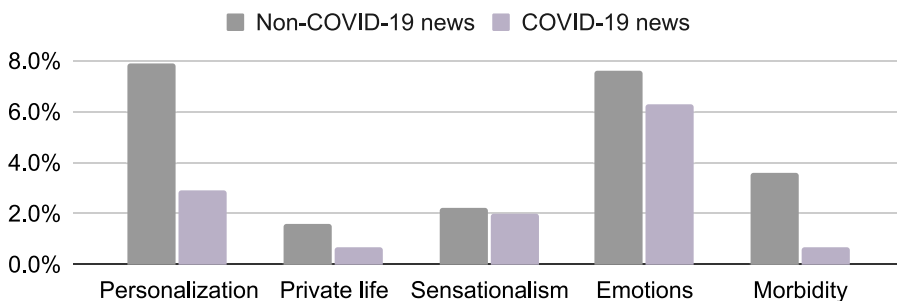


Figure 1. Indicators of the infotainment role in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news.

The result (Appendix 3) showed that there are not meaningful differences between the conservative newspaper, *Chosun Ilbo*, and the liberal newspaper, *Hankyoreh*, except civic role in non-COVID-19 stories. It can be interpreted that liberal newspaper functions for civic role, encouraging democratic citizenship, compared to conservative newspaper in ordinary news reporting. However, in specific context—public health crisis, there are not significant differences in role performance between newspapers located in politically opposite. We expected the conservative outlet, *Chosun Ilbo*, to perform the watchdog role more in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage due to its politically adversarial attitude toward the liberal government. As such, this research did not seem to support *H2*.

However, when we scrutinized the indicators of watchdog role meticulously, there was a meaningful difference between conservative and liberal papers. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in the percentage of watchdog indicators between the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* and the liberal *Hankyoreh* in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news stories, respectively using a stacked bar graph. It shows that the conservative newspaper consistently exhibited a significantly higher presence of “criticism by other” compared to the liberal outlet in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (Appendix 4). It can be interpreted as the conservative paper used the voices of “sources” to convey more critical viewpoints of the liberal government and authorities regardless of the issue context. Thus, *H2* was partially supported by our results related to coverage in newspapers.

Online Outlets: Different Roles without the Link of Political Polarization

In contrast to newspapers, online news outlets showed stark differences between conservative and liberal outlets regarding journalistic roles. *Dailian*, a conservative outlet, mainly performed the service role in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage. *OhMyNews* performed the watchdog, infotainment, and civic roles in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (Appendix 5). In watchdog role, as shown in Figure 3, the liberal outlet outperformed the conservative one in every indicator in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (Appendix 6). These differences could not be explained by political parallelism, under which the conservative media was expected to show higher watchdog performance under the liberal administration.

Dailian, a business-oriented outlet, produces articles on consumer information and business economic activities, performing the service role as its main activity. *OhMyNews*,

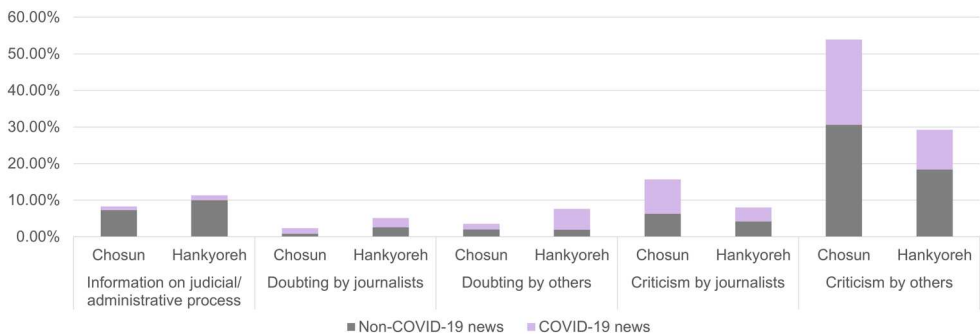


Figure 2. Differences in selected indicators of watchdog between newspapers in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news.

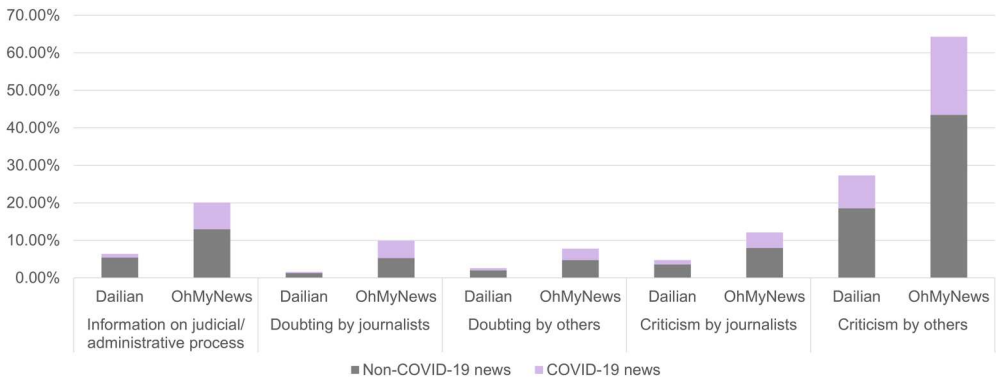


Figure 3. Differences in selected indicators of watchdog between online outlets in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news.

a civic journalism outlet, produces articles on diverse civic activities with strong commitment to watchdog role. Thus, in this study, although the conservative and liberal online outlets performed different journalistic roles in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage, this could not be attributed to their attitude towards the liberal government or political parallelism. Thus, *H2* on political polarization is not supported in the case of online outlets.

Public Mobilizer and Educator in COVID-19 Coverage

South Korean journalism showed the general increase in public mobilizer and educator role, measured by the indicators; “call for action,” “impact on everyday life,” “tips and advice,” “local impact,” “social community impact,” and “educating on duties and rights” (Table 4). It means there were journalistic efforts to mobilize, advise, and educate citizens in the context of COVID-19. Thus, *H3* was supported in this research following the previous research such as Hallin et al. (2023) and Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019).

Each outlet was examined in its performance of the public mobilizer and educator role in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage (Appendix 7). Interestingly, the conservative outlets, *Chosun Ilbo* (newspaper) and *Dailian* (online), showed the increasing performance toward the public mobilizer and educator in COVID-19 coverage. Figure 4 shows that the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* significantly increased the presence of “local impact” along with other indicators such as “educating on duties and rights,” “impact on everyday life,” and

Table 4. Selected indicators for public mobilizer and educator in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 coverage.

Journalistic Role / Indicator		Non-COVID-19 N = 2698	COVID-19 N = 1261	χ^2	Φ
Interventionist Service	Call for action	1.1%	2.3%	6.94**	.04
	Impact on Everyday life	0.5%	2.4%	78.05***	.14
Civic	Tips and advice	0.3%	1.9%	47.30***	.11
	Local impact	3.7%	6.8%	42.59***	.10
	Social community impact	2.9%	5.2%	11.21***	.05
	Educating on duties and rights	1.8%	3.9%	19.20***	.07

Note: df = 1, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001

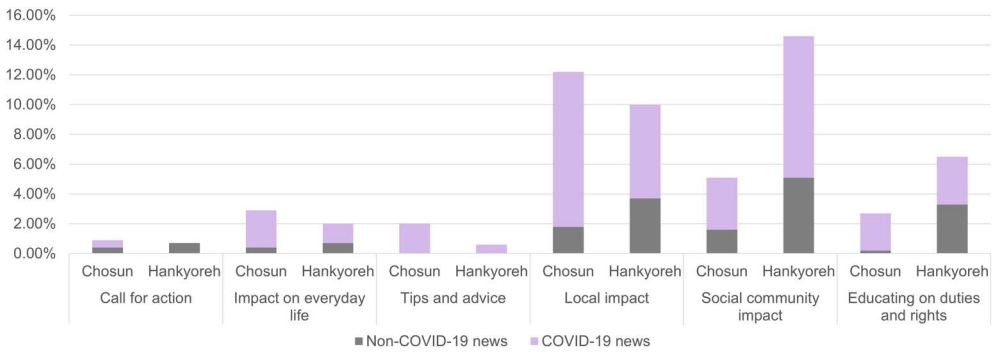


Figure 4. Differences in public mobilizer and educator role between newspapers in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news.

“tips and advice.” In contrast, Hankyoreh did not show statistically meaningful differences between non-COVID19 and COVID-19 coverage. The similar pattern was also found in conservative and liberal online outlets (Figure 5). The conservative *Dailian* shows a statistically meaningful increase in the presence of “social community impact” and “educating duties and rights” in COVID-19 coverage. This means that the liberal outlets, which outperform in the selected indicators of the public mobilizer and educator role than that of conservative outlets in their everyday reporting (non-COVID-19 coverage), did not show statistically meaningful differences in COVID-19 news. Thus, public health crisis induces different journalistic practices particularly in conservative outlets in South Korea.

Discussion: Journalistic Continuity and Variability in the COVID-19 Coverage

Based on seemingly contradictory findings on news coverage of public health crisis, this study set three hypotheses; the inertial tendency of media hype/mediatization (*H1*) and politicization/polarization (*H2*), and shifting toward public mobilizer and educator role (*H3*) in COVID-19 coverage.

First, there was a similar tendency of media hype/mediatization in regard to indicators such as “sensationalism” and “emotions.” According to previous research, mediatized

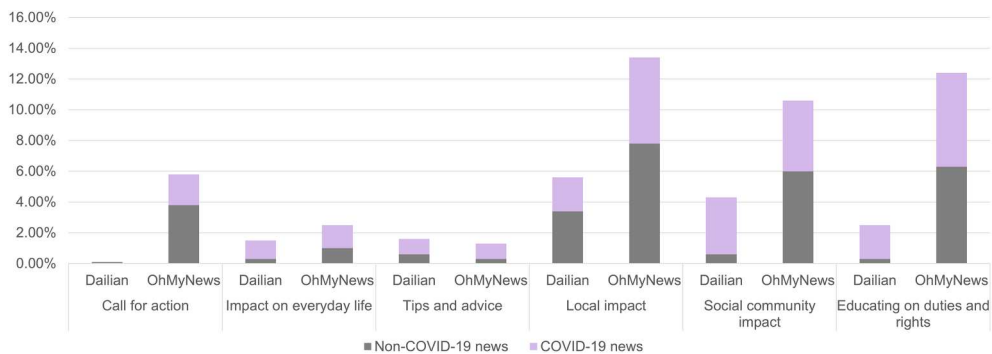


Figure 5. Differences in public mobilizer and educator role between online outlets in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news.

news stories included eye-catching, sensationalized, and fear-inducing expressions and capitalized on panic and uncertainty (Kilgo, You, and Johnson 2018; Krishnatray and Gadekar 2014). Thus, “sensationalism” and “emotions” can be seen as key elements of mediatization. In that sense, although the infotainment role was lower in COVID-19 coverage, it can be argued that a similar level of media hype/mediatization was found in COVID-19 news stories (*H1*). This suggests that the South Korean news media has a consistent attitude toward attracting the audience’s attention, indicating the audience was approached as “spectators” by the news media even during public health crises.

In terms of politicization/polarization, newspapers showed the tendency of political polarization in a specific watchdog role indicator. The conservative newspaper used sources’ voices to criticize the liberal government and authorities who held power during that period much more and consistently in both non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news stories. Given that the principle of objective journalism, using sources to voice criticism is a practical way for journalists to indirectly present their own viewpoints. Online media did not show the expected levels of political polarization in non-COVID-19 coverage or COVID-19 coverage. Unlike newspapers, online news media is more politically diverse and influenced by their underlying management principles. Thus, *H2* was partially supported in newspapers with the indicator “criticism by others”. This suggests that newspapers are the key players of political polarization in South Korean media system, and they exhibited the polarized reporting via selecting sources even in COVID-19 coverage.

Although media hype/mediatization and political polarization were partially exhibited in some degree even in COVID-19 stories, the public mobilizer and educator role became significantly higher in COVID-19 coverage (*H3*). While journalists followed habitual practices in their reporting, they also adopted different styles when reporting on the pandemic regardless of their ideological affiliation, even within a highly polarized society. The increasing performance for public mobilizer and educator was found even in conservative newspaper and online outlet, which usually performed a lower level of civic role than that of the liberal counterparts. This means the specific context/issue can influence the journalistic role and practices across different ideological positions.

Through these findings, we suggest that the contradictory observations between media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization vs. public mobilizer and educator can be concurrent in covering public health crisis. The competitive media market and politically polarized media system, historically constructed in a society, can work as a “term” as being structured and practiced in a certain way of selecting sources, reporting styles, and narrative schemes. The routinized journalistic practices would be remained even in a new situation such as the pandemic, although the degree of media hype/mediatization and political polarization becomes decreased. In contrast, the unprecedented pandemic as a “constant” induced a certain set of journalistic roles and practices such as the public mobilizer and educator, particularly in conservative media outlets which do not perform such a role in their ordinary reporting compared to the liberal outlets. Thus, journalistic roles are neither static nor volatile, rather negotiated outcome from the structured routines in media system with situated activities sensitive to context.

The outcome of the increased public mobilizer and educator role in COVID-19 can be explained from journalistic norms sensitive to context and the characteristic of public sphere in South Korea. First, there are shared journalistic norms in covering disasters and crises. Since news organizations are members of a community, they have a stake

in community well-being (Wilkins 2012). Journalism that “performs a public service—saving lives, restoring community, ensuring that preparation for the future avoids past mistakes and other foreseeable errors” (Wilkins 2012, 141) is essential in reporting a crisis. In South Korea, the disaster reporting standards proclaimed in 2014 by the Journalists Association of Korea¹⁰ (JAK) states that journalists keep in mind that media coverage of disasters has a prevention and recovery function as well, to prevent the spread of damage and help victims and affected communities overcome hardships and return to normalcy. In April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the JAK also proclaimed the infectious disease reporting standards which emphasize that journalists are a part of the community to combat infectious diseases and prevent the spread of harm. The first article of the reporting standards says that infectious disease coverage should identify groups that are vulnerable to the disease and provide preventive measures and behavioral tips first and repeatedly. Although the reporting standards by JAK are non-binding normative principles to guide journalistic activities, it is affirmed that there were journalistic demands and actions to set and share the reporting standards for public mobilizer and educator in the early phase of the pandemic in 2020.

Another explanation for the increase of public mobilizer and educator in journalistic roles could be the “state-oriented” characteristics of public sphere in South Korea. In performing public mobilizer and educator, the audience was mainly approached as a “student/subject” to be informed and educated for effective enactment of decisions and measures of health authorities rather than as a “citizen” in a traditional meaning, as members of society to be empowered and encouraged to participate in political debates. Including the approach of “spectator” shown in infotainment role, the South Korean public can be seen as located outside of the public sphere discussing COVID-19, which mainly consisted of authorities. This resonates with the concept of the “*Hunmin*”¹¹ public sphere” proposed by Kang to explain the state-dominated nature of the South Korean media system and public sphere, in which deliberation and discussion are developed around the state and elites (Kang 2013, 51). In the context of the unprecedented public health crisis, the public mobilizer and educator role could be emphasized in this “*Hunmin* public sphere” in South Korea. As a result, although media hype/mediatization and political polarization were partially observed in news media, the increased public mobilizer and educator role could lead to a comparatively high compliance of the Korean public with the measures introduced by South Korean health officials.

Conclusion

Previous research on public health crises showed contradictory pictures toward media hype/mediatization, politicization, and polarization or toward public mobilizer and educator in news coverage. In South Korea, which has competitive media market and highly polarized media landscape, there was continuity for mediatized reporting with “sensationalism” and “emotions.” In newspapers, there was also journalistic continuity for politically polarized reporting with “criticism by other” even in COVID-19 coverage. However, the pandemic brought different journalistic practices toward public mobilizer and educator, especially in conservative media outlets. Thus, there was journalistic continuity, performed in routine practices structured by the South Korean media system and journalism culture, as well as journalistic salience toward public mobilizer and educator in the COVID-19 context.

The results of this study also suggest that the audience was approached differently depending on the local and issue context. South Korean journalism located the audience as “spectator” and “student/subject” when covering COVID-19, rather than (empowered) “citizen”. This may be due to the nature of the issue, the unprecedented public crisis, and the local context of South Korea. The mediated public sphere is more dominated by and for the state and elites in the South Korean or Asian media system, and people were located as the “student/subject” to be educated or “spectator” outside of the public sphere.

This research goes a long way to help us to understand how South Korean journalism covered the pandemic. Still, it has a several limitations. Although we compared the journalistic roles performed in non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 stories, we cannot exclude the possibility that the pandemic shaped all news coverage, including stories about non-COVID-19 related issues. In addition, although we selected a representative sample of outlets from each media type, the outlet’s format, such as radio news program, may have an influence. To avoid opinion-centered programs, we were limited to relatively short and straightforward news programs instead of popular commentary programs in radio. Furthermore, we did not include the news stories that circulated on social media, which deserve further attention. Despite these limitations, we believe that there were journalistic differences as well as continuity in the performance of journalistic roles and practices between non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 news stories, and that this can be applied to other public health crises and other countries, especially in Asia. We hope there will be further discussion and deeper investigation into the journalistic roles performed during public health crises or any crisis in which journalists could behave differently in relation to power and audiences.

Notes

1. The interventionist role is connected to the journalistic roles previously discussed such as the active interpreter, participant, and advocate (Janowitz 1975; Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1976; Waisbord 2009, 371). The disseminator role is connected to detached and distanced objective journalism practices.
2. The watchdog role is connected to the role of monitoring the powerful and denouncing wrong-doing (Waisbord 2000; Weaver and Willnat 2012). It often materializes in investigative journalism. The loyal-facilitator role involves acting as a spokesperson for those in power (Mellado 2021, 35).
3. According to the Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2020), South Korea ranked last for media trust among 40 countries surveyed.
4. According to a 2017 survey conducted by *Sisajournal* (Ahn 2017), a weekly news magazine, JTBC was the most influential, trusted, and viewed news network. In 2018, it was the most influential and trusted and the second most viewed news network.
5. Radio news programs in South Korea are mostly commentary. In 2020, the most popular commentary program was *News Factory* by Kim Uh-Joon (7:00-9:00 AM) on TBS. *8 Morning News* is broadcast between the second and third sections of *News Factory*. The second most popular commentary program was *The News Show* by Kim Hyun-Jung (7:20-9:00 AM). *7 Morning News* is broadcast right before *The News Show*.
6. OhMyNews was founded in 2000 as the first civic journalism online news media with the slogan “every citizen is a reporter.” Over 60 professional journalists publish news articles and support, edit, and check articles written by “citizen journalists” for this site. Website: www.ohmynews.co.kr.

7. Dailian was founded in 2004 as a comprehensive politically conservative news site. Website: www.dailian.co.kr.
8. Among news stories coded as “sensationalism” in COVID-19 coverage, each outlet occupied following percent; 37.5 in JTBC, 20.8% in KBS, 20.8 in Chosun Ilbo, 16.7 in OhMyNews, 4.2 in Dailian, 0 for Hankyoreh, CBS, and TBS.
9. The selected television channels, KBS and JTBC, are considered neutral and liberal-neutral, respectively. The radio channels CBS and TBS are considered neutral and liberal, respectively.
10. The Journalists Association of Korea (JAK) was established in 1964 in opposition to the authoritarian regime’s attempt to enact media control legislation. For more information on JAK, see <https://www.journalist.or.kr/>.
11. *Hunmin* means “educating the people” in Korean.

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