

REPORTING AT A DISTANCE

The Impact of COVID-19 on
Journalists and
Journalism in Africa.

By Dr Sandra Roberts, On behalf of The African Editors' Forum (TAEF)



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Executive summary

This report represents the culmination of a qualitative study conducted in sixteen African countries from the five regions of Africa: North, Southern, West, Eastern and Central Africa. The study was informed by international trends prevalent in media revealed by research. Interviews took place in the selected countries and were subjected to thematic analysis to discover the common themes in the diverse media landscapes represented in the sample.

The experience common to almost all participants is that it was difficult to report in the field – hence the name of the report and it was difficult to get access to sources, particularly at the start of the pandemic. There were financial and official constraints that served to frustrate journalists attempts to get sources and verify stories. The difficulty in getting sources was not the only frustration journalists felt, in fact almost everyone detailed various stressors that the pandemic had delivered. The fear of infection and transmission to loved ones was constant. And for many the constant gnawing of financial insecurity, which was something that many interviewees faced. Many had been subject to job losses, pay cuts, or delayed and inadequate allowances for working costs.

With these and other stresses there were typically no formal institutional support available, neither financial or psychological, and sometimes little understanding. The journalists had to rely on other sources of support in the form of friends, colleagues and relationships within communities.

The difficulties that individual journalists experienced had impacts in terms of the sector as a whole and their ability to deliver information. There was interference with movement and intimidation, which necessarily limited the voices and experiences that could be conveyed through content. In some cases, there was censorship. Simultaneously, misinformation permeated both news media and to a greater extent, social media. With closures of outlets, there were fewer owners of media and less content diversity. Yet there were also novel approaches to distributing news content and changed practices as a result of the pandemic that were, or could prove to be, more effective, such as fact checking and online meetings.

1. Introduction

The African media environment is rich and diverse, with strong democracies and their attendant solid media policy frameworks, together with some of the most authoritarian countries and least free media environments. Lockdowns and other restrictions enforced to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections and its attendant mortality rate worldwide have been at the expense of citizen's civil rights (at least temporarily). Media freedom has been challenged in many countries by state actions since the start of the pandemic.

Simultaneously, print media has suffered reduced revenue, in some cases resulting in job losses and other austerity measures, while broadcast media has lost advertisers, negatively impacting the industry. Digitisation, already underway before the pandemic, has accelerated. Digital media business models are still evolving, and incomes are lower than for traditional media. All these factors have often worsened the working conditions of journalists. Regular reporters working in the pandemic are now on the 'frontline' as war correspondents have traditionally been. They are subject to trauma from field reporting and the same pandemic pressures as the rest of the population of remote working and economic recessions. In addition, job losses have often led to extended hours and extra responsibilities.

There is some information available about the impact of COVID-19 and response measures on journalists in different countries, but an African continental perspective has been lacking. This research sought to address this by including the voices of journalists from all five regions of Africa to establish the impact of the pandemic on African journalists and the media environments in which they work.

This report has been produced as part of the UNESCO project "#CoronavirusFacts, Addressing the 'Disinfodemic' on COVID-19", funded by the European Union, and through additional support of UNESCO's Multi-Donor Programme for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists.

2. Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists in all regions of Africa as well as the impact on media freedom.

To meet the project objectives, the research will seek to answer:

1. What are the impacts of the pandemic and responses thereto to the psychological and physical safety of journalists as well as their job security? Have female journalists been impacted in similar ways and degrees as male?

2. What impacts are directly because of the pandemic or indirectly through government and other institutions' actions?
3. What have some of the impacts of misinformation been in terms of media practices and the public's response?

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to explore these questions. Researchers in all five regions were recruited to do interviews in the selected countries. Journalists and editors were interviewed in English, Arabic and French.

Case studies were produced for fifteen countries based on this research and other sources, and all interviews were analysed based on the themes in them.

Interviews were conducted with journalists in the following countries:

North Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Egypt• Algeria• Tunisia	West Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Senegal• Nigeria• Ghana
Central Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)• The Central African Republic (CAR)• Cameroon	East Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kenya• Uganda• Malawi
Southern Africa: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Namibia• South Africa• Zambia• Zimbabwe	

It was difficult to recruit participants from some countries, as a result, other countries were selected. For instance, in Burundi and Rwanda, those contacted were very suspicious of the research. In Namibia, getting interviews proved difficult, but then it became easier later, after a second Southern African country was included, Zambia. In contrast, in response to an invite to participate, there were many Kenyans who wanted to be interviewed. The target was five interviews per country, in some cases there were more, in some cases slightly less. Details of interviewees are in Appendix I.

As a qualitative study, in-depth interviews were preferred. However, in consideration of connectivity, participants had the options of voice notes and email/text messages was given. As a result, there were some very long in-depth interviews and some relatively short. Some participants seemed defensive in interviews. This is not surprising, given the personal nature of some of the questions (interview schedule appears as Appendix II). Others may have been guarded for other reasons, especially in countries with poor media freedom.



Image source: <https://cpj.org/2020/03/south-africa-enacts-regulations-criminalizing-disi/>

3. Approach

The approach to this research is one based on an understanding of the critical role of media in informing democratic debate and processes, as well as, encouraging sustainable development. To fulfil this role, a few characteristics should be present in a media landscape.

The first is media freedom – the freedom of journalists to go about reporting without interference, intimidation, arrests, or violence. If journalists are subject to violence or intimidation, incidents should be dealt with according to national law and international best practices. Secondly, to do good reporting, journalists need access to resources and information. Thirdly, media should be independent and not be unduly influenced by government or private interests. Fourthly, there should be pluralistic ownership – a regulatory environment that allows for public, private and community media to serve all people in a country. Ideally, restrictions on ownership should exist to avoid concentration of media control in the hands of a small group of people.

Content should address the needs and interests of the different publics and be accessible in terms of reach and language. Media should only be subject to necessary oversight, such as spectrum allocation, and independent and self-regulatory bodies should be in place to avoid the undue influence of other interests. Media should have a code of good practice that is known and implemented and to which media practitioners hold themselves to account.

All these factors are key to people accessing their human rights. During times of pandemics and natural disasters, governments should avoid suppressing civil liberties as much as possible, though for example instating overly broad states of emergency.

During trying times, media should act in the best interests of the public, holding the powerful to account as necessary, while promoting trust in government programmes that are necessary and beneficial, such as vaccination programmes.

All these principles are enshrined in international agreements and have been widely adopted by African countries.

4. Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic is arguably a human rights crisis, reflecting and increasing existing global inequalities and access to resources. Yet, it also requires unprecedented international and national cooperation to vaccinate all people and wipe out the virus. Journalists have found themselves in the crosshairs as the economic realities have impacted the sector, while serving a critical role in communicating information on prevention and control. This literature review examines the tensions within journalism and the communications ecosystem around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partly, the difficulties that journalists face in a crisis are related to their different roles. In contexts where media freedom is suppressed, journalists may have little option other than to function, to disseminate government communication, particularly with the ownership and control of media often connected to a national political elite.¹

In disaster and crisis communication, journalism serves as a conduit for communications from public officials and experts to the broader public²

This “facilitative role of journalism” allows for information to reach the public through media platforms. But journalists also have a watchdog role.³ Journalists find themselves at a nexus of political wrangling; the need to act in the best interests of the public and maintain independence. Under pressure to toe the line, governments can also use the pandemic to clamp down on media freedom⁴.

A key difficulty in terms of the media’s ability to perform their roles during the crisis was difficulties in accessing resources which jeopardised journalists’ capacity to fulfil their functions⁵.

... the pandemic put journalists at the frontline of supplying essential health information to massively expanded audiences in need of reporting they could trust,¹ even as the ensuing collapse in economic activity decimated advertising revenues,² leaving public interest media vulnerable to bankruptcy or to be taken over by media barons with a political agenda.³

1 Okwuchukwu, O. G. (n.d.). The Influence of Media Ownership and Control on Media Agenda Setting in Nigeria. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 10.

2 Christians et al. 2010 in Perreault, M. F., & Perreault, G. P. (2021). Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 976–991. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992813>

3 Sommer, U., & Rappel-Kroyzer, O. (2020). *Reconceptualizing the Watchdog: Comparing Media Coverage of COVID-19 Response in Democracy* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3698310). Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3698310>

4 Macleod, H. (2021). COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3852816). Social Science Research Network. Retrieved January 5, 2022 (https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2990-Covid19_and_the_media_FINAL_singlepages.pdf).

5 Perreault, M. F., & Perreault, G. P. (2021). Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 976–991. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992813>

Media companies have seen great declines in revenue globally.⁶ Eighty nine per cent of journalists in an International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) report on the impact of the pandemic, said that their organisation had been subject to at least one austerity measure as a result of COVID-19, such as job and salary cuts.⁷ Together with salary cuts, 60% of respondents in a small study by Reuters reported working longer hours since the pandemic started. This burden fell disproportionately on women who felt “incredible pressure to do more at home and at work, with far fewer resources”.⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on media across the African continent.⁹ In the ICFJ study, journalists reported that their employers had stopped (7%) or reduced the print run (11%) of their publications because of budget constraints¹⁰. The reductions in revenue have left journalists, internationally, concerned about their continued financial security. The pandemic has given rise to unique challenges for journalists, while at the same time exacerbating and accelerating many trends and developments in the media landscape¹¹. These trends include the casualisation and de-professionalisation of journalism.¹² The lack of resources impacts journalists’ ability to access sources and sites for reporting according to a USAID/Internews report¹³:

“Challenges faced by journalists such as lack of transport, equipment, high data costs and travel bans that prohibited inter-provincial travel impacted negatively on news production under COVID-19 lockdown regulations, which affected media houses’ capacity to deliver news.”

Elsewhere in the report, a Zimbabwean journalist reflected on how he could not perform his job as he had been supplied insufficient funds for data. Given the widespread pay and job cuts, journalists cannot be expected to pay for their own transport to cover a news story or have to pay for their own data to access relevant content to write a news story. A lack of funds seriously compromises the ability of a journalist to report.

Denial of access to sources was also sometimes purposeful for government as they sought to control the narratives of the pandemic and the response. As governments tried to control narratives, journalists found it difficult to access sources for reporting, particularly sources in government and government-held data.

Authorities are very reluctant to give data to journalists... From the very beginning of the pandemic, government wanted to get credit and show the world they fully controlled the virus. So now, they do not want to highlight that the situation is escalating. They want to control information.¹⁴

Governments have denied access to hospitals and doctors¹⁵. In the ICFJ study, 50% of respondents reported that their access to information, the most common of which was “denial of access to government representatives or other official sources, followed by “unable to report due to a lack of accreditation or permit, “excluded from government press conferences and “formal freedom of information requests rejected”¹⁶ In Africa, IPI documented denial of access through restricted access to officials / press conferences and press passes / accreditation revoked or denied¹⁷.

6 Posetti, J., Bell, E., & Brown, P. (n.d.). *Journalism and the Pandemic Survey*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

7 Ibid.

8 Selva, M. & Feinstein, A. (2020). *COVID-19 is hurting journalists’ mental health. News outlets should help them now*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/covid-19-hurting-journalists-mental-health-news-outlets-should-help-them-now>

9 Reporters Without Borders. 2020. “The 2020 Pandemic Has Challenged Press Freedom in Africa.” RSF. Retrieved January 5, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/reports/2020-pandemic-has-challenged-press-freedom-africa>).

10 Posetti, J., Bell, E., & Brown, P. (n.d.). *Journalism and the Pandemic Survey*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

11 Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

12 Wahl-Jorgensen, K., Williams, A., Sambrook, R., Harris, J., Garcia-Blanco, I., Dencik, L., Cushion, S., Carter, C., & Allan, S. (2016). The Future of Journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), 801–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1199486> and Waisbord, Silvio. 2019. “The Vulnerabilities of Journalism.” *Journalism* 20(1):210–13. doi: 10.1177/1464884918809283.

13 Mawarire, T., & Phiri, M. (2020). *Covid-19 Effects on Freedom of Expression in Southern Africa, 2020 Research Report*. 23. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/INTERNEWS_EFFECTS_OF_COVID19_ON_FREEDOM_OF_EXPRESSION_IN_SELECT_SADC_COUNTRIES_2.pdf

14 Macleod, H. (2021). *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3852816). Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3852816>

15 Macleod, H. (2021). *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3852816). Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3852816>

16 Posetti, J., Bell, E., & Brown, P. (n.d.). *Journalism and the Pandemic Survey*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

17 IPI. (n.d.). *COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker*. *International Press Institute*. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://ipi.media/covid19/>

Journalists have also been expelled from countries for critical reporting. Egypt, for example, expelled a journalist for questioning government infection statistics¹⁸.

Journalist's concerns about finances were second only to the psychological toll that covering the pandemic caused. Most respondents (82%) had experienced a negative emotional or psychological reaction because of the pandemic and 70% rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with COVID-19 as the most difficult part of their job.

The impacts included high anxiety levels and burnout¹⁹ COVID-19 conditions exposed journalists to death daily. The Reuters study found that about a quarter of respondents experienced clinically significant symptoms of anxiety including worry, insomnia, poor concentration and feeling on edge during the pandemic. Eleven per cent had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror, and shame, as well as a desire to avoid recalling traumatic incidents.

With a pandemic like COVID-19, it is expected of governments to come up with measures to mitigate the impact of the virus – however, in many cases, that also means that governments try to (unduly) control narratives surrounding the virus as well as the efficacy and desirability of governments' responses. Some governments, such as the government of Tanzania, have tried to control narratives, by denying the reality of Covid-19 in media that they can directly control – this went so far as refusing to share information Covid-19 testing, as well as make it criminally punishable to post content about the virus.²⁰ But when people have access to the internet, they may simply get their information from elsewhere; such COVID-19 denialism cannot be seen wholly isolated from the increasingly authoritarian tendencies that can be observed in Tanzania (also seen in many other governments).



Image source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-quick-response-less-mobility-can-save-africa-/1813919>

The term 'disinfodemic' has been coined to describe the amount of disinformation available about the pandemic. In the ICFJ study, over 80% encountered COVID-19-related dis/mis information at least once a week. Journalists reported seeing misinformation weekly (32%) and 28% of journalists saw it daily. Much of the misinformation distributed on Facebook and orchestrated in many cases by political actors²¹. Top sources of disinformation were regular citizens (accounting for almost half of disinformation, followed by "Political leaders and elected officials", trolls were third and profiteers fourth with "Propagandistic or heavily partisan news media, or state media coming fifth at 34%.²²

Journalists in different countries may face different COVID-19 realities in which to report (or not be legally allowed to report) and thus, that media's successes and shortcomings are at least partly explained by the democratic institutions and media freedom in the various countries. The Economic Intelligence Unit 2020 report found the largest global democratic regression since the annual report was started in 2006 and they claim that:

citizens experienced the biggest rollback of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime (and perhaps even in wartime)

This was due to the suspension of civil liberties. All regions experienced regression, dampening democracy. More authoritarian environments and more concentrated media ownership may produce more content that governments or the elite want people to see, hear or read. There is a great variation in Africa in terms of media freedom, with Namibia²³ being top of the continent and 24th in the world in terms of media freedom, while Eritrea is the worst at 180 and no independent media²⁴. Ghana and South Africa are 30 and 32 respectively, while Egypt is in 166th position. The case studies for these countries (excluding Eritrea) give more details about the conditions in these countries.

18 Egypt expels Guardian reporter Ruth Michaelson over COVID-19 coverage. (2020, March 26). *Committee to Protect Journalists*. <https://cpj.org/2020/03/egypt-expels-guardian-reporter-ruth-michaelson-ove/>

19 Ibid.

20 Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). *Tanzanian reporter banned for six months for coronavirus coverage*. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://rsf.org/en/news/tanzanian-reporter-banned-six-months-coronavirus-coverage>

21 Posetti, J., Bell, E., & Brown, P. (n.d.). *Journalism and the Pandemic Survey*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/journalism-and-pandemic-survey>

22 Ibid.

23 Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). *Namibia: Real freedom but frequent threats*. RSF. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://rsf.org/en/namibia>

24 Reporters Without Borders. (2021, September 17). *Eritrea – 20 years of dictatorship, two decades with no independent media*. RSF. <https://rsf.org/en/news/eritrea-20-years-dictatorship-two-decades-no-independent-media>

The military has been deployed to enforce lockdowns in many countries.²⁵ Arguably, some governments have reacted to the pandemic, not as a public health crisis but as a policing crisis. For a long time, in Kenya, the death toll as a result of overzealous policing of COVID-19 measures was higher than the number of people who died directly as a result of a COVID-19 infection.²⁶ South Africa²⁷ and other countries²⁸ also experienced deaths as a result of policing. Rwandan authorities have arbitrarily arrested scores of people, while rapes and thefts by security forces have also been reported.²⁹ The increased security force presence together with the difficulties accessing personal protective equipment (PPE) is not conducive to good frontline journalism or media freedom.

Under-resourced and unprepared, countries needed to respond to the pandemic by ensuring adequate PPE, awareness raising and later vaccines. Historically, healthcare provision has been grossly underfunded in many African countries. In the Abuja Declaration of 2001, African countries had pledged to spend 15% of their budget on healthcare provision. In 2018, only Sierra Leone achieved that³⁰. There was a need for expedited procurement during the COVID-19 response. It became important for journalists to identify how different actors gained financially through the epidemic. Various procurement scandals have arisen because of the COVID-19 pandemic, including ones in Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa³¹. The uncovering of these scandals reveals that despite challenges, African journalists are still doing crucial investigations.

Media has received a boost in credibility with the pandemic. Reuters speculates:

..it's possible that the surfacing of the debate has educated users in understanding, and placing value on, the editorial integrity of trusted brands.

The public needs accurate information during a pandemic and this demand may be valuable for media in future as long as quality news can be developed by African media. Increases have also been seen in television audiences, with impartial broadcasters being the most trusted. Simultaneously, trust in social media sources dropped. There is a relation, in some countries to low trust levels in news leading to the seeking out of other sources of information on social media. Trust does not convert to audience numbers as tabloids attract readers but are strongly distrusted. The credibility of media content is critical to journalism's role in encouraging good behaviours regarding covid.

The pandemic has placed great strains on African journalists, the media industry, and media freedom. But has also seen some good reporting on government procurement, holding politicians to account. While disinformation and misinformation are rife, there is hope as news media gains greater levels of trust, that can hopefully translate into greater sustainability.



Image source: <https://ifex.org/west-african-experts-share-ideas-on-how-to-halt-abuse-of-journalists-during-covid-19-pandemic/>

25 Kalkman, J. P. (2021). Military crisis responses to COVID-19. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 29(1), 99–103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12328>

26 Riley, T., & Namu, J.-A. (2020, October 23). Nine weeks of bloodshed: How brutal policing of Kenya's Covid curfew left 15 dead. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/23/brutal-policing-kenyas-covid-curfew-left-15-dead>

27 Nyathi, A. (2020). *Ipid investigates after 8 deaths recorded since lockdown*. Eyewitness News. <https://ewn.co.za/2020/04/03/ipid-investigates-after-8-deaths-recorded-since-lockdown>

28 Olowe, D. (2020). Coronavirus in Africa: Whipping, shooting and snooping. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52214740>

29 Human Rights Watch. (2020, April 24). Rwanda: Lockdown Arrests, Abuses Surge. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/24/rwanda-lockdown-arrests-abuses-surge>

30 WHO. (n.d.). *Current health expenditure (% of GDP)—Sub-Saharan Africa | Data*. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.GD.ZS?locations=ZG&view=map>

31 Heywood, A. T., Tatenda Mazarura and Mark. (2020, August 2). *Covid-19 and the epidemic of corrupt governments: 'A heart-wrenching, unscrupulous and filthy feeding frenzy.'* Daily Maverick. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-02-covid-19-and-the-epidemic-of-corrupt-governments-a-heart-wrenching-unscrupulous-and-filthy-feeding-frenzy/>

5. The impact of the COVID pandemic on journalists

The COVID pandemic has forced changes to the way people work across the board and led to increased precarity for people across various trades. Some of the changes occasioned by the pandemic impact the media sector too, others impact journalists as emergency workers and others are particular to the profession of journalism itself.

Across all countries and interviews, some patterns were clear regarding the changes that impacted individual journalists and newsrooms, often indicative of broader changes, which are discussed in a subsequent section.

The section starts by asking whether journalists had access to adequate protective equipment and could implement practices that would keep them from contracting COVID-19. The biggest challenge for many journalists was accessing sources to create stories and verify information, and this is discussed next. The section then turns to the dramatic changes in newsrooms, with the increased use of technology in newsroom processes and news gathering. Journalists were impacted financially by the pandemic, as were their employers and clients, and this is discussed thereafter. Simultaneously, the workload on individuals was increased due to staff attrition and ill health. The section finishes with a discussion about how these factors compounded to chronically stress journalists and impact their physical and emotional health. There were some support mechanisms available, mostly informal, and these are discussed last.

Protective processes and practices

No protection is foolproof in the conditions engendered by COVID-19, but some equipment and services are essential to work as journalists. In this section, the access to basic protective equipment is discussed, the risks of accessing workplace equipment, and access to the basic requirements for filing stories – notably the internet.

1. Basic protective practices and equipment

The very basic protective equipment mentioned by participants were masks and sanitiser. In terms of practices, social distancing was important in the office, particularly studios – and additional measures were necessary for broadcasters.

Most participants mentioned working from home as a protective measure taken. There were no processes in place for remote working and this was a difficult change in terms of human resource management and newsroom processes. Some people were forced to go to the office

even though they had been exposed to the virus, or out on assignment even when they felt it was too risky. Others were given more freedom to judge risks for themselves and only go into the field and office as necessary.

When people did go to the office, all workplaces of those interviewed introduced masks and sanitising solution to some extent, although they were not always available.

... the media have taken a number of decisions, including directing the majority of employees to telework, to avoid human contact. They made available to staff who had to be present in the workplace, protective measures, such as masks and disinfectant gel, and nothing more. (male freelancer, Algeria)

Masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) were not as readily available when out on assignment and some journalists had to fund their own. Freelancers had less protection in this regard.

Personally, I have also spent a fortune on protective gear since the start of the pandemic. (male producer, Senegal)

Checking of body temperatures was also mentioned by some:

From the onset of the pandemic, our employer made sure that we had masks available for each and every day when we were entering the office premises. You were handed over a mask and of course the temperature test was being conducted on each and every one who was getting into our premises, be it an employee or customers or sources, everyone was undergoing the same process, and almost at each and every door, and each and every department, there was some kind of facility where you could get sanitiser. (male producer, Malawi)

For broadcasters, where access to studios is required, the shift to rotational working was reactive, rather than proactive after an outbreak. To reduce the chances of infection, staff who had to come in came in on a rotational basis to allow for social distancing. Many journalists worked at home, if being in the studio was not essential. Some journalists expressed concern about the adequacy of protective practices adopted in the workplaces. Studios are a particular source of infection risk.

... we later discovered that they were affected, or should I say infected, by the pandemic so these are the people that we were working with closely, we were touching the same things, we were using the same mic, we were using the same facilities almost all the time. (male producer, Malawi)

... people got infected and we were sharing resources. You know when we record in the voice booth, you know that, are using one microphone so chances of infection were pretty high here in the newsroom. And also, in the studios using the same machines and all, not like us producers who have different machines, they are using the same machines and everyone is there so chances were high in the newsroom and in the studio. (male producer, Kenya)

Broadcast journalists had to adapt their practices, sometimes improvising as they went.

There are number of challenges that we had to go through, and sometimes with equipment we have to improvise. For example, our microphones, [we had] to find a way of making them longer so that the person has to stand in the distance and so you can maintain that two metre rule between you and your interviewee. (male journalist, Ghana)

Many participants were back in the office, at least on a rotational basis.

We had to come to work at intervals because the office had too many people so we couldn't stay there, so many people got infected so us guys had to come in shifts. (female producer, Kenya)

Some workplaces maintained practices adopted to encourage social distancing, these included Zoom meetings and interviews, rather than having guests in the studio.

Travelling was difficult for many participants who relied on public transport. In initial lockdowns, no transport was available, this led to programmes not being broadcast. One participant who worked at a radio station had to move closer to his workplace so that he could continue to work, others couldn't work at all. Another participant explained how she now walked to work to avoid public transport.

One workplace had changed the staff transport to reduce the risk of infection.

Before the pandemic, we had the staff bus, we had any number of people go into one car but that has changed, there is a limited number of people who are required to be in one car, so we have resorted to the use of [...] smaller vehicles. (male producer, Kenya)

Fieldwork and travelling were a concern for many participants because they were in direct contact with people who were dying during their reporting and exposed to news daily on infection rates, illness and death as well as having colleagues exposed.

Many journalists did not feel that they were sufficient protections in place. Outbreaks of COVID-19 in various offices seem to back this up. There was also not equitable access to protective resources, even within the same organisations.

At the head office level, yes there was [adequate protective measures taken] but at the regional level? No! At the head office level, our in-house medical officer was available, the safety health committee was also available to attend to issues, but at the regional level – No! At our office, no, but at the head office level, yes there was, and it was available to the regions if we really needed to. (male reporter, Ghana)

Access to PPE was poorer in regional offices or rural areas. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists provided media practitioners with protective equipment. One participant noted:

... I am a media practitioner, but I am yet to receive my equipment. So, who benefited from this? And remember, I don't know how many journalists are here in Zimbabwe, but only a fragment benefitted. So, I think even those organisations that work to protect media practitioners, the journalists, information officers, communications officers, failed to adequately equip and protect journalists from COVID-19. (male journalist/researcher, Zimbabwe)

Remote working was introduced during lockdowns and workplaces took care to meet the basics in terms of PPE and social distancing. However, protections were not consistent or uniform in their application and broadcast journalists were particularly vulnerable due to shared equipment.

2. Workable home workspaces

With the changes in work practices, equipment needed to be available for remote working. This is both in terms of office equipment and internet connectivity.

A few participants said that they received support to make working from home easier:

They also offered us money to get desks or chairs or anything we might need to make our work from home situation more liveable. (male editor, South Africa)

My employer, in particular, has been very outstanding in this regard... relocating their workstations and being provided with the necessary logistics to remain connected to the office. The company was buying, data bundles for employees to work from home... providing resources for the continuity of business. (male editor, Namibia)

My organisation has devoted more resources to acquiring technology to work effectively remotely. (male journalist, Senegal)

One participant, a Zimbabwean freelancer, complained about the cost of buying his own gadgets and the difficulties working due to power failures. A South African journalist echoed this.

However, data and call costs were far more frequently mentioned. Some workplaces supplied data or reimbursed data costs, others paid for data, but not in line with the actual costs incurred.

And so, if during coverage you have to spend a lot of money on data then you realise that it begins to eat into your earnings and that makes life sometimes difficult. (male journalist, Ghana).

At first, I was using my data. I was forced to buy data to do their work. And some months, I think they started to provide me with the data packages. But again, it was not enough. Remember, it's a new transition. And we were not ready to we were not prepared to face it. So, the engagements demanded a lot of data, their communication demanded a lot of airtime and stuff. But the resources, I felt to me were not enough. So, I was forced to dig in my pockets, and use my measly resources, financial resources, of course, to meet their objectives. (male journalist/researcher, Zimbabwe)

Reimbursements for data and other costs were also often late, because of lockdown initially.

Not only could power failures result in not being able to access the internet, but some journalists mentioned that the mobile infrastructure made connecting hard at times. This could ruin meetings and interviews.

You have to realise that our ICT infrastructure is pretty poor. (male journalist/researcher, Zimbabwe)

The connection [for Zoom calls] is never stable. (female journalist, Cameroon)

Many journalists found it difficult to work during the pandemic and had insufficient resources to do their jobs effectively at home and in the field.

Accessing sources

By far, the most common theme throughout all the research was the difficulties experienced getting sources. Almost every participant mentioned the fact that accessing sources was difficult.

Of course, physical access to sources is more important in a visual medium, like television, to set the scene for the story, if not to get video clips of interviews themselves. This is not limited to broadcasters of course; all journalists can better develop and cultivate relationships with sources in the field.

Since COVID started, [when] in my case, if I interact with people who walk on the streets, that's how I get my stories. So, with COVID that changed, because I was staying at home, most of the times, I was not even going to my usual job, I was working from home, meaning movements were minimised. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Another participant stressed the importance of being able to go out into the field.

Journalism that does not take place on the ground is not journalism. (male journalist, Algeria)

In terms of a stressor, the denial of access to sources and events made the job of reporting difficult, in coming up with interesting stories and in verifying information. Good journalists report from the field, using a number of different sources to verify the information they have. The freedom of journalists to move around is crucial to the creation of stories. If journalists are physically at the scene, they have access to eye-witness accounts and other sources.

Relationships with experts and whistle-blowers, in particular, are often built through in-person meetings, and particularly when working on investigative stories, reporters may need to meet key sources personally. The reason for in-person meetings is for the protection of sources, as electronic communications can be surveilled – particularly on stories of national importance and/or about powerful people.

During lockdowns and since, some countries restricted the movement of people, not only between provinces but through roadblocks and increased security force presence.

Of course, it has changed, before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, we would freely move but following the outbreak of the pandemic, we are limited for example, recently the President of Uganda, Yoweri

Kaguta Museveni, granted the pass-outs for 5,200 police officers in my area [marking the graduation of the police officers] ... most of journalists in the area were sidelined, which wasn't there before the outbreak of the pandemic. (male news editor, Uganda)

...there are now many people and organisations who are providing such kind of information, which is very different from two years ago when we just experienced the first wave. (male producer, Malawi)

The acknowledgement that journalists are emergency workers were, in many countries, only granted after industry lobbying. Zimbabwe did not consider journalists essential workers. In other countries, journalists had to get letters from employers or the government to be out reporting. The requirement for a variety of documents needed by journalists made movements hard, particularly during lockdowns.

Social distancing can be used to deny independent journalists access to events and press conferences.

Every time there is a roadblock, you then have to produce your ID, you then have to produce a letter, and then you have to produce confirmation that you actually work where this letter came from, and sometimes they had to verify that, okay, does this person work for you? And has this person been sent wherever? And sometimes, people were told no, go back, you can't proceed. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

They only accredit the media that they want to attend a certain event. And sometimes the excuse could just be like, "No, the place is full. We can't accommodate more people, which was actually not the case. So, it's worse than usual, because most cases you [used to] arrive even when you know you don't have an invitation [...] and sometimes they just let you in. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Security checks with registers of peoples' movements would have a depressing impact on any journalist working on a story that sought to hold powerful people to account. This participant explains:

It has also been difficult to get hold of sources who were working at home.

Because of COVID, there was increased registration of where you are going, there are roadblocks, even when you're getting into a building. Buildings that are not necessarily under so much security. There was that documentation of who's been here? Who have they been to see? And then what is their temperature? Do they have COVID? So, now this is information that is being documented, not because you're a journalist [all movements are documented]. Now people have noticed, you said, you're a journalist, and you're here for an interview. It is different from when a person then has to randomly organise a meeting. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

I must also say that closure of businesses was the best excuse, for instance, when you call officials to give you some information, they would rush out to say that they are no longer in the office, they will come back to you, which in most cases they wouldn't come back to you. So, information is scarce, you send an email today for the officials to respond to you, it will take days so there was that kind of frustration when you need information. (male producer, Malawi)

Participants also expressed frustration at the lack of availability of sources. There is also the temptation from governments to control the narrative of the pandemic and the associated public health impacts, which may deter government sources to speak to journalists and limit the number of options for sources. At the beginning of the pandemic, even government sources could be quiet:

And even when reached, it is easier to give a journalist the slip telephonically than when a journalist is physically present.

People are just not responsive. You may even schedule, and then people are like, I can't do this. And then for you to reschedule they may just become unresponsive. So, I lost out on so many stories, that could have been great. (female, Zimbabwe, freelancer)

The difficulty getting to sufficient sources within deadlines can compromise the credibility of the story and may make it impossible to submit the story. It also means that the voices of ordinary people are more likely to be excluded from coverage as it is harder to talk to people in public spaces and people are more worried about granting interviews because of the risk of COVID.

Technology-mediated news production

Yet, new practices have brought some benefits and some challenges. This section discusses the initial adoption phase, the difficulties associated with new ways of working and the benefits thereof for newsrooms. Finally, the risks of working online are explored.

It took many newsrooms time to adjust to working online. One participant explains:

I believe the situation was not anticipated and so there was no way that my employers for instance could have prepared for it. Besides, there has been nothing like this and no one had any good information on what to do. Turning to work online for instance, was ad hoc as the technology was not much popular and we were all waking up to it. (male reporter, Malawi)

...working from home... was great for some people, for me... but I think communication breakdowns happened a lot. And I think also because with virtual stuff it's hard to sense the tone and stuff a lot. Where it was easy to just walk over to somebody's desk and say, hey, you know, what's, uh, what's this? And what's that? And, you know, I said, you know, give suggestions and stuff like that. So that took a little bit of time to sort of, even out. (female journalist, South Africa)

This has had a dampening effect on creativity.

My job has changed, especially because of teleworking. I cannot have journalists at my disposal. So, I find it very difficult to liven up my department with topical articles. (male editor, Algeria)

Another participant felt that creativity in response to emergencies in the field were lessened because of a lack of alternative content available to use.

Productivity suffered in many organisations, even after the initial phase where new practices were introduced.

The onset of the pandemic has changed behaviour in the workplace and has a considerable impact on performance and productivity. (female journalist, Cameroon)

This participant felt that news meetings were far less effective and there was a sense of torpor in newsroom staff. Also, online meetings were made less productive due to poor connectivity.

A few participants noted how the processes in the newsroom, when disturbed by the absence, poor productivity, or difficulty, communication of one person rippled through the rest of the team.

In the newsroom we work as a team, some contribute stories while others compile the stories and produce the news. So, each and every one of us was affected by the changes in the way we do things. (male journalist, Malawi)

Technology also made it possible to intercept and prevent communication.

Yes, my personal safety has been in danger especially my phone. I fear that. I could work but someone is monitoring my moves and conversations. An example was my frequent phone calls to a South African radio [station] stopped abruptly as they told me that they could connect to my phone. (male journalist, Uganda)

Economic impact for journalists

Reduced ad spend and lower circulation numbers for print publications impacted the profitability and in some cases the sustainability of media companies. This section discusses the financial knock-on impacts on journalists and their families.

The economic consequences of the pandemic for private companies had knock-on impacts on private media.

Even the businesses where we used to get money like advertising with our media house, they were stopped because I remember people, some of the business had stopped from operating and now people could not give us business, of course this is where I would get a lot of money. You find most of the businesses like schools, hotels, these tour places, hotels that are in our region which attract tourists, that is usually how we get money [...] stopped. (male producer, Uganda)

Financial struggles of some companies were not entirely as a result of COVID-19 but had been exacerbated by broader economic downturns.

The company that I work for particularly continues to struggle financially. The challenges were already there prior to COVID, given the emergence of social media which has threatened the existence of newspapers, reducing circulation etc. COVID came in and

worsened it as now, with economic challenges arising from job losses and everything, people now have to choose between buying bread and a newspaper. (female journalist, Malawi)

Private media companies were made vulnerable, and no participants had details about any national initiatives to support media companies. Generally, government funding of media companies is not desirable as it can compromise independence. In Nigeria, the government encouraged the purchase of adverts in order to support media. However, several journalists expressed frustration as other industries had received government support and had some protection against the economic consequences of the pandemic, while media did not. Funds were made available also to individuals, the very poor, but journalists did not fall into this category, despite falling more and more into the ranks of the precariat.

The economic difficulties of media companies impacted journalists in various ways. Many companies had laid off staff.

Some staff were laid off and some don't have hope of retaining their jobs, and the organisation has been financially affected by the outbreak of the pandemic. (male news editor, Uganda)

When the pandemic got to its apogee, a shutdown that was declared, a lot of people were asked to work from home. When people were called back some were finally asked to go home because they had been retrenched. (male editor, Nigeria)

One participant had to take manual jobs after being retrenched. His story is particularly harrowing:

When I was released, my wife was one week pregnant, you can imagine we struggled the entire 2020, until she gave birth. I did not pay rent for like three or four months because whatever they gave me, I actually exhausted it so it's only that I used to do hustling here and there, doing some menial jobs so that I could survive. Then the issue of commuting now, you know I have no bus fare, I have to borrow if I need to use public transport or be stuck in the house and then when we were doing online writing, sometimes we do it at home, maybe we don't have the internet. I don't have bundles, so yes those are some of the challenges I have been through. (male reporter/editor, Kenya)

Many participants had gone through periods where the payment of their salaries had been delayed.

After the outbreak of the pandemic within Uganda in March last year, the radio station I work for delayed to pay us, yet and when you inquired, they'd tell you that the pandemic affects each and everything. (male reporter, Uganda)

Some months, salaries would be delayed, so many financial requisitions to support fieldwork for exclusive and in-depth stories were put on hold. Yet my newspaper especially thrives on human interest and analytical stories that cannot have done on the desk alone. (female editor, Malawi)

Sometimes the late pay or pay cuts preceded retrenchments.

Before we were even let go from the company that I was working for, we didn't receive our salaries for some time, so that one already was frustrating mentally and we were still supposed to deliver, you see, if you're still in a company and they're not paying you but they still expect you to deliver it inflicts emotional harm. (female producer, Kenya)

A participant noted that unpaid wages led to people leaving the company.

Some of them left work and returned to the villages to do other activities after the station management delayed paying us. (male reporter, Uganda)

Many participants had taken pay cuts, both instead of retrenchment, or before.

Of course, the pay cuts especially for those who have families, it's been really demoralising of course because the standard of living is very high so guys are struggling to maintain the families, the pay wasn't even coming on a specific day, it would always be late. (female producer, Kenya)

My work has not changed because of the COVID pandemic, but my salary has changed downwards. (male journalist, Cameroon)

Others were not paid if they were not at work or had leave pay-outs denied.

However, public media seemed to be more secure. A public-media reporter in Ghana said:

I think my job is very safe. I work with the public sector and in Ghana I think this is the safest place to work. You may talk about the low wages but the price that is the price we have to pay for the security in terms of job... If anything at all, COVID actually strengthened my belief that my job is more secure than any journalists in this country. (male reporter, Ghana)

Freelancers also were used less by publications.

After the pandemic, most publications seemed to have cut down on freelance, maybe because of funding. And that affected my cash flow... The number of assignments reduced significantly, and other publications stopped commissioning freelancers altogether. (male journalist, Malawi)

Yet, with the loss of employment, more journalists became freelancers. One participant had more work as a result of the pandemic as organisations had been downsized.

Additional work for those in employment had dried up as a result of the pandemic.

Apart from my usual salary, there was nothing additional. As journalists we have side opportunities that we do when we go out covering information. Sometimes you conduct some consultancy services, organising the media and others and that comes with a change, so you make extra money. But during this period no one was organising any programme, no one was consulting the media for any services, so the extra income that was coming was cut off and I didn't receive any additional monies. (male journalist/researcher, Zimbabwe)

Costs had also increased for some participants; besides telephony costs, participants had had increases in school fees, rent and had to support family members who had lost their jobs. Medical costs were also an issue.

Participants had lost jobs, extra work, been paid late and taken pay cuts while in some cases, costs went up. Not only were the losses difficult, but the general insecurity about what would happen next was a significant chronic stressor.

Increased workload

Fewer staff due to sickness, retrenchment or burnout in newsrooms increased the workloads and responsibilities for the remaining staff.

One participant explained.

[filling] in for colleagues and covering my content and sections for them when they were overwhelmed. So yeah, it's just been really busy. (male editor, South Africa)

Another participant had had his newsroom decrease from 28 staffers to five.

...we had 28 staff. Eight of us were told to first wait until the [the first] lockdown comes to an end to resume working]. [With the second lockdown] they were again stopped from working. Remember these are people whose families survive on pay they get per month, some of them, we had some of our staff members who left and never came back from the first lockdown now as per now, out of the 28, we have only five. (male producer, Uganda)

The increased workload and responsibilities for the participant were positive in the sense that he was learning a lot that would stand him in good stead in his future career. Simultaneously, he still worked with reduced salary.

Chronic stress and support mechanisms

All the trends discussed above, the constant fear of infection, the difficulties in performing the job required, increasing economic precarity and concerns for family together with increases in workloads had taken their toll.

Most participants had extremely high chronic levels of fear and anxiety.

The idea of constantly going out to the street... a hysterical fear of being on the street... I stopped working a little for fear of coming into contact with people. (female editor, Egypt)

And for the first few months, it just was so scary. It just felt like the end of the world all the time. And you weren't sure, like, you know, how bad was it? How bad was bad? We had nothing to compare it to. So, everything just was very, very, very scary. And it just felt like it was a whole new world. I'm a healthy person. I've never had any health issues. I've never lived in like, with, with the fear that something

deathly could like happen to me at any point... So, it was a year of like, just complete uncertainty and feeling disoriented, and your entire lifestyle and world and everything changes... So, it was just I think day to day, feeling anxious, kind of feeling frightened, feeling overwhelmed with information, feeling overwhelmed with the lack of information. (female journalist, South Africa)

And I think the other thing that was really hard was just the kind of sense of cabin fever from the first lockdown that was really, really challenging. I'm lucky because I had family that could be supportive. So, I wasn't on my own, which would have been extremely difficult. (female journalist, South Africa)

day I was admitted to hospital, a photojournalist had also died. So, these things actually gave me a scare. (male reporter, Ghana)

...having people in family WhatsApp groups saying my patient has COVID and we are trying to get a hospital that will admit them, that person went ahead and died gasping for breath and sometimes you even cover it, it really affected our mental health. (female news editor, Kenya)

The pandemic has created enormous psychological difficulties because when you see your loved ones die, it is not easy to live with and bear. We have not had psychological support and we have to live with it. (male journalist, DRC)

Feelings of isolation were common, but also adapting to social situations after prolonged periods of isolation was difficult for some. Two participants said they had developed social anxiety during the pandemic.

Participants also experienced trauma while reporting.

[It] was really a difficult time for most of us, reporting how people were dying in hospitals and at the very beginning of the pandemic reporting someone dying, burying their whole family, the stigma that came with isolation in the early days of COVID pandemic, covering these deaths, loved ones didn't even have a chance to properly say goodbye to their loved ones because of those measures that were in place... At the end of the day when we put down the pen, we have left the keyboard and we at home sleeping, all these images come to you and as a human being we didn't have mechanisms in place to debrief or to pour out hearts and say, this is the story that I covered today and it may have broken parts of me, we didn't have that so went to sleep with that trauma and every day, day in, day out reporting on how hospital beds are full. (female news editor, Kenya)

Participants knew many people who got infected, and many who had died.

Not a day went by without the news of the death of a loved one, a friend, a neighbour. (male journalist, Algeria)

When we began to hear about people who died, medical doctors, pharmacists, very big people in society, then the apprehension kept increasing. In fact, the day, the week I caught COVID, a junior of mine from school had died and then the

The constant news of COVID and its impacts kept participants in a state of terror for extended periods, concerned about their own mental and physical health.

Catching COVID themselves was one thing, but a great fear for many with the contagion was in passing it on to their loved ones.

Even though I was careful when I went out, not only not to catch the virus, but especially not to pass it on to my family, it was difficult to escape, and the risk was everywhere. (male journalist, Algeria)

This impacted how participants interacted with their families.

...They tested COVID positive within a matter of two weeks and here I was with the family at home, with kids! You get home and the kids are running to come and hug you - daddy has arrived! It was quite challenging to get home and the kids are rushing and you tell them stay away from me. Some of them can't even talk. One of them - my youngest can't even talk - so it was difficult explaining to him that they needed to keep away from me... So once I arrive from work, I enter a different washroom, I remove my clothes put them in the washing machine and get them washed. So, I was under serious psychological pressure within the period... (male journalist, Ghana)

Another Ugandan participant isolated himself away from his family and did not return home for two weeks to protect them.

Participants were asked about the financial, psychological, and social support they received, both from their workplaces and other sources. Given the extreme worry journalists experienced about finances, financial support would have a protective impact on participants' wellbeing. In South Africa, there were funds made available to freelancers.

I am aware that the South African Editors' Forum, for example, introduced a fund for mobilising donations to support journalists during the period, I do not think such efforts could have yielded much here considering the economic environment. But maybe I am just pessimistic. (female editor, Malawi)

The relative security of knowing that retrenchments or pay cuts were not on the cards was protective in itself, to a certain extent. Other participants and workplaces provided direct financial relief at times.

This colleague of mine who got COVID from her media organisation... they sent her some money and asked her to stay at home and rest and that was it. (male reporter, Ghana)

The people that were found with the virus and needed to go home for isolation were given some money by the company apart from their salary, they were given additional funds so that they could support themselves and their families' as they were not active anymore at work. (male reporter, Malawi)

I think the fact that they gave us a bit of extra money in the initial parts for the hard work we were doing or just anything we needed was really nice and it went a long way. (male reporter, South Africa)

This was the exception rather than the rule, in fact a Zimbabwean journalist said that when she contracted COVID from her work, she would have appreciated even a gift basket while she was recovering. Others had to get financial support elsewhere.

It was really tough. I've never had to ask my mom for any help. I had to, she offered without me asking. And I had to accept because I had no choice. Because the money I was making doesn't even make any sense at all, because I'm in school as well. My son is in school. I don't own my own house. So that means I pay rent, I have to pay electricity and water. And on top of that, my landlord was wanting to hike the rentals as well. After that experience, I ended up leaving that place and I'm staying at a new place, but there was no support. And it was tough. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Some fortunate participants had mechanisms in place to assist with medical costs.

...with COVID-19, whoever tested positive, the company provided medicine and stuff. So instead of employees dipping into their own pockets, they have been assisted in some ways... so I think that is supportive economically. (male editor, Namibia)

I think when I got COVID where I work, they got me tested, and then where I got tested, they gave me drugs and stuff. But I think it wasn't enough, because, if you're a breadwinner in your family and you're the one – and I am a single parent, I have my son with me – we don't have help. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Many companies could not afford to financially support journalists or offer even basic testing to staff. Journalists were responsible for their own medical costs, even if they were exposed at work.

I got COVID and my family members got COVID. You're sick, you have to recover. And then my siblings got COVID – we literally got COVID at the same time. But because I was older, and I then had to provide care for them I was trying to make sure they are managing their COVID and COVID medication is super expensive. You couldn't get it on medical aid. You just need to go buy it and literally multiplying by three because there are three people with COVID. So that was very challenging. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

The burden of care also increased during COVID.

Having children at home and trying to work from home was incredibly stressful. And I think a lot of employers just didn't handle that with a lot of care, in terms of working hours, workload and what to do with your kids. And they were like, Oh, cute. Look, look how understanding we are, we let kids into Zoom meetings. Then, bam! You have to work until like, what time tonight. And like every parent that I know, felt that their employer was just piled on during that period at a time when they had very limited capacity. So, I think from that perspective, it wasn't a terribly there wasn't a terrible amount of support. (female journalist, South Africa)

Sick family members also needed care.

Unsurprisingly, journalists experienced burnout and mental breakdowns:

I had a few episodes that were really dark, I can count on one hand people I know personally, you know fellow journalists and colleagues in the industry, [had] total mental breakdowns and they were admitted. (female news editor, Kenya)

Of the participants, all those who spoke of care work including childcare and needing to care for others were women. While uniform measures to support women in the dual roles of carer and career woman may not be feasible, an acknowledgement or expression of support may have helped participants deal with the additional strain, particularly for single mothers.

Psychological support was available for few, but not many, and it was not necessarily easy to access. A South African journalist explains:

We are part of that ICAS (Independent Counselling and Advisory Services) thingy [an employee wellness programme]. So, they do provide support in that way. I found it quite hard to actually access and to really figure out what you could do and what not to do whatever. But they do provide support and they were quite cool with like saying if you had a particularly rough week or something like that, take it easy for a while. So yeah, so they were quite good. (female journalist, South Africa)

Journalists noted that there was a lack of support from their employers and other institutions.

I feel our employers and the associations that cover journalists could have done more and to give credit where it is due. The media content of Kenya has really gone on the uptake of organising mental health workshop for journalists, we have begun seeing a lot of change this year but last year in the height of the pandemic, I think we were on our own, it was really difficult trying to navigate that. (female news editor, Kenya)

No there hasn't been any kind of psychological or social support, the country where I live in, having access to psychological support is very difficult, I live in a country where the health system is very overwhelmed, and we don't have institutions that can really help people psychologically so there was none. (male journalist, Malawi)

Workplaces were often not geared up to provide the kind of support and empathy participants felt were required in the newsroom under pandemic conditions.

I think there was people, a lot of people wanted to give emotional support, but like their HR systems weren't kind of geared towards it. The whole system wasn't really geared towards like a situation where you need a lot of flexibility with your employees, and you need a lot of empathy with what they're actually going through. It was a tricky one... I can sincerely say it was, a real attempt and sincerity and desire to support us. I think it was just in terms of like, people didn't really know how what that would entail or how long it would go on for. (female journalist, South Africa)

[The pandemic], it was like a falling bomb, which is why we had to work our way through. Solutions we found to deal with this pandemic were not adequate. Regarding the pandemic as far as I am concerned there are no answers from the employer. (male journalist, DRC)

Unsurprisingly, then, most emotional support was informal, even if it was in the newsroom.

What I can say we did [in our newsroom], was to support each other even though we were working in uncommon or in unusual times... it was difficult for us to do the things we normally did and we tried to make the newsroom as conducive as possible ... I think everybody actually supported each other in terms of knowledge sharing. (female reporter, Ghana)

I don't remember getting any support ... but I moved on, I got over it because you know as a journalist you know you face a lot during your profession especially in Africa and in particular Uganda so I actually went through it. I may have gotten some support from some people but if it was psychosocial support then it is from my fellow journalists. We used to encourage each other; we would tell ourselves yeah we can do it! We can make it through this pandemic but apart from that, I don't remember getting any professional or expert support in regard to that. (male journalist, Uganda)

Participants often mentioned informal support received through community and family circles.

This is Africa, you just need some rest and then prepare to head back to work. I think the fact that I do freelance helps me rest and do other activities like swimming and traveling or attending parties to take my mind off the issues at hand. But most of the time I never place too much emotional attachment to my stories. So social support usually comes from a good community I live in, and I am lucky the people I live with care and always ask how I am faring. (male journalist, Uganda)

Personally, I have not received any psychological or social support. This is just limited to the various exchanges that one makes with family and between collaborators. But neither the employer nor a media organisation organised this kind of contribution for me. (male journalist, Central African Republic)

Journalists also had to get financial support to access psychological services from informal networks.

I have a good friend, she is also a colleague in the industry actually, and I think when things got really bad, I wrote to her and I said: "Hey Vera, this is what I am going through and I just feel like I can't cope anymore," and she was gracious enough pay from her own pocket for me to see a psychologist and later a psychiatrist, I had some meds prescribed to me and that really took me through that period. I have also had a lot of support, I had a really strong, small but really strong circle that sort of helped me navigate through this by sharing experiences, by sharing encouragements basically just letting me know that I wasn't the only one in this, I wasn't even alone in this, I had people rooting for me, I had people believing in me and wishing me the very best and that we were an army of people who found themselves in murky waters trying to navigate back to safety and that we were going to so it and I think there is some safety and security that comes with knowing that, you are not in this alone, you have people rooting for you and you are not walking the journey alone there are others walking it with you and you are all determined to see it end well so that really helped me. (female news editor, Kenya)

The pressures of reporting on difficult situations, economic difficulties, isolation, increased workload, the need to

engage in care work compounded to make it very difficult for journalists, leading to burnout and illness. Supportive mechanisms were not there for most participants, and they had to form their own networks of support.

6. The impact of the COVID pandemic on journalism

Given the difficulties faced by journalists and the states' use of state of emergencies to address the pandemic, it is not surprising that journalism and the media have come under significant strain.

The approach section laid out criteria for measuring the health of journalism and media freedom in a country. These were the freedom for journalists to go about reporting without interference or fear, and the media to have access to information sources. The airing or publication of news material should also be allowed without interference as long as it is in line with journalistic ethics. The final indicator of the health of journalism and media freedom is the sustainability of companies and organisations, as this impacts the amount of pluralism in terms of ownership and content quality and diversity of media offerings.

Interference and fear

The pandemic brought with it opportunities for officials and security force personnel to gain financially, and given that this was the large-scale airborne pandemic, the chances were high that at least some funds would be wasted. This was, then, a great opportunity to monitor official initiatives and behaviour to ensure that they were acting in the public interest. Yet, the extra security forces deployed, particularly during lockdowns, was also an opportunity for increased surveillance and intimidation as well as reduced access to of information.

States of emergencies effectively curb the rights of freedom of movement and association for all people in a country. These are justifiable in certain circumstances, such as public health crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic but it is also possible to use public health as an opportunity to stifle freedom of expression. Misinformation is deadly in a pandemic, and it is important that the public have access to accurate information, but this can be used as a guise to silence political opponents and ensure that coverage is one-sided. Lockdowns in particular brought agents of the state into closer contact with the public, and journalists, and this created the opportunity for violence, arrest and intimidation. This section explores participants' experiences and opinions on the changes in the media environments and freedom of the media.

1. Freedom of movement and information

Many participants said that media freedom had not necessarily been violated during the pandemic; however, restrictions around movement meant that journalists were hamstrung in reporting and had limited sources of information.

Some participants said that they were able to move around unimpeded.

Even during the lockdown, we had the chance of going to work and if you were moving in town and you said you were the media, security allowed you to move about and journalists had a chance to move around... So, I don't think [media freedom] has really been impacted, because we had the chance to do what we were normally doing. Nothing changed, no one stopped us. (female reporter, Ghana)

However, the previous section detailed how journalists were consistently denied access to sources, particularly during the lockdowns and had their ability to move around curtailed.

Aside from the fears of contagion and difficulty accessing sources because of the pandemic, the presence of security forces, curfews and travel bans makes interference with the work of journalism possible. In order to stop the spread of the pandemic, movement between regions was sometimes restricted, this meant that journalists could not cover areas that they otherwise would have.

There were many restrictions on movement and, therefore, media freedom was relatively influenced. (male editor, Algeria)

... the freedom to move around, to go to the places where the events are taking place has been impacted, as has the curfew imposed in the cities, depending on the rate of infection. (male journalist, Algeria)

Since the start of the pandemic, our province of South Kivu has been among the most affected provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In South Kivu, the provincial governor has ruled that there can be three days of no work curfew in Ibanda commune. Since I live in this commune, I would have to walk seven to 10 kilometres to get to my office in Kadutu commune. When I returned, I felt insecure because there were police everywhere trying to arrest anyone who violated this decision. (male producer, DRC)

More concerning is the continued denial of movement since lockdowns.

Since the appearance of COVID I can no longer travel outside the capital, due to health restrictions and the imposed curfew. I used to report from the field, but it became impossible with all these restrictions. Writing about the forest fires that ravaged the north of the country, for example, from home, based on stories collected from social media is not journalism in my opinion. (male journalist, Algeria)

I have to rely mostly on other media footage to create a story or plan to move early enough before curfew time. With travel restrictions and fear of contact with others, some [reporters] have chosen to give half-true, unverified information to avoid risks they deem unnecessary. (male editor, Algeria)

Of course, COVID influenced media freedom. I would not get the chance to move from one district to another as when the president locked people from moving from one district to another during the first lockdown. Since then, you would find even if there is a story you are supposed to be going for in a district, you don't get chances to move from one area to another. (male producer, Uganda)

Note that Algeria and Uganda have poor media freedom ratings (146³² and 125³³ in the world, the lowest ranking being 180). Ideally, the public should be able to get information from all parts of the countries, and people within isolated regions should be aware of what is happening in their areas. The best source of such information is through credible media.

Media organisations had to lobby to get journalists classified as emergency services to allow them to move around during lockdowns. Even so, curfews needed to be planned around and for journalists without a vehicle, movement would be impossible.

If you explained yourself as a journalist, you could still be permitted to move but that means you must have your own car and cannot rely on public transport, which is restricted and very few journalists can afford their own vehicle. (male producer, Uganda)

32 Reporters without borders. (2021). "Algeria: Media Crushed by Draconian Laws." *RSF*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/algeria>).

33 Reporters without borders. (2021). "Uganda: Attacks on the Media." *RSF*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/uganda>).

Other participants noted that they were reliant on other media for footage, as the number of people in venues was limited due to social distancing precautions.

The freedom to move around, to go to the places where the events are taking place has been impacted, as has the curfew imposed in the cities, depending on the rate of infection. (female reporter, Ghana)

Media freedom has been influenced too, since journalists or media practitioners are limited to attend certain activities due to an authorised number of attendants. For instance, here in Uganda, the number is limited to 200 people. (male news editor, Uganda)

While such limitations may be made in good faith to prevent infections, it is also possible that limitations may ensure that only media friendly to people in power can attend events.

The presence of security forces in the street, was for some, inherently somewhat risky, as journalists did not want to have their activities interfered with. A number of participants said there was an increased need for care in the field.

I think media freedom has been influenced by COVID and one such way is the freedom to move and interact with participants because security is everywhere, and we have to move carefully. You take pictures with caution as the pandemic has affected security officials in equal measure. So, any slight move can anger them, and you get injured. (male journalist, Uganda)

Things have been tightened such that not many things can be tolerated (male journalist, Ghana)

There was lots of harassment from the law enforcement agencies, there was some lobbying by the unions to classify journalists so that they could carry out their operations. (male journalist, Zimbabwe)

Journalists were not allowed to work freely, in fact journalists were not considered as essential services here in Zimbabwe. And during most of 2020, we were using our 2019 accreditation cards. And that alone exposed us to law enforcement forces, to security guys. (male journalist, Zimbabwe).

For context, Ghana is ranked 30 in the world in terms of media freedom³⁴, the second highest country in Africa, and Zimbabwe is 130³⁵. So, suppression in Ghana may be a relatively new phenomenon.

Because journalists were constrained in their movements out of concerns to prevent infection, it was not always clear what spaces were closed to them. So, in many countries it may not have been obvious where freedom of movement was limited.

Overall, in South Africa, I think the case can be made for media freedom, I mean, media were allowed, were seen as essential workers, and we're allowed to still cover stories, but we don't really know what access they were limited to and what access they had fully. (male editor, South Africa)

Within our media, given the rise in positive cases at times, a small field team has been set up to avoid too many movements and to respect the barrier measures. (female journalist, CAR)

South Africa is ranked 32³⁶ in terms of media freedom and CAR 126³⁶.

The self-imposed constraints on movement may be a larger limiting factor to movement than official prohibitions in some countries.

It was mainly participants of countries where press freedom was already limited that expressed concern about restrictions to movement brought about by the COVID restrictions. However, it is not until the freedom of journalists to move is tested, as they feel that their chances of infection have dropped, that the reality of freedom of movement will be confirmed. Journalists not being in the field is very concerning in terms of ensuring that accurate news appears in the media.

34 Reporters without borders. (2021). "Ghana: Not Enough Protection for Journalists." *RSF*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/ghana>).

35 Reporters without borders. (2021). "Zimbabwe: Page Not yet Turned on Mugabe Era." *RSF*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/zimbabwe>).

36 Reporters Without Borders. (2021). "Central African Republic : Journalists Harassed, Murders Unpunished." *RSF*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/central-african-republic>).

The increased presence of security forces and limitations of movement have created the conditions for more violence, intimidation, and arrests of journalists. This study included various journalists from different media houses and areas, these participants were not necessarily exposed to violence and intimidation as they were constrained from field reporting. Better indications of the extent of violence and intimidation against journalists would be apparent in other studies. Despite this, participants were aware of violence by security forces.

There have been instances of violence against civilians in South Africa.

There were terrible things happening, like people getting shot for leaving their homes, you know, by the military and so you really felt like you were in a cage. It was pretty awful. (female journalist, South Africa)

And violence has been perpetrated against journalists.

Security authorities like the police took advantage of the laws and regulations that were implemented, like the curfew, to target some journalists. I do know of journalists who were beaten here when they were covering some stories and the excuse was because this was because of COVID-19 and stuff like that but I do believe that COVID-19 has also been to cover up some of the ills that governments have been doing. (male journalist, Malawi)

Some of my colleagues were even beaten by the soldiers for no apparent reason. Media practitioners are being threatened by security forces, they are being detained, they are being jailed, they're being harassed for no apparent reason. (male journalist, Zimbabwe)

For reference, Malawi has a media freedom rating of 62³⁷.

As COVID-19 restrictions brought citizens and journalists into closer contact with security forces, there were more opportunities for violence and intimidation. Under lockdowns, the presence of security forces is used to ensure compliance with laws but it can also be used to dampen media freedom as journalists are less willing to be in the field. Ultimately, limits on journalists' ability to access sources denies people the right to information. Access to information is a right recognised in international law and most African countries have agreed to put in place mechanisms to ensure that the public has access to information held by governments and private parties. Constraints on journalists in their ability to move around freely and access sources during the pandemic impeded access to information.

2. Expression, censorship, and diversity of voices

It is tempting for authorities to constrain freedom of expression, especially when there are a lot of myths about an issue of international concern such as the pandemic. However, suppressing voices also leads to more suspicion of governments and government-backed initiatives, such as vaccinations.

Participants from Central Africa spoke of pressure to ensure that only one side of the story was covered and the difficulties accessing multiple sources.

I will say, the freedom of the media was influenced because the government obliged journalists to sign a charter within the framework of the treatment of the information on COVID-19. This charter obliges journalists not to carry out certain investigations into certain facts related to the pandemic or it gives the authorisation to healthcare personnel not to reveal to journalists in matters of monitoring and the fight against this pandemic. And, in the name of media freedom, I find that inconceivable. (female journalist, CAR).

Media freedom was influenced because we were all forced to say the same thing... We had to toe the line, which is to give the authorities room to express themselves and not to express a contrary idea. (female journalist, DRC)

Media freedom was greatly affected. Since COVID-19 started in South Kivu there were communication problems between the provincial authority and the INRB (official department in charge of the pandemic) where the results published by the two structures differed. The provincial authority believes that he is the only one empowered to deliver results, when we as journalists have to balance the sources... before the pandemic we were free to communicate. (male producer, DRC)

37 Reporters without borders. (2021). "Malawi : Progress That Needs Consolidating." RSF. Retrieved January 9, 2022 (<https://rsf.org/en/malawi>).

Journalists had come under fire during the pandemic for their reporting, for example, in Nigeria:

There were instances when journalists' rights were affected. There was the case of the former aviation minister, Fani-Kayode, who attacked a journalist for questioning his movement during the lockdown. There was also the case of Agba Jalingo, the publisher of a Cross River State, who was arrested by the governor of the state for publishing a story. (female editor, Nigeria)

A participant had been threatened while trying to investigate a story.

I have experienced threats in the sense that some officials were accused of misusing resources. When I started investigating, I received anonymous calls saying I could face unspecified action if I pursued the investigation. (male reporter, Malawi)

Even in South Africa, there were attempts to regulate what was said by media in terms of COVID-19.

As The Conversation, there may have been some sort of impact for media freedom, where a lot of the content for COVID specifically had to be approved, either by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, or whoever else people are reporting to. So that, in a sense, did impact media freedom, I guess that you couldn't really cover content, without getting sign off from people, and if people didn't like what academics were saying, they would try and block it somehow. So, I think that, especially when covering health, or COVID-19, the government was placing, like strict guidelines that whoever was, like producing content on it, it has to be approved first, I think that did have an impact. (male editor, South Africa)

Some participants in countries with poor media freedom did not feel that there was more censorship as a result of COVID.

I really don't think media freedom suffered during COVID in my country. We have had issues with media freedom long before the advent of COVID and the authorities tried to gag the press. Some media houses have tried to create an atmosphere of fear before COVID and the government clamped down on these organisations for their reportage, and so that climate existed before. (female producer, Nigeria)

I think what I can say is journalism here in Zimbabwe is like working on the mine field during midnight, especially if you are reporting from the private side of the media, but if you are from the public from government owned, and the pro-government, media institutions, you are safe. (male journalist, Zimbabwe)

Some self-censorship may be undertaken because of the controversy and consequences of saying things about COVID as a media practitioner.

There are still certain things that one cannot just say about COVID. I mean, you can't come out like me, I can't have somebody come out and say, I haven't been vaccinated because the moment they shared their opinion, somebody else may just attack you, you have to be a lot more cautious about how you say things. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Some of the stories people could not air because some people were afraid because there was a lot of mix up of real story and fake story because some of the stories were being censored. You know people fear, so there was some little freedom infringement. (male editor/reporter, Kenya)

It is preferable to have a diversity of voices in the media. The pandemic impacted different sectors, industries, and communities in various ways. Many, if not all people were affected, and had stories to tell thereof. Yet, a lack of access to sources meant that many stories were left untold.

It is justifiable to avoid quoting sources who take an unscientific approach when discussing the pandemic, because of the impact in terms of the potential for lost lives. However, there are many experts on matters adjacent to the pandemic that could have been consulted. In addition, there are many stories of the tribulations and triumphs of the various groups of people impacted that could have been featured in the media. Using a variety of sources is not only good journalistic practice but also makes for more interesting stories.

Some governments tried to control messages about public health and a diversity of voices has not always been available on news stories, as governments are cautious about what is said. Interference has meant that there has been some censorship and limitations imposed on freedom of the media.

Misinformation

Misinformation proliferated during the pandemic, making the jobs of journalists much harder. Also, given the limitations on journalists' movements, managing this misinformation became particularly difficult. All journalists' need is to be able to report from the field, to interview sources and see events first-hand.

The media have an obligation to inform and educate the populace. Their role becomes crucial during national emergencies. But there are no such requirements on individuals on social media, who are not subject to the kind of regulation that media is. Typically, individuals should avoid hate speech or inciting violence, they may be sued for defamation, for impugning the reputation of someone but they do not have to meet the same standards in terms of ethics and validating information.

Media, in contrast, are often bound by self-regulatory and regulatory bodies that include ethical codes. Accurate and ethical journalism is critical, because publishing incorrect information can cause a lot of damage and trying to correct information after the fact, particularly online, is only partly effective. Media also need to retain the trust of their audiences. There is no benefit to consuming media from professionals if it is just a repetition of what people on the internet have produced.

When asked about misinformation, participants almost universally condemned social media for its spread. Widespread misinformation undermined the credibility of all media.

The public is trapped because it is difficult to distinguish between a medium and a social network, between fake news and verified information. Suddenly, all the media lose their credibility. (male journalist, Algeria)

What happened now is something that has never happened in my life. I'm already 56 years' old. I have never experienced anything of this nature. So, when I look at journalism as a result, I look at journalists trying their level best to make sure that they tell the people about the number of people who have died, the way to prevent [infections] and all that stuff. But people still not believing because of what, because of undermining the journalist as a result of what they heard on the social media. (male journalist, South Africa)

We had to be highly alert as journalists because there was a lot of fake news making the rounds. I fell victim to one such fake news report and we were not adequately prepared to do fact checking. It was during this COVID-19 pandemic that some of these fact checking apps came up for us to use. I think I attended an online thing with the US Embassy, and I learned some of these tricks but before then there was nothing like that so we had challenges. The threat came from social media, the threat to information, quality information, factual information. (male reporter, Ghana)

It is incumbent on journalists to not simply parrot information from social media. During the pandemic, there were masses of information that needed to be checked before publishing. This created a substantial burden on journalists to verify the accuracy of information.

Since the appearance of COVID and the health restrictions, we have spent our time checking information relayed by social networks and questionable news sites. Not a day goes by without false information being relayed by several sites and making the buzz on social networks, before being denied, and sometimes, forgotten, without ever knowing the true from the false. (male journalist, Algeria)

Misinformation has also promoted gossip and has created a lot of clarification work for journalists and media houses to work on to make things right. (female journalist, Malawi)



Image source: <https://www.afro.who.int/news/africas-covid-19-surge-tops-second-wave-peak-vaccine-deliveries-pick>

Failure to decipher facts from misinformation has led to the repetition of misinformation, which represented an existential threat to some companies

So, in this era of online digital space, there have been lots of fake stories and these have led to poor reporting, some of the people have been fired because of those things, some of the media houses have been shut. (male reporter/editor, Kenya)

It reduced the recipient's confidence in the transmission medium and made him refrain from dealing with it in one way or another, which is reflected in the financial return that the medium receives, which explains the closure of many media outlets in the recent period. (male journalist, Egypt)

Misinformation has had very real public health impacts too.

All this information about how the vaccine is reacting to different people because the media is putting it out, and people consume these messages. So of course, it is impacting the public... The public considers media as a reliable source... they act upon what they consume on media. For example, vaccine intake has been low due to the information spread on media on how the effects are bad, hence creating a resistance from most people. (female producer, Kenya)

Other participants noted how misinformation led to the public eschewing basic protective practices such as social distancing, mask wearing and hand washing.

A participant's newsroom had switched to distributing news on WhatsApp and Telegram and felt that using these channels helped address misinformation that also appeared on these channels.

We found that WhatsApp is a tool rapidly used by the public for misinformation and one way to combat or address it is to provide credible news that is distributed through WhatsApp. (male journalist, Uganda)

In fact, factual media stories undermine perceptions created by misinformation.

I think to some extent the people were able to change their perception after receiving the right information from the media. (male journalist, Malawi)

This newsroom actively sought to dispel misinformation.

Disinformation was a crucial element because already at the editorial level, we opted to fight against fake news. We created a specialised programme where we came back to the bad information that was circulating. Experts were given room to explain to listeners the outline of the coronavirus and how to avoid the spread [and so] minimised the impact of COVID. (male journalist, DRC)

Online information was hard to dispel as journalists did not go into the field as much. One participant noted that the abundance of misinformation had led to far better verification processes.

We have had to up our game in terms of verifying information, and although that affects production of stories, as we have a daily deadline, the process helped us reduce the risk of publishing fake news. On the other hand, we managed to develop relations with more sources, which ensured that our stories are multi-sourced. [In contrast to] the olden days when just one person could comment, and the story is run simply because they hold a position in government. (female journalist, Zimbabwe)

Misinformation has increased the workloads of newsrooms, leading to the publication of misinformation in mainstream media. This has undermined the credibility of media, potentially leading to poorer sales.



Image source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/africa-covid-19-deaths-pass-3-500-cases-near-120-000/1854816>

Media sustainability, pluralism, and content diversity

This research revealed considerable challenges to the continued sustainability of media, closures, job losses and pay cuts. The previous section revealed how this impacts journalists as individuals but these trends ultimately undermine democracy in all countries affected.

Pluralism refers to the number of owners there are in the media landscape. A good media environment that meets the needs of the most people is one where there are numerous owners, typically there should be a range of public, private and community media to meet the public's needs. Public media should have a wide geographic reach and serve the people in the country with free-to-air programming; however, it is vulnerable to interference from powerful people. A diversity of well-funded, private media should be able to attract enough audience members and advertisers to retain their independence and is typically the site of good investigative journalism that holds the powerful to account. Community media can meet the needs of geographical or other communities, using the language of the community to talk about issues faced by the community. Community media is generally run on a not-for-profit basis.

The failure of private media represents a threat to media freedom and democracy, as good quality, independent information is no longer available to the population. This was recognised by some participants.

The media suffered a threat to its existence since sales dropped. The reduction in its economic power also affected the power of the media and stories that they would otherwise stand by, they wouldn't do so again. I will say that it was in direct response to the pandemic. (male editor, Nigeria).

We saw companies close and we had some other media houses closing in the country, especially in print. (male journalist, Uganda)

Bailing out troubled media companies can undermine their independence.

I think the media has been under threat during the COVID-19 [pandemic]. In my country, most of the media houses could not manage to function, could not manage to fund their activities to run their operations, so the government had to come in and get them some bail out and I do believe that when you have that kind of a situation where government is helping you in terms of finances, it becomes very difficult for you to be independent in covering officials and the government itself. (male journalist, Malawi)

The impact of the experiences of participants, when projected to the media sector represents reduced time and resources available for news production, fewer staff with less experience in newsrooms, lower salaries and less money available for news gathering. These would all result in poorer content.

The move from print to online content can also change the quality of the end product.

[The pandemic] has affected the gathering of news [and] when it comes to even the writing of the news, a lot of people will not have the time to read. Speaking as a print journalist, the effort we put into writing has changed. The number of pages we devote to news has also changed. It has also affected patronage of newspapers as well as the way we write. We now resort to publishing online and therefore use less words and a lot of pictures. The number of copies we publish has reduced because COVID-19 has affected the purchasing power [of consumers]. (male editor, Nigeria)

Digital and mainstream, there is somehow different styles in working, in mainstream there is more of seriousness but you know when you are doing blog as much as it is serious, there are some element of rumours, in a blog you may write some rumours so it may not be 100 percent because you just pick a story from another blog, you edit, you re-edit so that is what I can say has changed when it comes to my job... here I am just confined with just writing and mainly writing entertainment stories and this online content, the entertainment of this rumours, we don't focus much on politics, sports or business, you understand with blogs, most of the people are fighting for clicks. (male reporter/editor, Kenya).

A lack of money for reporting also impacts content.

... companies [are] cutting down on costs... you find that you don't fully deliver your work the way you're supposed to do because of so many restrictions on being a journalist, because of the constraints in terms of budgeting, the challenges of not being able to fully travel and do stories. (female producer, Kenya)

Good Journalism costs money. For example, when I pitched the ICC story about Ongwen, I spent almost all the money and simply just got the credit of publishing it as the cost of doing the story was higher than the return. Desk journalism is good and easy to do but not compelling when one starts to write as the reader has already seen all your examples. (male journalist, Uganda)

Decline in the money available for news media may have many downstream consequences, such as continued drops in audiences and the quality is not as good. In addition, less competition in the market means audiences may not receive the good, diverse content they need.

Conclusion

The restrictions on media activity have been lifted to a certain extent, however, not in all countries. Poorer incomes in media companies make for less funds for staff and reporting together with more work for existing staff. Unsurprisingly, misinformation has, in some cases, made its way into the media. Increasing the potential for further declines in earnings.

7. The light at the end of the tunnel?

The Covid pandemic has not changed the direction of the media sector, it has just accelerated many of the processes already in place.

The need to work remotely may offer opportunities to improve processes in future, but the managers did express concern about losses in productivity and difficulties producing news remotely. Although participants have adopted these technologies, it appears that they could use more strategies on how to best make use of them.

Similarly, the ability to interview sources remotely for broadcast is useful for the future, as expert sources such as academics may have more stable internet and journalists have now learnt how to instruct interviewees in recording themselves.

The most compelling positive thing to have come out of this pandemic is that participants have had to learn to deal with misinformation. Fact-checking tactics can be used post-pandemic in other situations. It is likely that journalists have also improved their ability to report on research and sciences. More training on verification and science reporting may still prove beneficial. Digital and media literacy programmes for the general public may be very effective in encouraging the uptake of authoritative news stories.

Given the great amounts of misinformation, it is possible that some audiences may be prepared to pay for independent, quality content.

The pandemic has also enabled the development of content for more platforms and helped transition participants into creating digital content. As data costs are high in many countries, the use of relatively low-data technologies such as WhatsApp and Telegram may serve to provide audiences with accurate information and reporting.

8. Recommendations

Introduction

There is a clear need for verified information in the pandemic to help stem the tides of misinformation, provide life-saving health advice, and to make the public aware of the experiences of others in these trying times. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic and the response thereto has left journalists alone and afraid, under chronic stress and sometimes with limited access to PPE. It has also narrowed opportunities for freedom of expression and challenged media freedom. These recommendations emerge for the research as areas of future focus.

These recommendations are laid out below and then integrated into a preliminary intervention framework before some further considerations.

Financial Support

Journalists and media workers would benefit from dedicated financial support to address losses of income from COVID-enforced layoffs and downsizing, as well as bridge delays in salary payments and the reimbursement of reporting costs. Coordination and delivery of such support, however, may be complex. In principle, to expedite support and guard against intentional or unintentional misuse, beneficiaries would be registered by themselves or through their outlets. In many countries, though, registration of media workers introduces risks to journalists' ability to do their jobs and may even compromise their physical safety. If financial support of journalists or media organisations is possible, it should be administered independently from government officials and private interests.

Chronically resource-strapped newsrooms and journalists cannot fulfil the role of media in society of educating, informing the public and holding the powerful to account. Therefore, financial support interventions should be focussed on (but not necessarily limited to) such items as temporary income relief and reimbursement of costs incurred, off importance in the latter is costs of airtime and mobile data.

Such financial resources would make reporting possible and also alleviate much of the additional psychological pressure that journalists have faced during the pandemic. Financial resources are critical to media continuing to fulfil their societal role, but also, insufficient resources pose an existential risk to the industry and profession as poor-quality media would likely lead to reduced audiences and the turning to alternative, probably less accurate sources of information.

Information and Data: Access and Distribution

Journalists interviewed reported common difficulties in (a) accessing verified COVID information and (b) distinguishing misinformation from verifiable facts quickly to prevent further disseminating and legitimising false stories. There are strong arguments for supportive interventions aimed at collating and providing access to current, accurate information, both at local, national, and possibly regional level. In many cases, this may not require the creation of new sources, but simply the aggregation and consolidation of trustworthy information and data through accessible channels.

Both active and passive strategies for information and data distribution should ideally be employed. Active strategies would use “push” channels such as WhatsApp and broadcast media, including community radio. These are ideal for reaching the public at large to provide trustworthy information and news. Passive strategies would make use of the “pull” channels of more traditional digital media such as websites and Facebook pages. On such platforms, interested parties such as journalists and civil society would visit to obtain information.

Given the wide uptake of mobile technologies for accessing information, passive strategies should be mobile focussed and be independently administered, for instance by existent, trusted civil society institutions, to ensure both confidence and use.

Both active and passive strategies would lead to enhanced community awareness and improved understanding among the public and the period of focussed efforts in this regard may be time delimited, initially.

When considering new interventions of this type, the opportunity exists for consolidation of effort. Priority should be given to media workers made redundant or in need. Doing so affords the opportunity to both create the intervention and channel supportive funding to individuals. Programme developers should therefore bear in mind the possibility of enlisting media workers in the desired interventions.

Media and Journalism support

In addition to ancillary support, such as financial aid and access to information, there are also opportunities for direct support to media workers in respect of their job performance. Such support is likely to be best directed through (a) specific training interventions, (b) provision of materials, and (c) enhanced distribution of currently available resources.

Specifically, given the challenges faced by journalists under COVID, training that is focussed on innovative reporting techniques (such as the use of WhatsApp, YouTube, and newer entrants such as TikTok) is indicated. In addition, media workers face new and complex difficulties interpreting either false data, or sparse data. There is, therefore, a strong argument for training interventions focussed on data and information interpretation, source assessment, and critical analysis.

There is also an extremely strong argument for accelerating and supporting the creation of independent media co-operatives. Such independent co-operatives are likely to be the fastest route to enabling media workers on the ground, enlist under-employed media workers, and provide aggregation points (“nodes”) through which funds, resources, and materials can confidently be channelled. Support for such should be through both direct funding and programmatic support, such the delivery of templates, procedures, standards, charters, and toolkits for co-operative establishment. Governmental and non-governmental national and regional awareness and information programmes, together with public and private media, and community development workers are markets for the content produced by such cooperatives. In this way, the cooperatives would function as news agencies. As such, once established, the cooperatives should be sustainable.

Naturally, the risk of co-option in service of a partisan agenda exists, and this should be borne in mind. However, despite the risk, direct and accelerated support for co-operative formation offers the fastest and most direct route to media workers on the ground, and has advantages that make it a strong intervention for the short-, and possibly long-term.

The research suggests practical training in:

- Innovative data collection and verification strategies to gain access to credible information while movement is limited both by pandemic precautions and fewer practitioners in newsrooms.
- The creative use of emerging channels to combat reduced access to verified content and capitalise on emerging channels as a distribution platform.
- Digital channel enrolment and familiarisation
- Internet usage and data assessment
- Tactics for filtering and responding to misinformation quickly
- Safety protocols for collection of audio-visual content and avoiding interception

It is also essential to distribute and create awareness of the Safety Guide for Journalists Covering Pandemics in Africa to promote journalists’ safety.

Enhanced COVID support and intervention

In addition to the measures already outlined, the basic PPE for journalists must be established and maintained. Journalists face the same pandemic risks as the general population, but their exposure is often higher due to the nature of their work.

Journalists have been widely recognised as frontline workers but have not been afforded the same protections as others at the forefront of the pandemic response. Where journalists are not formally recognised as frontline workers, it is imperative that they are, and that this status is maintained for the foreseeable future.

Existent government and non-government efforts to distribute basic PPE should be expanded to include journalists and media workers. As the pandemic continues, consistent supplies of PPE are essential. Distribution must be to both journalists in metropolises and in more remote areas.

All these recommendations are packaged into a suggested intervention framework below.

Additional stakeholder groups are:

- Public sector actors on national, provincial and local levels
- Individual journalists and journalist organisations
- Regulatory bodies
- The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (as a source and channel to information)
- Regional bodies, including the African Union
- Media organisations from public, private and community media.
- Private companies
- Existing psychological services
- Viable civil society structures
- Local, national, and regional initiatives already active

There is a need for consultation and collaboration among all stakeholders to launch, sustain and promote awareness around programmes to be implemented.

The spectrum of probable interventions necessitates a coordinated programme of work, encompassing a range of actors. Successful interventions require the coordination of actors, both at programme development level, and at public sector advocacy. For example, development of a comprehensive national or regional intervention framework requires extensive consultation with affected public sector actors, not only in terms of their support, but also to identify programmes and interventions already active which may be supportive or which can be aligned.

Conclusion

The COVID pandemic has introduced and accelerated challenges to the media, but it also presents an opportunity to raise awareness of the crucial societal role that the media plays, particularly with the increase in mis- and dis-information. A coordinated, holistic response to the financial and informational challenges, as well as the establishment of journalist co-operatives and continued PPE distribution offers a comprehensive response to the challenges identified in this research.



Image source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/17/who-official-urges-faster-supply-of-covid-vaccines-to-africa-as-cases-surge>



[environment-for-media-in-southern-africa-especially-print-journalism-teaser-researcher-newspapers-and-magazines-were-hard-hit-by-the-pandemic/6309660.html](https://www.environment-for-media-in-southern-africa-especially-print-journalism-teaser-researcher-newspapers-and-magazines-were-hard-hit-by-the-pandemic/6309660.html)

Suggested intervention framework

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
FINANCIAL					
Income support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chronic financial constraints on individual journalists Lack of financial resources to report 	Intervention to be criteria-driven and time-delimited based on pandemic conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbying and advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation Lobbying governments and inter-governmental agencies Regional alignment Joint programme development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefit distribution Joint programme development Criteria development Community awareness
Reimbursement of costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private sector difficulties paying freelancers and retrenchments Reimbursement of costs delayed Funding own PPE Subsidising work – transport, airtime and data, supplies 	Intervention to be criteria-driven and time-delimited based on pandemic conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbying and advocacy Criteria development Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation Lobbying and advocacy with governments and inter-governmental agencies Joint programme development Identification and coordination of civil society channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefit distribution Joint programme development Criteria development Community awareness
Data and airtime subsidies – to claimants or private sector providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High costs of data and airtime funded or co-funded by journalists 	Time-delimited based on pandemic conditions but developed in future to lowered data costs or ongoing subsidies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbying and advocacy Criteria development Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation Lobbying and advocacy Joint programme development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefit distribution Joint programme development Criteria development Community awareness Management of claimants

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
INFORMATION AND DATA					
Mobile-friendly and low-data aggregation portals for valid information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of access to data sources Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information 	Time-delimited based on pandemic conditions but with a view to future information needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbying and advocacy Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation Lobbying and advocacy Google and Facebook engagements Joint programme development Identification and coordination of civil society channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint programme development Criteria development Identification and development of standards and guardrails Portal administration Community awareness
Scheduled WhatsApp broadcasting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of access to verified information (journalists and the public) Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information 	Ongoing scheduled information bursts, ideally aligned to mobile-friendly portals, including low coverage demographics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbying and advocacy Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation Google and Facebook engagements Joint programme development Identification and coordination of civil society channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint programme development Identification and development of standards and guardrails Programme administration Community awareness Participant enrolment
TikTok enrolment and training programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under employment and growing economic pressures Lack of access to verified information (the public) 	<p>Short-term, criteria-based enrolment of media workers in TikTok, for purposes of reporting and content creation. Ideally aligned to training in digital media usage. (See section below).</p> <p>Probable dependency on content, curriculum, and training provider/s.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund mobilisation ByteDance³⁸ organizational engagement Joint programme development Identification and coordination of civil society channels Joint programme development Identification and development of standards and guardrails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint programme development Identification and development of standards and guardrails Community awareness Participant enrolment Training delivery and administration

38 Owners of TikTok. TikTok is included in the intervention framework as the short-video platform feeds content onto other social media. So, even if users do not use TikTok, they are exposed on, for example, Facebook and WhatsApp

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
INFORMATION AND DATA					
YouTube programme enrolment and training programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under employment and growing economic pressures • Lack of access to verified information (public) 	<p>Short-term, criteria-based enrolment of media workers in YouTube, for purposes of reporting and information creation. Ideally aligned to training in digital media usage. (See section below)</p> <p>Probable dependency on content, curriculum, and training provider/s.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Google engagement • Joint programme development • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Training delivery and administration
Facebook community portal/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to verified information (with a focus on journalists' need for verified sources of information) 	<p>Short to mid-term for the setup of information aggregation on Facebook community pages (local, national, regional tiering)</p> <p>Mobile-friendly and low-data usage protocols prioritised.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community awareness • Local and national stakeholder engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Facebook engagement • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
MEDIA AND JOURNALISM SUPPORT					
Media co-operatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Un- and under-employment and growing economic pressures • Limitation of information and growing media monoculture • Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information 	<p>Programmatic development of local, national, and possibly regional media co-operatives, targeting the use of pooled resources, materials, and funds.</p> <p>Media co-operatives should also target effective use of redundant or under-employed media workers, both in the establishment and in the operating phases.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Criteria development • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Lobbying and advocacy • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Programme delivery and administration
Training: information assessment/ fact-checking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitation of information and growing media monoculture • Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information • Lack of access to verified information (public) <p>Difficulties dealing with misinformation and producing credible reporting</p>	<p>Short-term and ongoing.</p> <p>Dedicated virtual and in-person training (as applicable) in distinguishing valid and invalid media communications, sources, and claims.</p> <p>Probable dependency on content, curriculum, and training provider/s.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Supplier/provider identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Training delivery and administration

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
MEDIA AND JOURNALISM SUPPORT					
Training: Data analysis (data journalism light)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitation of information and growing media monoculture • Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information • Lack of access to verified information (public) <p>Difficulties dealing with data and producing credible reporting</p>	<p>Dedicated virtual and in-person training (as applicable) in conducting basic data analysis and comparison.</p> <p>Probable dependency on content, curriculum, and training provider/s.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Supplier/provider identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Training delivery and administration
Training: Digital media as platform	<p>Difficulties accessing audiences with the decline of print circulation and high data costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under employment and growing economic pressures • Limitation of information and growing media monoculture • Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information 	<p>Dedicated virtual and in-person training (as applicable) in utilisation of digital media channels for reporting. Training to be aligned to mobile-friendly platforms with the goal of including low-coverage demographics.</p> <p>Probable dependency on content, curriculum, and training provider/s.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Supplier/provider identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Training delivery and administration
Training: Innovative information gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitation of information and growing media monoculture • Prevalence of partial or agenda-driven information • Lack of access to traditional sources and sites for reporting 	<p>Dedicated virtual and in-person training (as applicable) in innovative data collection and verification strategies to gain access to credible information while movement is limited both by pandemic precautions and fewer practitioners in newsrooms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy • Community awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Identification and coordination of civil society channels • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Supplier/provider identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Training delivery and administration

Intervention	Related objective or issue	Period of intervention and further details	TAEF	UNESCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
GENERAL COVID SUPPORT					
Prioritisation of media workers as “front-line” actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under employment and growing economic pressures • Increase in journalists’ risk profiles • Reimbursement of costs delayed • Funding own PPE Lack of access to free PPE	Ongoing Development of “front-line” criteria for media workers, and active engagement with local and national public sector authorities and non-government actors for inclusion. Programmes such as these would allow media worker prioritisation for PPE, media briefings, public sector support services, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund mobilisation • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint programme development • Identification and development of standards and guardrails • Community awareness • Participant enrolment • Programme delivery and administration

Caveats and notes:

The intervention framework provided is suggested and should not be understood to be definitive. Definitive and programmatic frameworks will still need to be developed, and actors, roles, and targets may change. However, it is useful to understand the likely dynamics and inter-relationships.

The framework focusses on three broad role players, however in order to ensure that the correct actors are included in implementation, stakeholders on various levels will need to be mapped.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK



1. Appendix I: Interview schedule

ADJUST THIS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE ACCORDING TO THE FLOW OF THE INTERVIEW AND THE MEDIUM OF THE INTERVIEW (PHONE, VOICE RECORDING OR EMAIL). PHONE/ONLINE IS PREFERRED.

The African Editors Forum (TAEF) together with fraycollege is conducting qualitative research about the various impacts of COVID-19 on journalists and journalism.

Are you available to answer some questions and contribute to the findings? Some of the questions may be a little sensitive and you may feel some discomfort. You can choose to be named or not.

You have the option of sending a voice recording or email with your answers, but I would appreciate it if you can answer now or if I can make a more convenient time to call.

We will be recording and transcribing the interviews to do thematic analysis on them.

May I proceed? By proceeding you acknowledge that I, fraycollege and the African Editors Forum may receive information about you that will be kept for the purposes of this research and the organisations may contact you in future.

1. Describe your job
2. Has your job changed since the beginning of the COVID pandemic? How? In any other ways? (Try extract at least three answers, not only working place changes)
3. Has the work of others in your organisation changed similarly? Why? Why not?
4. Please share about the difficulties that you have personally experienced in COVID.
5. Do you feel there were adequate institutional responses from your employer/ contracting organisation/ journalism and editors associations in your country?
6. Do you feel like you have suffered emotional harm since the start of the pandemic?
7. Has psychological or social support been available to you? Please explain.
8. Do you feel like you have experienced more threats to your safety since the start of the pandemic? Please describe incidents. (Clarify online threats too)
9. Has your personal safety been impacted by COVID? How?
10. Has your job security been impacted by COVID? How?
11. Do you feel that there have been any economic support structures in place for you?
12. Do you feel that there have been any economic support structures in place for your employer? (If relevant)
13. Has media freedom been influenced by COVID? How? (Look for national, regional, institutional and organisational impacts)
14. Do you feel that challenges you have mentioned (list notable ones, if necessary) have been directly because of the pandemic or as a result of responses to the pandemic? Explain.
15. How has misinformation impacted media practices in your own and other organisations? Explain.
16. How has misinformation during the pandemic impacted the public's response? Explain.
17. Are you willing to be named in the research report?

2. Appendix II: Interviewees

COUNTRY	POSITION	SEX
Algeria	Editor In Chief	Male
Algeria	Journalist	Male
Algeria	Journalist	Female
Algeria	Journalist	Female
Algeria	Journalist	Female
Cameroon	Subeditor	Male
Cameroon	Producer/Journalist	Female
Cameroon	Journalist	Male
Cameroon	Journalist	Male
Cameroon	Journalist	Male
Central Africa Republic	Journalist	Male
Central Africa Republic	Producer	Female
Central Africa Republic	Journalist	Male
Democratic Republic of Congo	Journalist	Female
Democratic Republic of Congo	Journalist	Male
Democratic Republic of Congo	Journalist	Female
Democratic Republic of Congo	Programme Manager	Male
Democratic Republic of Congo	Journalist	Male
Egypt	Editor	Female
Egypt	Editor In Chief	Male
Egypt	Journalist	Female
Egypt	Journalist	Male
Egypt	Journalist	Male
Ghana	Journalist	Male
Ghana	Journalist	Female
Ghana	Reporter	Female
Ghana	Reporter	Male
Ghana	Reporter	Male
Ghana	Reporter	Male
Kenya	Editor	Female
Kenya	Reporter/Editor	Male
Kenya	News Editor	Female
Kenya	Producer	Female
Kenya	Producer	Female
Malawi	Journalist	Male
Malawi	Editor	Female
Malawi	Producer	Male
Malawi	Journalist	Female
Malawi	Correspondent	Male
Namibia	Journalist	Male
Namibia	Editor In Chief	Male
Namibia	Associate Editor	Male
Namibia	Editor	Male
Namibia	Presenter	Female
Nigeria	Editor	Male

Nigeria	Editor	Female
Nigeria	Editor	Female
Nigeria	Reporter	Female
Nigeria	Publisher	Female
Nigeria	Editor	Male
Senegal	Editor In Chief	Male
Senegal	Radio Broadcaster	Male
South Africa	Journalist	Female
South Africa	Editor	Male
South Africa	Digital Journalist	Male
South Africa	Journalist	Female
South Africa	Journalist	Female
Tunisia	Journalist	Female
Tunisia	Journalist	Female
Uganda	Journalist	Male
Uganda	Reporter	Male
Uganda	Deputy News Editor	Male
Uganda	Producer	Male
Uganda	Journalist	Male
Zambia	Editor Radio/Tv	Male
Zambia	Media Owner/Journalist	Male
Zambia	Journalist	female
Zimbabwe	Journalist	Female
Zimbabwe	Journalist/Researcher	Male
Zimbabwe	Journalist	Female
Zimbabwe	Journalist	Female
Zimbabwe	Journalist	Male

3. Appendix III: Country case studies



ALGERIA



Journalists deal with misinformation and risks of infection

By Azzeddine Bensouiah

The media industry and media freedom

Algeria has a strong mix of French and Arabic radio, television, print and online media outlets although the government exercises broad control. Indeed, until 2014 [says the BBC](#), a state monopoly forced private satellite television stations to operate from outside Algeria.M

There are currently more than one hundred print dailies in Arabic and French and additional 150 accredited electronic sites, with many more that are not accredited. There are about 20 television stations. The state has television, radio and newspaper outlets, but the private sector is predominant in terms of numbers, despite financial and administrative difficulties.

According to [BBC Media Action](#), just over half (52%) of Algerians say they use the internet and just under half (47%) say they use social media. Internet access is high among the youth with up to 80% usage among those aged 16-24.

Algeria ranks 146 out of 180 countries on [Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index](#) - a rating the report ascribes to a “media crushed by draconian laws”. RSF says threats to press freedom have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as authorities clamped down with “draconian and vaguely-worded laws”. Online media have been blocked and there has been harassment of journalists and media outlets.

COVID-19 pandemic and response

The Algerian Ministry of Health [reported](#) its first COVID-19 case as early as February 25, 2020. Like many countries it was not prepared to face a pandemic this serious. As the number of cases multiplied and the number of deaths increased, panic spread and calls, via media and social networks, multiplied to get the government to impose restrictions, starting with closing the borders in the wake of the first cases coming from France.

On March 23, 2020, the government [announced a full lockdown and curfew](#) in Blida and Algiers which had the highest rate of contamination. By January 2022, Algeria had reported 220,825 infections and 6,318 coronavirus-related deaths. [Reuters reports](#) that the country had administered at least 12,545,356 doses of COVID vaccines at that time – estimated to cover (with two doses) about 14.6% of the country’s population.

Many believe that the government’s management of the pandemic has enabled the country to avoid the worst, in comparison with its neighbours but the restrictions have had serious economic consequences. The [World Bank notes](#) that “the dual shock posed by stringent non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe fall in hydrocarbon revenues” added to Algeria’s economic woes with an expected fragile recovery.

Impact on Journalists

The press, in this environment of fear and uncertainty, has suffered from the effects of the pandemic and its handling by the government. Deprived of free movement, confined in cities and forced to resort to teleworking to continue to survive, the Algerian press had to face a danger of a new kind: social networks and the multiple electronic sites mushrooming overnight.

Misinformation and disinformation proliferated while people flocked to social media as print circulation continued to decline.

“As the public was scared, even paralyzed, they believed everything they read, which encouraged the spread of fake news,” said Aziz Bouyakoub, an editor-in-chief in a national press agency.

“Since the appearance of COVID and the health restrictions, we have spent our time checking information relayed by social networks and questionable news sites. Not a day goes by without false information being relayed by several sites and making the buzz on social networks, before being denied, and sometimes, forgotten, without ever knowing the true from the false,” said journalist Azzeddine Bensouiah.

However, it is the journalists and those in charge of these “traditional” media who are brought before the courts, sometimes imprisoned for their writing.

One journalist, who asked not to be named, said his way of working changed immediately.

“I had to resort, because of sanitary confinement, to other means of operating, including the telephone and email on which I relied heavily. I kept my movements to a minimum in certain places, except by necessity,” he said.

The toll was high: “The government was overwhelmed by the scale of the pandemic, at its onset, and even with the emergence of the Delta variant. The journalists’ unions could not help it,” said Bensouiah who added the head of a journalists’ union died during the pandemic.

“About thirty journalists, including media bosses, have succumbed to COVID. Journalists could not claim any special or privileged status during this pandemic. They suffered from it like all the people,” he added.

Another journalist interviewed by fraycollege researcher, Azzeddine Bensouiah, who asked not to be named, said she feared contracting the virus, which had happened to her before: “I was infected with COVID-19 during my reporting.” She said that received full support from her colleagues, managers and the media agency.

“Everyone was worried about me, especially when I got the virus.”

Noting the precarious life of journalists, respondents said the hardship – with lack of social coverage – exacerbated the situation. One example is the Bechar region, in southwest Algeria, [where local correspondents find it very difficult to carry out their work](#), without having social security coverage or a substantial salary from their employers.

Isolation, bearing the costs of protective gear and COVID tests as well as the inability to take off sick leave as a freelancer meant many journalists were at increased risk.

Conclusion

All in all, the pandemic and the responses provided by the government ended up further weakening the Algerian press, which had struggled, long before that, to survive economically.



Lack of information and safety concerns impede journalists

By Melini Moses

Media industry and media freedom

Located along the Atlantic Ocean, Cameroon shares its borders with the Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Nigeria.

Cameroon has two official languages, English and French. However, according to the [World Atlas](#), the country is home to over 1738 different linguistic groups. The majority of regions are populated mainly by French-speakers (eight out of ten), with the remaining two regions, representing 17% of Cameroon's population, speaking English. Linguistic differences are a cause of [conflict in the country](#).

According to the [BBC](#), Cameroon has a lively media industry. CRTV, run by the state, operates national television and radio networks as well as provincial radio stations. There are also many private radio and television stations in the country, and hundreds of press titles. However, Press freedom is restricted, according to [Freedom House](#), and non-governmental organisations are also affected. It says protections are poorly upheld and journalists who are critical face pressure, along with the risk of detention or arrest in connection with their work. Defamation is a criminal offence in Cameroon, and [Freedom House](#) says even the media regulatory body, the National Communications Council, has in the past harassed journalists.

On June 5, 2020, journalist Samuel Wazizi died in state custody. [Aljazeera](#) reported that he had been arrested in August 2019 for criticising the government's handling of a separatist revolt.

"This TV presenter's death while held incommunicado in a completely illegal manner by the military is the worst crime against a journalist in the past ten years in Cameroon," said Arnaud Froger, the head of [Reporters Without Borders](#) Africa desk.

Cameroon ranked 135 out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. [Reporters Without Borders](#) says press freedom is declining in Cameroon and it is now one of Africa's most dangerous countries for journalists. It says reporters have been detained arbitrarily and prosecuted, including by military tribunals or special courts.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response

Cameroon reported its first case of COVID-19 on March 6, 2020. [The Cameroonian government](#) put in place various measures, including a closure of the country's land, air, and sea borders. It closed schools and prohibited gatherings of more than 50 people.

However, according to [The Lancet](#), by April 25th 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases still increased exponentially to 1569 with 53 deaths reported. It says these figures were believed to be an underestimation, and realistic projections suggest that there were approximately 14 000 cases of COVID-19 in the country at the time.

According to [Reuters](#), in January 2022, there had been over 100,000 infections and almost 2000 COVID-19-related deaths officially reported in the country since the start of the pandemic. At that time, Cameroon had administered just over one million doses of COVID-19 vaccines. Assuming each person needed and received two doses, that would mean around 2% of the country's population may be fully vaccinated.

The pandemic had a serious financial impact on Cameroon. According to the [World Bank](#), in 2020, there was a significant deterioration in economic activity in the country. Households and businesses lost income which led to a drop in consumption. Public and private investments were also badly affected. The [World Bank](#) estimates that the economic crises due to the pandemic increased the extreme poverty rate in the country from 24.5% in 2019 to 25.3% in 2021.

COVID-19 impact on journalists

As the coronavirus swept through the country, media houses had to quickly rethink their operations. Like in many other parts of the globe, there was a huge shift to remote working, with interviews being conducted on the telephone or with the use of technology. Journalists had to shoulder the emotional and economic impact of the pandemic, impacting their families, while continuing to report on the virus.

Chief Bisong Etahoben says as a freelance journalist, COVID-19 impacted him financially, as he had to accept a 30% drop in pay. At one stage he tested positive for COVID-19 and quarantined for two weeks. He continued writing during this time, away from his usual work environment.

He says no psychological, economic, or social support has been made available to him. Etahoben says the freedom to express himself was not affected during the pandemic. *“I have not experienced any change in my liberty to do, say and write what I want to,”* he said.

Etahoben has however expressed concern over the impact that fake news and misinformation has had on journalists in Cameroon. *“To the extent that more time is dedicated to fact-checking I can say misinformation has had some impact in my media house,”* he said.

***“This has led to many people being reticent towards getting vaccinated against the virus and has led to deaths in some cases,”* he said.**

Gisèle Onguene, Sub-Editor at another media house, says she had to adapt to changing work conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. She says she works from home most of the time, making it difficult to communicate with reporters in the same newsroom.

***“This has taken away that day-to-day contact with reporters to enable verification of facts on the story. This becomes worse when the reporter cannot be contacted on the phone. As a result, the sub-editor will either remove a point or add information that might not necessarily be factual,”* she said.**

She says the constant fear of contracting the coronavirus also had an impact on the newsroom.

***“COVID brought anxiety in the newsroom especially at the beginning of the pandemic when a colleague you were mingling with freely has suddenly been diagnosed with COVID and has to go into quarantine. As a possible contact you also must undergo tests and quarantine,”* said Onguene.**

She added that her employers did their best to adhere to government protocols, including ensuring that hand sanitiser was available to workers and visitors to the premises.

Onguene says she lost many friends and relatives to the pandemic. Her media house and staff were also financially affected.

***“Because many companies had closed down, the newspaper experienced a decline in business and some people were asked to take voluntary or early retirement,”* she said.**

She echoed the concerns of many journalists about fake news and misinformation saying, “our readers and advertisers do not know which source to trust for news anymore. People were suspicious of pandemic data from government and started circulating their own information. This was undermining the government’s efforts at containing the spread of the pandemic.”

Aboubakar Sidick Mouchili, head of the Information and Magazines department at [Cameroon Radio Television News](#), has also worked as a Reporter at CRTV since 2019. He says COVID-19 has changed behaviour in the workplace and has had a considerable impact on both performance and productivity.

***“The conferences are very often done by Zoom but are only 45% effective. Not everyone has a good quality Android phone, the connection is never stable. There is a lack of spontaneity for emergencies in the field. Those we rely on for resources are sometimes reluctant to assist for fear of contamination. Several colleagues contracted the disease and this creates an over-exploitation of colleagues who stay on the job,”* says Mouchili.**

He says travelling to the office also meant extra precautions had to be taken. “In the street and at home, new reflexes were born. I always change before kissing the children. The shoes stay very far from the door,” he said.

Mouchili says his employer has taken government COVID-19 protocols seriously. “We have had the provision of COVID tests and free care in the event of illness, taps, potable water and hydro alcoholic gels. The number of people allowed onto elevators at any given time has been reduced, and during meetings, social distancing is required. The major problem has been the slow supply of sufficient sanitisers,” he said.

Mouchili believes misinformation during the pandemic had a significant impact on the public's response to the pandemic. "In my opinion, the disinformation has just pushed the population to be afraid and to resort to traditional medicines from the village.

COVID-19 impact on media freedom

Media Freedom in Cameroon has long been under threat. In 2019, the [African Freedom of Expression Exchange](#) called on the Cameroonian government to put measures in place to end the ongoing attacks on Press Freedom. It noted that access to information considerably deteriorated between 2017 and 2019, with an increased crackdown on journalists working in Cameroon. It attributed this mainly to the socio-political and security crisis experienced by the country. In the [Report](#), the state was identified as the key perpetrators of freedom of expression violations. Several journalists were arrested, physically assaulted, or had their equipment destroyed.

The Media Freedom Coalition Diplomatic Network met in Cameroon in September 2021. The [UK Government](#) quoted the Canadian High Commissioner to Cameroon, Richard Bale, as saying,

"It is critical in all countries to support the freedom and independence of journalists - whether they be working in print, audio-visual or increasingly through social media – to inform, enquire, report accurately and hold to account decision-makers in both the public and private sectors. This is an essential strand in the complex fibre of democracy, and the 47 member countries of the Media Freedom Coalition – including those from Africa – have committed to work to these ends."

According to the [statement](#), the coalition has 47 members, including Botswana, Ghana, Seychelles and Sudan, from the African continent.

An article by Cameroonian journalist Joyce Mbong, published by the [Wits Journalism Africa China Reporting Project](#), referred to government communication as "murky," and said the Cameroonian government had failed to adequately account for millions of dollars donated for COVID-19 related aid.

"Unfortunately, in Cameroon the media remains polarized, and a deep dichotomy exists between state owned and private media entities, including access to resources to report in the crisis. After the country reported its first cases in March 2020, government communication was limited to daily press conferences to announce the number of new cases and measures taken to curb the spread," Mbong said.

"The state broadcaster, Cameroon Radio Television and the state run [Cameroon Tribune](#) followed in this trend by only announcing daily cases of new infections in the country's two official languages. A few messages on prevention measures were also broadcast in English and French over private TV Stations, but community outlets remained completely excluded", added Mbong

She said that due to a lack of resources, private media organisations progressively abandoned active and participatory reporting on the crisis.

[Reporters Without Borders](#) said that twenty newspaper owners organised a "day without the press" on May 4, 2020, to garner attention to the situation. Most of their demands focussed on the media sector's economic fragility, worsened by the public health crisis, as well as the absence of official support.

"With this public health crisis, the sustainability of media organizations becomes not only a major factor in the future of public debate and democratic societies but an indispensable condition for guaranteeing the right to information," said Assane Diagne, director of [Reporters Without Borders](#) West Africa office. "

In December 2020, an article was published by the [East African](#) titled, "In Cameroon, journalists can't breathe as laws stifle press freedom." In it, Jude Vibian, the national president of the Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists is quoted as saying he receives complaints daily from members about harassment, threats, and intimidation by people with political power.

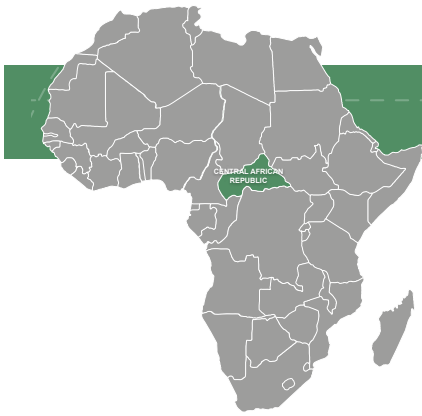
Yerima Kini Nsom, the Yaoundé bureau chief of *The Post* newspaper, told the [East African](#) that the criminalisation of media offences has affected the quality of journalism in Cameroon, forcing many journalists to exercise self-censorship. He has also raised the issue of a lack of access to official sources of information and says Cameroon lacks a Freedom of Information Act which would compel official sources to disclose public information. Nsom says this leads to reporters relying on secondary sources for information, which may not always be trustworthy.

"We have had situations in this country where when a journalist goes to a minister who is handling an issue that the public needs to know, the minister says he needs clearance from the prime minister, and then the Prime Minister's Office will say it needs clearance from the presidency. So, the story dies, if you don't rely on secondary sources," he said.

This situation outlined above is likely to have had a direct impact on news reports around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Cameroon has a chequered history in terms of press freedom, and while the COVID-19 pandemic may not have worsened the situation, it has certainly highlighted the glaring problems that exist. Of serious concern is the barriers involved in getting access to information from government – information which should be in the public domain. The restricted access to government sources and resources, including proper financial statements, poses a huge threat to media freedom and infringes on the public's right to know. Without information from credible NGO's and other organisations within Cameroon, it is therefore difficult to gauge the true impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the nation.



Central African Republic



Media faces competition from social media

By Douce Namwezi

Media industry and media freedom

In the Central African Republic (CAR), the media includes printed media, public and private television channels and a range of radio stations including a public radio, private humanitarian, community, religious and international radio stations. There is growing access to the Internet.

The Central African Republic [occupies the 126th position](#) in terms of press freedom out of 180 countries in the Reporters without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index for 2021. The RSF noted that “journalists are still in danger from the various warring factions and attacks on the media continue, including a radio station ransacked in April 2020”. The report highlights hostility towards journalists with journalists threatened during the 2020 presidential election.

“Disinformation campaigns, especially online ones, are increasing in scale and it is not unusual for responsible journalists and bloggers to be the targets of hate messages, defamation and attacks on social media,” said the report.

COVID-19 pandemic and response

The Central African Republic recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 14, 2020. A landlocked country, the health impact was low but the [African Development Bank reported](#) a strain on its economy due to measures taken to contain the outbreak.

The Central African government [launched the COVID-19 vaccination campaign](#) on May 20, 2021, with the support of partners, including WHO, UNICEF and GAVI. The campaign began with the symbolic vaccination of government officials and health workers. The first batch of doses initially covered frontline health workers and vulnerable people aged 50 and over, and then extended to religious leaders, community relays, traders, people in the transport industry, and journalists.

By January 2022, the Central African Republic [had reported](#) 12,454 infections and 101 coronavirus-related deaths since the pandemic began. About 10% of the population was vaccinated with over 850 000 doses administered.

Impact on Journalists

Social distancing meant journalistic work was limited as reporting needed to be done virtually. Editor Brice Ledoux Saramalet explained:

“We do not have access to some sources of information because the services were limited. Often, in normal times, we carry out missions in the cities of the provinces but the arrival of this pandemic, press trips are also limited.”

“With the COVID-19 pandemic I will say that a lot has changed,” said journalist Rolf Steve Doumia Leu, noting that whereas the full team usually met for morning editorial meetings, half of the team worked online from home while the rest worked at the office within COVID-19 protocols such as temperature checks, hand washing and the use of masks.

The psychological impact was high: “I felt threatened in terms of health because I am exposed by being all the time in the field, since I meet people who do not often observe barrier measures such as wearing a mask and social distancing,” said Saramalet.

“COVID-19 has created stress in our daily lives because even some of our colleagues did not believe in the disease,” said journalist Merveille Mada.

For some CAR journalists, media freedom was influenced because the government had journalists sign a charter as part of the handling of information on COVID-19. This charter obliges journalists not to carry out certain investigations into certain facts related to the pandemic and authorises healthcare staff not to disclose everything to journalists in terms of monitoring and evaluation of the fight against this pandemic.

Several organizations scrambled to support the media. For example, the Fondation Hirondelle supported the Ndeke Luka radio station by sending psychological support to journalists.

Journalists also competed with social media.

“With the birth of social media, it’s a bit difficult to give listeners real-time information because they get a lot of information that mainstream media doesn’t broadcast,” said Mada. “Communication with the population was difficult because they did not accept that the disease was real, but as a journalist you have to raise awareness to avoid the exponential rise in cases.”

Conclusion

The dramatic changes noted by reporters was overshadowed by the challenges wrought by disinformation and misinformation. While donor-funded media organisations were able to provide psychological as well as training support for journalists, more needs to be done.

Democratic Republic of Congo



Access to information

By Douce Namwezi

Media industry and media freedom

Radio remains the most consumed media in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with more than 316 radio stations. This platform attracts 62% of media audiences according to 2021 [research](#). There are more than 100 television channels and around 100 newspapers.

Radio retains its top position due to the lack of electricity in certain parts of the country which limits access to television. Just less than half of the population – about 44% - access television. The internet comes in third position with 35% of media audiences and continues to make progress as more and more people get access. Cable channels occupy fourth position with 17%. Print media has only 6% of the audience.

According to the 2021 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Democratic Republic of the Congo is in 149th place out of 180 countries in the [ranking](#). The RSF notes that “violence against journalists spread with complete impunity”.

The organisation notes that freedom to inform was also curtailed online by frequent Internet cuts or by blocking access to social media and journalists continues to be arrested, attacked and murdered.

“No fewer than 115 press freedom violations were logged in 2020 by Journalists in Danger (JED), RSF’s partner organisation in the DRC,” the report notes.

These limitations meant media professionals did not have access to reliable to information about the pandemic or the ability to communicate to audiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response

The COVID-19 pandemic was officially recognised in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in March 2020 after the first case was detected on March 10. The country took immediate measures such as compulsory mask wearing, hand washing and physical distancing. The measures were sustained through 2020 and early 2021.

In June 2021, the third COVID-19 wave was marked by overcrowded hospitals and successive peaks of new cases. The country introduced new restrictions including the closure of bars, terraces, discotheques, and nightclubs. However, a full lockdown was not imposed, and restaurants were allowed to operate at 50% capacity until 9pm each evening. These capacity restrictions were also imposed on places of worship, public administration and private companies. Teleworking, where possible, was encouraged.

Funeral vigils in funeral homes or at home are also prohibited. The remains were to be taken directly from the morgue to the place of burial with only a small group of mourners allowed. In public transport, only 50% of the carrying capacity was to be tolerated. Motorcycle taxis were limited to one passenger, among other restrictions.

Many people remained sceptical about the existence of the infection, however, despite the rising numbers. [By April 2021](#), the country began importing Astra Zeneca as part of its strategy to vaccinate the population.

By January 2022, the DRC had [reported](#) 80,175 infections and 1,225 coronavirus-related deaths reported in the country since the pandemic began. Vaccination remains very low with less than 0,2% of the population fully vaccinated and only 333,589 vaccine doses administered by this time. Communication Minister, Patrick Muyaya, announced the easing of measures against COVID-19 in the DRC in August 2021.

Impact on Journalists

Restrictions on gatherings and limited access meant that media professionals did not have access to reliable information about the pandemic.

Journalist Ronely Ntibonera said the pandemic directly impacted on the way they worked. “It was more difficult for us,” she noted

Journalist Djiress Baloki said the shift online meant a lack of access to the internet could impact on coverage: “To do the editorial conference, you had to do it online and the day when there is no internet connection, you do not participate in the council.” Resource challenges – including lack of access to solar power – also curtailed coverage.

In addition, journalists faced a number of mental health challenges with the strain of the constant possible exposure to COVID-19.

“The pandemic has created enormous psychological difficulties because when you see your loved ones die, it is not easy to live with and bear. We have not had psychological support and we have to live with it,” said Ntibonera.

Journalists faced difficulties during this period as access to statistics of new cases were not revealed in a timely manner. Sometimes there was a confusion among the heads of authorities who contradicted each other when it came to explaining the course of the disease and giving the results of new cases. One such case was in the province of South Kivu where the provincial governor did not agree with the case statistics given by the National Institute of Biomedical Research (INRB).

“Accessing the sources of information was not easy. We could even go a week without knowing the epidemiological situation in town,” Bakoli noted.

Programme manager Patrick Kahondwa noted that the lack of access to sources was a major challenge: In normal time we were used to doing face-to-face reports but with COVID-19 we are forced to do some interviews over the phone. At the same time, we lacked resource people because, quite simply, the way of working was remote.” Many sources, he noted did not want to receive journalists for fear of being infected.

A number noted pressured on the way they reported on COVID-19 “we were all forced to say the same thing and not say bad things about COVID.

Misinformation and disinformation proved to be major challenges.

“When the traditional media are looking for true and reliable information, some Internet users have already posted false stuff on social networks and it has caught the attention of the public,” said reporter Joelle Bufole.

Several international organizations have scrambled to support the work of the media in the search for clear and verified information and to update the population on current events in order to prevent the spread of this virus.

Conclusion

Access to credible information is essential for journalists to write verified stories for their audiences. However, DRC journalists also lacked support for the work they were doing with limited resources and not psychological support during the pandemic.



COVID-19 government response bad for media freedom and the public's trust in the media

By Melini Moses

Media industry and media freedom

Egypt, a country located in the north-eastern corner of Africa, is the site of one of the world's earliest urban and literate societies. According to [Britannica](#), 42.8% of the country's population, of 101,993,000 people, live in urban areas while 57.2% are in predominantly rural areas.

Egypt's media landscape has witnessed many changes and challenges over the past decade. However, it remains among the most influential in Africa.

[Media Landscapes](#) says the newspaper industry has taken a knock in recent years, with the number of titles dropping drastically due to high expenses. Television is the most popular medium, which reaches almost all Egyptians, while digital media has witnessed remarkable growth in recent times. This may be attributed to the country's large youth population.

[Media Landscapes](#) says, despite a robust press industry, there are limited critical voices in the mainstream media sector. The state runs many television and radio stations, websites, magazines, and newspapers. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press, there are laws that get in the way of these freedoms. In addition, the country is yet to put in place a law around access to Information, despite widespread calls for such.

Egypt is ranked very low in terms of media freedom (166 of 180 in the 2021) [World Press Freedom Index](#). But, even with this low base, according to [Reporters Without Borders](#), concerns around press freedom are growing, with the country now one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists. It says many reporters spend years in detention without being charged or tried, while others are sentenced to long jail terms or life imprisonment.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response in Egypt

Egypt recorded its [first COVID-19 case](#) on the 14th of February, 2020. At the time, health authorities expressed confidence that the country was fully capable of handling the situation.

According to latest statistics from the [World Health Organisation](#), Egypt has recorded more than 388 000 cases of COVID-19 to date, with close to 22 000 deaths. More than 57 000 vaccine doses have been administered. According to [Reuters](#), assuming every person needs two doses, Egypt would have vaccinated about 26.3 percent of the country's population.

Egypt did not put in place a hard lockdown. However, [Frontiers in Public Health](#) says the country implemented several measures to slow down and control the spread of Coronavirus. In March 2020, all international flights were suspended. Schools, universities and areas where the public could gather, were closed. Tourism was halted and a curfew enforced until the end of March 2020. Campaigns to create awareness about the coronavirus and safety protocols were launched in the media, and a hotline was set up to provide medical advice.

COVID-19 impact on journalists in Egypt

No one has been immune to the pandemic, least of all journalists. They have had to continue reporting on news and events, often putting their lives at risk. Many journalists contracted the virus, or experienced heightened anxiety about testing positive. Egyptian journalist Hajar Reda said she had a hysterical fear of being on the street, and even stopped working for a bit as she was afraid of mingling with people. She said there was little social or psychological support available to her. Reda has contracted COVID-19 twice since the start of the global pandemic.

Nadia Abdelbari, a journalist for an Egyptian national daily says the entire work environment changed. “I lost the notion of working in a regular editorial space with direct contact with my other colleagues and editors. All of this has been replaced by Zoom meetings,” she says. While contact was limited at the office, she still had to use public transport to reach newsmakers, a situation that added to her worry. “I felt anxious all the time, given the ever-increasing number of cases of contamination and death.” Abdelbari says she sometimes consulted with psychologists to help overcome her stress.

Editor Mohamed Zaki says fear of contracting the virus affected professional performance in the newsroom. “The danger is in dealing with others, especially since there are people who do not believe in health prevention and precautionary measures,” he said.

Most of those interviewed do not believe that COVID had an impact on their job security. They say the work continued, with the increased use of technology to secure interviews. Physical contact with newsmakers has been limited as far as possible.

COVID-19 impact on media freedom

[The International Freedom of Expression Exchange](#), or ifex, is a global network of independent non-governmental organisations that work at local, national and regional level to defend and promote freedom of expression as a human right. It believes freedom of expression took a downward turn during the pandemic. Ifex says the first quarter of 2020 witnessed varied Freedom of Expression violations by different state institutions.

[The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression](#) has described several violations against journalists in the first three months of 2020, some of which are related to restrictions on press coverage of COVID-19 developments in Egypt. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

In one of the cases cited, journalist Basma Mostafa was arrested and interrogated for three hours. She was apprehended while taking pictures of a crowd of people waiting to test for COVID-19. The security threatened to charge her with impersonating a journalist, and filming without a permit, because she did not have a Journalists’ Syndicate ID card. Mostafa said they interrogated her for another half an hour about her work, and eventually let her go but not before telling her that Egypt was corona free, and that journalists were behind such rumours.

On the 26th of March, 2020, [the Guardian](#) published an article saying that Egyptian authorities forced Guardian journalist, Ruth Michaelson, to leave the country after she reported on a scientific study which said that Egypt was likely to have many more coronavirus cases than had officially been confirmed.

Michaelson had cited a study which was accepted for publication in the [Lancet Infectious Diseases Journal](#), which had estimated that Egypt could have had 19 310 coronavirus cases by early March 2020, with the lower end of the range about 6 000 cases. The Egyptian government’s official count at the time was that three people were infected.

[The Guardian](#) said that Michaelson, who has lived in, and reported from, Egypt since 2014, was advised by western diplomats that members of the country’s security services wanted her to leave, and that her press accreditation was revoked. She left Egypt on a flight to Germany in March 2020. According to the Guardian, her departure left the north African country with no full-time British newspaper correspondents.

The COVID-19 pandemic also appears to have eroded public trust in the media. Some journalists say there was no transparency in the disclosure of information relating to COVID-19, which led to a distrust of the press. “The public does not trust the information published on COVID-19,” said Journalist Samy Ayoub.

Journalist Nadia Abdelbari echoed these sentiments. “At the beginning, there was not enough information, especially on the issue of vaccine availability and their effectiveness. Conflicting information on vaccines has led a large part of the population to flee this solution,” she said.

Editor Mohamed Zaki says COVID-19 led to a blurring of lines. “There was a loss of the link between the journalist and the source, and the idea of a safe carrier struck the profession in death. It reduced the recipient’s confidence in the transmission medium and made him refrain from dealing with it in one way or another, which is reflected in the financial return that the medium receives and explains the closure of many media outlets in the recent period,” said Zaki.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened an already strained relationship between the Egyptian government and the media. A lack of transparency and access to information appears to be the central problem. Historically, the Egyptian government is known to control information flow to the public, and has in the past conducted raids, arrested journalists and revoked work permits. While in theory, the Egyptian constitution guarantees free speech and press freedom, there is an urgent need for this to be put into practice.



Challenges to media sustainability and journalists' risks of infection

By Francis Kokutse

The media industry and media freedom

Ghana's [ranking](#) in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) remained unchanged at 30 out of 180 countries during the pandemic. This makes it the second. The small -0.93 drop in its score to 22.26 was attributed to a lack of comprehensive protection for journalists.

The Index notes that while Ghana continues to be seen as one of the most democratic countries in Africa and Chapter 12 of its 1992 constitution guarantees media pluralism and independence, a third of the media are owned by the state or by businessmen linked to the government.

The [Media Ownership Monitor](#) found a lack of transparency and limited access to ownership information prevail in the media industry in Ghana. It noted that conflicts of interest between media owners and politics, and a weak regulatory system pose a threat to freedom of expression in the country.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Ghana's media landscape is vibrant and diverse with print, radio, television and online publications.

The [RSF](#) has, however, noted increasing threats against the media: "Nonetheless, journalists covering the effectiveness of the government's measures against COVID-19 were attacked by police again in 2020. Politicians have also made death threats against investigative reporters. A law on access to state-held information was finally adopted, 20 years after it was first introduced in parliament."

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) report "[Media and COVID-19 in West Africa: Ghana](#)" notes the critical role played by journalists: "The outbreak of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease) pandemic has affected all aspects of life across the world, and the media is no exception. The daunting financial, logistical and operational challenges notwithstanding, the media in Ghana and across West Africa generally, have demonstrated remarkable capacity to adapt and continue to play their vital role of informing, educating and sensitising the populace in these critical times."

COVID-19 pandemic and response

Ghana registered its first COVID-19 infection on March 12, 2020. Ghana's comprehensive approach to tackling COVID-19 has been cited in a number of [studies](#). A [study in the British Medical Journal](#), in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, hailed Ghana's response as one of the best in Africa. The country's 'whole-of-government' approach was structured around five objectives: to curtail the importation of cases; identify and contain them; care for the sick; cushion the impact of COVID-19 on Ghana's economic and social life; and boost domestic production as a means of deepening self-reliance.

The government's [perspective](#) on the COVID-19 response was captured by the president when he announced lockdown measures on March 28, 2020: "We know how to bring the economy back to life. What we do not know is how to bring people back to life."

By January 2022, Ghana had reported 148,079 infections and 1,313 coronavirus-related deaths since the pandemic began [according to Reuters](#). The country had administered at least 7,755,231 doses of COVID vaccines by that time - about 12.7% of the country's population.

The country was one of the first countries, early in February 2020, to receive 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/ Oxford vaccine, from the Serum Institute of India (SII) from Pune, India to Accra. The initiative was part of the COVAX (an international alliance to give access to vaccines) effort [to deliver at least 2 billion](#) doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021.

Unfortunately, misinformation and fake news have increased vaccine hesitancy with a number of people refusing to be vaccinated. This has accounted for the low level of vaccination so far.

How Ghanaian journalists fared

Journalists interviewed for this report noted that the media suffered in terms of patronage and advertising revenue as Ghana's economy collapsed and economic activity shrunk. Some media companies did not operate at full capacity. Though some media personnel suffered some financial hitches, overall, it was not as bad as was expected.

Dzifa Tetteh said people were not comfortable with face-to-face interviews, so much was done via phone or WhatsApp recordings. "Many institutions cancelled their programmes (including trainings and workshops) or had them rescheduled so this affected the means of gathering information," adding that this meant minimising contact with people.

"In our case as newspaper publishers and vendors claim to make low sales because people have been trying to reduce human contacts and it has affected our incomes," she noted.

Journalist Ben Glover noted the need to take precautions when returning home after doing interviews so as not to infect family members.

"Was there any strain? Like you get home from the office... the children want to come and hug you and you say Charlie, I don't know whether I'm carrying the virus, let me bath. So normally I go to the house through the back door. I don't go through the front because I don't want them to interact with me immediately after I arrive from work," said Glover.

Chris Akorli said travelling to and from work during the pandemic was difficult.

"My major difficulty was the use of public transport to and from work with other passengers. The danger was no social distancing in the vehicles, exposing everyone to the pandemic," he said.

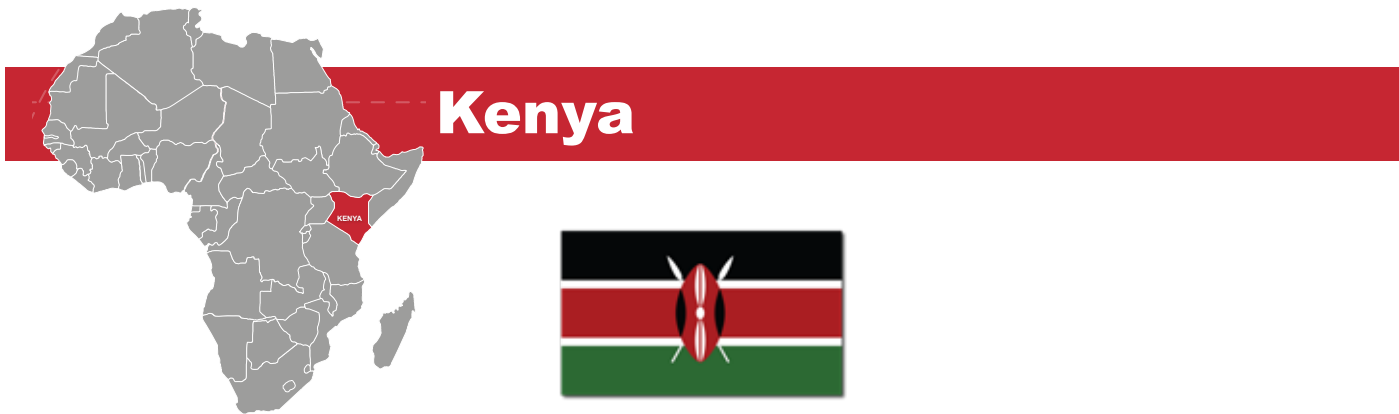
Journalists said there was not much government support for the media sector. Nor was there psychological support for media workers. The strain of working during a pandemic was also noted. Some – particularly broadcast journalists who needed to continue doing interviews in the field - were paranoid on the likelihood of contracting COVID-19.

The rapid shift to virtual newsrooms meant that a number of journalists were unprepared for the technology deployed at the time. Practicing virtual journalism meant journalists had to attend functions online. Some noted that difficulties with technology and internet access meant they were unable to connect to some of the meetings.

While none reported concerns for their physical safety, some noted that there were clashes with law enforcement agencies who were either over-bearing or did not understand the role of the journalists. For many, however, misinformation and disinformation posed severe problems during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Media sustainability remains a key concern in Ghana. The MFWA, noted limited government financial support, it said: "The financial standing of media enterprises has been weakened by the general fall in economic and social activities arising out of the outbreak of the pandemic." These concerns remain.



Impacts on journalists

By Cynthia Owuor

Media industry and media freedom in Kenya

The East African country of Kenya has a well-established media sector serving millions of people across the country. Kenya's lively media scene has a small number of players dominating the media industry.

A report by [Geo Poll](#) indicates that Kenya has more radio stations than television stations - making radio a popular medium of mass communication. Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), which is a state-owned media, is funded by advertisements and a government budget.

According to [Reporters without Borders](#), Kenya has seen a slow erosion of media freedom in recent years. The political situation and security concerns have been used since 2016 as grounds to restricting the freedom to inform the public on public interest stories.

A report by [Article 19](#) reports that violence against journalists doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. The findings indicate that 22 out of 48 recorded cases occurred between 12th March to the end of April 2020. These took place after the government of Kenya introduced a raft of emergency measures to curb the spread and effects of the virus.

COVID-19 impact was clearly marked as Kenya ranked 102 in 2021 on [Reporters without Borders](#) global Press Freedom Index.

COVID-19 and COVID Response in Kenya

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 12th March 2020. President Uhuru Kenyatta took immediate measures to curb the spread of the virus. Schools and all other learning institutions were closed with immediate effect. Curfew restrictions were introduced including suspending night travel as a measure to limit the spread of the virus. Modalities of implementing social distance were introduced as per the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations.

As of December 10, 2021, the Ministry of Health has confirmed 254,904 cases with 5,333 fatalities of COVID cases.

A total of 7,893,165 vaccine doses have so far been administered with the government kick starting on mass vaccination.

COVID Impact on Journalists in Kenya

[Article 19 East Africa](#) has documented at least 70 journalists who tested positive for COVID-19 while reporting.

According to Kenya Labor Union, the pandemic has seen at least 300 journalists lose their jobs while others have been subjected to pay cuts and [long delays in salary payment](#).

“Journalists were subjected to 50% pay cuts as most income generating projects were either withdrawn or unable to be executed due to COVID border restrictions and curfews,” said Zaitun Ali, a journalist at a local station in Kenya.

“This has really changed the dynamics of how we work as we had to come to work in shifts because the office had too many people so we couldn’t stay there, so many journalists got infected so we were forced to adjust.”

Ali shared that they had to cancel a whole season of a popular show on their TV station and they lost sponsors in the process.

The pandemic has had different impacts on different journalists in Kenya. From salary cuts to job losses to changes in work environment.

“One of the biggest effects that the pandemic has had on me was losing my job,” said Nancy Onyancha, a former news producer who was laid off because of COVID-19.

She is currently working as a freelance journalist and shared that adjusting to the new normal of COVID-19 was a daunting task.

“Working in the field as a freelance journalist in the middle of a pandemic also came with its own challenges as some areas were not accessible and, sometimes, we were not allowed to do interviews because of the fear that we might transmit COVID-19 to interviewees,” said Onyancha.

Faith, a journalist at a different media house who did not want her surname used, shared that the pandemic brought many changes to which she had to adjust.

“My job has changed considerably since this pandemic started. I started working remotely from April 2020 to early November 2021 owing to the pandemic and, in a first, launched the magazine I currently edit from the comfort of my house. With remote work also came Zoom meetings, and a new phrase “Zoom Fatigue” also emerged,” she said.

Faith reported self-imposed pressure to prove that she was productive and said she struggled to take breaks from her home desk. She was forced to pay for her online communication and internet connection – unlike at the office where this was taken care of by the media organisation.

Economic Support Structures

Most media houses in Kenya have not had any kind of economic relief package to support journalists through COVID 19 pandemic.

A news editor at a local station shared that journalist in Kenya were not prioritized when it came to economic support: “Surprisingly, unlike some sectors at the height of the pandemic that had the specific stimulus package, I don’t think a lot was done to support us. The media houses that employ us also didn’t receive that kind of relief so, in turn, they could not offer us that relief. So, when revenues dropped because advertising was no longer forthcoming, they had to cut our salaries and some of them had to let us go. I wouldn’t say there was any economic support.”

Ali concurred and said journalists struggled to make ends meet when the pandemic started without support.

“We had none whatsoever. We have really struggled economically and financially since COVID. However, they are trying to add a percentage of our salaries back, they are seeking funding from the mother employer,” said Ali.

This is the same case as Kevin Odera who lost his job without any sort of relief package. Odera, who was expecting his first child with his wife, struggled to make ends meet for his family before getting another job at a different media house.

“I realised my wife was one week pregnant after losing my job due to COVID, you can imagine how we struggled the entire 2020 until she gave birth.”

Odera got another job at Arena Media after months of being unemployed, but he shared that some of his former colleagues were not as lucky and are unemployed to date.

Even though the Media Council of Kenya launched Grants to support journalists during the pandemic, there haven’t been any economic support structures put up by employers since the beginning of the pandemic.

Conclusion

As the pandemic continues to show its impact, Kenya faces serious resource constraints and lack of a clear strategy to offer socio economic support within a reasonable period.

There needs to be a continuous mobilisation of resources to facilitate associations to give the necessary economic and social support to journalists who were affected by COVID-19.



Malawi



Media freedom activists stand up, but challenges increase

By Melini Moses

Media Industry and Media Freedom in Malawi

Malawi is a land-locked country in southeastern Africa, with a population of around 17.5 million people. According to [Britannica](#), it occupies a long and narrow strip of land along the East African Rift Valley.

Malawi is bordered by Tanzania to the north, Lake Malawi to the east, Mozambique to the east and south, and Zambia to the west. Ten major ethnic groups are historically associated with Malawi. Chewa is the main language spoken by Malawians. Other major languages include English, Lomwe, Yao, and Tumbuka. According to [Britannica](#), Malawi is one of the most densely populated countries in Southern Africa. It is however one of the least urbanized, with most of its people living in rural locations.

According to the [Media Institute of Southern Africa](#) (MISA) in Malawi, the country has two daily newspapers, five weekly newspapers, 14 television stations, two public radio broadcasters and several privately owned radio stations. There are only six online publications.

Malawi ranked 62 in the World Press Freedom Index, up seven positions from 69 in 2020. [Reporters Without Borders](#) says several cases of attacks against journalists, especially by police or members of political parties, were registered in 2020.

The covid-19 pandemic and response in Malawi

The first three COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Malawi on the April 2, 2020, in Lilongwe, the country's capital. According to the [Institute of Global Health](#), the country faced many challenges in its fight against the pandemic, including poverty, low literacy levels and hygiene conditions. However, the outbreak of the coronavirus in Malawi was still slower than that of many developed countries. The Institute says its believed that Malawi's young population, their immunity and the hot weather may have played a role in reducing its effect.

With the help of [UNICEF](#), the country now has three laboratories to test for COVID-19. [The Global Fund](#) in 2021, through its COVID-19 Response Mechanism supported Malawi with **over US\$102.5 million to fight COVID-19. The money was used for the** provision of diagnostic tests, oxygen equipment and infrastructure. Malawi also built and renovated some of its health facilities and infrastructure.

[BMJ Global Health](#) noted that Malawi embarked on a multi-pronged campaign to educate its citizens about the pandemic. Several policies were also put in place to reduce transmission, including a closure of schools and a ban on public gatherings.

According to [Reuters](#), COVID-19 infections are decreasing in Malawi, with 555 new infections reported on average every day. There have been more than 80,000 infections and more than 2,400 COVID-19 related deaths since the pandemic began.

Malawi has administered at least 1,847,917 doses of COVID-19 vaccines so far. That's enough to have vaccinated at least 5% of the population.

Covid-19 impact on journalists in Malawi

[The Wits Journalism Africa-China Reporting Project](#) has lauded the coverage of the pandemic by local journalists. It says while initially international sources took precedence, local journalists quickly began painting a picture of the pandemic within Malawi. They focussed on prevention, medical facts, the impact on the economy and shared success stories.

News Reporter, Peter Jegwi told fraycollege researcher, Cynthia Owuor, that the way he carried out his tasks changed dramatically at the onset of COVID-19.

“My job thrives on conducting interviews on the streets and in crowded areas. With the pandemic, that no longer became possible. I had to learn new ways of doing things and adopt new techniques of interviewing people. It has become harder, and for those of us who do freelance work, our incomes have also reduced. My employer now opts to interview people from London via WhatsApp when such interviews were previously being done by me which has had a huge impact on my earning capacity,” he said.

Jegwi said media colleagues become protective of their spaces and it became harder to trust each other with the sharing of equipment.

“Before COVID it was not uncommon to use each other’s recorders, tripod stands or even cars. With COVID, everyone become protective,” he said.

He says getting access to information from the Malawian government also became challenging. This was because his employer, an international media house, banned reporters from going out to do one-on-one interviews or to attend press conferences, due to the COVID-19 risk.

“Here, in Malawi, the Presidency introduced weekly press conferences which they expected us to attend. I couldn’t attend press conferences and the Presidency used it as an excuse to refuse to grant me interviews or ask them questions they believed could have been dealt with at the press conferences.”

He says the easiest way to interview people during the COVID-19 pandemic was through voice notes on WhatsApp. However, Jegwi said this was restrictive as it was limited to people who had smart phones. It meant that the voices of the poor were not heard. He says while the main media houses did reasonably well to adapt and care for their staff, smaller companies were forced to reduce staff or wages.

Jegwi says he did at some point feel threatened.

“I have experienced threats in the sense that some officials were accused of misusing resources, meant to fight the pandemic. When I started investigating, I received anonymous calls saying I could face unspecified action if I pursued the investigation.”

Jegwi believes COVID-19 has impacted media freedom.

“The biggest defenders of the media are independent media associations and civil society organisations. These have all experienced a reduction in their income. This inevitably impacted their work. The shield the media gets from these bodies has weakened, to the detriment of media freedom,” he said.

Jegwi says misinformation has also been a problem in Malawi.

“There’ve been times when even experts failed to give coherent information about the pandemic. This resulted in some incorrect information making its way into the media, resulting in the credibility of the media and journalists being eroded. Vaccine uptake for example has been very low because some members of the public believe the pandemic is part of a religious crusade or that vaccines have side effects that include causing impotence.”

News producer, Eric Enssidigi, says the pandemic made work challenging.

“We were divided into various shifts so the newsroom could be as decongested as possible. So that meant a lot of extra work. The other thing was internet challenges. Working from home required that we have internet bundles which was challenging because when you are working from the office you readily have access to the internet. Whilst working from home we were forced to dig deeper into our pockets and purchase those data bundles.”

He says staff were also fearful of catching the virus when they went to the office.

“So, some our friends, we later discovered that they were infected by the pandemic, so these are the people that we were working with closely, we were touching the same things, we were using the same mic, we were using the same facilities but then you never knew that they had it, until the tests were conducted so it was indeed a difficult situation,” he said.

Enssidigi says his company followed all the COVID-19 protocols and was supportive.

“From the onset of the pandemic, our employer made sure that we had masks available for each and every day when we were entering the office premises. You were handed over a mask and of course the temperature test was being conducted on each and every one who was entering our premises, be it an employee, customers or sources, everyone was undergoing

the same process. There was some kind of facility where you could get a sanitiser and in fact it was also being announced on all our platforms. The people that were found with the virus and needed to go home for isolation were given some money by the company apart from the salary, they were given additional funds so that they could support themselves and their families' since they were not active anymore at work."

He says there was a point when many staff felt their job security was under threat due to COVID.

"The company was not making money as it was supposed to as most businesses had closed, you know most of the revenue in these media houses comes from not the sales of the newspaper but it comes from sponsored programs, it comes from adverts, so the adverts were not coming and when they come, the people who are advertising the businesses were closed so they wouldn't be able to pay so indeed there were rumours that maybe there could be job losses and maybe to some extent others thought that we could lose our jobs because of the COVID pandemic, because of the restrictions that were imposed to contain the pandemic from spreading."

Enssidigi shared his sentiments on the pandemics influence on media freedom.

"We have media bodies here, institutions that were established to safeguard the rest of our journalists, to ensure that press freedoms still exist in the country. WMaleve the Malawi chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, the Journalists' Institute of Malawi, we have what we call the Media Counsel of Malawi, and we have other interest groups within the media. Apart from statements issued on the need to secure jobs for the media, the need for journalists to ensure that companies were not losing their jobs, the calls for measures, the call for packages for media bodies also to be cushioned from the effects of the covid pandemic, most importantly the restrictions that were employed to curb the spread of the virus, I haven't seen any tangible results on the ground, apart from maybe, the scarcity of people, information providers, the credibility of the people who must give us the information. I must say that there wasn't any tangible incident where we feel that media freedom was infringed because of the COVID pandemic but then I must also say that closure of businesses was the best excuse. For instance, when you call officials to give you some information, they would rush out to say that they are no longer in office, they must come back to you which in most cases they wouldn't come back to you, so information is scarce. You send an email today for the officials to respond to you, it will take days so there was that kind of frustration when you need information but when it comes to media freedom being influenced by the covid, I must say that there wasn't anything worth mentioning about that. We have our problems, but this has been ongoing related to access to information like the journalist being attacked, personal attacks against journalists, these have always been there, but there was nothing influenced by the covid pandemic."

He says misinformation especially through social media impacted the public's response to the pandemic.

"There is a lot of misinformation about the covid pandemic itself, the origins, the covid vaccines. People are relating these to the end of days, they are saying lots of things about the origin of this pandemic saying that it was created so that there is an opportunity for people to receive the vaccine which they feel is an equivalent of the 666, the mark of the beast so there are really many gaps that are affecting the public's response because poverty has also been one of the responses. In villages, people say like I don't even have money to buy anything to eat so where do you expect me to purchase a mask or soap so that I should be washing my hands regularly, when you talk of social distance, there are those incidences when the public transportation system is not that well organised here, we are sure to commute to and from work in these crowded minibuses. So, it was really difficult for the public to understand that this is a pandemic and we really need it to change the way we do things. So, misinformation, lack of resources and of course a lack of the right information has also impacted the response of the public to this pandemic."

A freelance journalist, who wished to remain anonymous, told Owuor that she'd really felt the financial pinch of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I am not working because I applied for several jobs where they would introduce a vacancy but then say we are not recruiting now because COVID-19 has impacted us. I feel like there hasn't been enough adequate support. We have an institution in Malawi that safeguards the rights of journalists, it didn't have any programmes for those journalists that had lost jobs or maybe didn't have any source of income as an impact of COVID-19. I have seen in other countries programmes like those but nothing of that sort here. There are media houses that are paying based on a story-to-story basis, others are on half pay so really the impact is still there," she said.

She also highlighted misinformation and fake news as a concern.

“Misinformation has made people lose trust in COVID-19 or any other health related information. It has also promoted gossip and has created a lot of clarification work for Journalists and media houses to work on to make things right. I believe the usage of WhatsApp and other social media platforms has worked much to the disadvantage of the COVID-19 preventive measures including vaccine. This is due to the rapid spread of fake news. This has in the end contributed to vaccine hesitancy.”

Covid-19 Impact on Media Freedom

On World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2021, Malawi’s Media Freedom Committee was birthed. The [World Association of News Publishers](#) (WAN-IFRA) celebrated the move which brought to nine the number of such Committees in Africa, and twenty in the world. It said the Committee would champion causes that are aimed at countering challenges to media freedom in Malawi, using its global network.

“The media has to continue to play a pivotal role in nurturing the new order that most patriotic Malawians have been craving for. Before us is an opportunity that must not be missed,” it said in a statement.

[Reporters Without Borders](#) says while many attacks against journalists took place in 2020, the law on Access to Information finally took effect, 13 years after discussions first began. Malawian President Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera also began holding regular press conferences. It says this was welcome after a disputed 2019 presidential election, which had a negative impact on the media. Social media was disconnected, two commercial TV stations were vandalised and radio phone-in programmes were banned when the election results were announced.

Media legislation is still very repressive, according to [Reporters Without Borders](#). It says a law provides for the imprisonment of those who “insult” the head of state, and a cyber-security law adopted in 2016 provides for the imprisonment of those who post “offensive” content. The organisation says these laws can be used against both journalists and bloggers.

In April 2021, the [International Press Institute](#) condemned the harassment of journalists in Malawi and called on the Malawian government to uphold press freedom. This after the police interrogated a journalist for publishing an article in which he quoted the head of the Centre for Democracy and Economic Development Initiative, who called the President a “joker, time-waster and a comedian.”

[MISA Malawi](#) also released a statement expressing concern with what it called the continued arbitrary summoning, arrests and detention of journalists by the Malawian Police.

“MISA Malawi condemns the actions by the police in the strongest terms and believe the summoning, arrests and detentions are an attack on media freedom. We are also reminded of the many times police authorities have promised to discipline officers who have attacked journalists on duty. We are yet to see this materialize. The Malawi police must understand that media freedom is enshrined in the Republican Constitution and their duty is to protect and not violate it.

Continued summoning, arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists for simply doing their job will unfortunately reflect badly on the country’s performance in the yearly press freedom indexes,” it said.

Conclusion

The Malawian government did well in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, acting quickly to put stringent measures in place. It’s clear that the media in Malawi played an active and crucial role in covering the coronavirus, shaping perceptions and behaviour. However, the challenges in getting access to information is a concern. Laws currently in place may also play a role in journalists self-censoring. Some media workers have suffered great financial loss due to the changes that took effect in newsrooms during the pandemic. This came with little to no support. More communication is needed between government, the media and media support bodies in order to improve the climate for reporters in Malawi.



Changing work conditions

By Francis Kokutse

Media industry and media freedom

Nigeria, led by President Mahammudu Buhari, is bordered on the west Benin and Cameroun on the east. The country is bordered on the South by the Gulf of Guinea and on the north by the Sahelian countries of Chad and Niger. With a population of [over 200 million](#), it is described as the most populous country in Africa.

Nigeria has a diverse media landscape which – once dominated by legacy media such as print and radio – has a growing online offering. Prior to the pandemic, [the African Media Barometer \(AMB\) Nigeria 2019](#) noted that the country was “awash with news sources, from a vibrant but struggling newspaper industry to expanding online news and information services. Radio is huge in the country, particularly in the north.”

But the practice of journalism is not without challenges. The country was ranked 120 out of 180 in the Reporters without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index in 2021. This is five places down from the previous year’s ranking. [According to the RSF](#) “Nigeria is now one of West Africa’s most dangerous and difficult countries for journalists, who are often spied on, attacked, arbitrarily arrested or even killed.”

COVID-19 pandemic and response in country

Nigeria registered its first COVID-19 case on February 27, 2020. The government [declared](#) a nationwide lockdown March 30, 2020, with immediate effects in three states of the Federation namely: Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja. This was then extended for two weeks with the inclusion of Kano on April 27, 2020. The lockdown in the country saw a reduced number of new cases reported.

In a [report](#) in August 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Africa Regional Office commended the Nigerian government for showing political will to protect its people by immediate adoption of a whole of government response in line with recommendations of the International Health Regulations (IHR).

“The Presidential Task Force on COVID 19 (PTF) provided the strong leadership required for a well-coordinated multi-sectoral, inter-governmental effort to contain spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that made a difference in our response,” the report said.

In addition, the country also sourced vaccines from reliable sources to ensure availability to its citizens. The first COVAX vaccines arrived in the country in March 2021 with a [reported](#) target of vaccinating 70% of 200 million people by 2022.

Nigeria’s Chairman of the Presidential Steering Committee (PSC) on COVID-19, [Boss Mustapha said](#) the arrival of Moderna, and Janssen (Johnson and Jonson) vaccines enhanced the government’s effort to get more Nigerians vaccinated to achieve herd immunity against the disease. Nigeria has received over 4 million doses of Moderna vaccine donated by the United States (US) government through the COVAX facility and 117, 600 doses of Johnson and Johnson vaccine through the African Union and Afrexim Bank as initial supplies.

The country expects an additional 42.5m doses of different vaccine products from the COVAX facility, African Union, and donations from the US Government, United Kingdom (UK) Government and other countries to be used for the second phase vaccination with different cold chain requirements.

COVID-19: How It affected Nigerian Journalists

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to linger, its effects on the economy and people continue to be felt.

The disruption for journalism was immediate.

Platform Africa editor Adeola Yusuf said COVID-19 brought many changes: “Even the editing of news items to the publishing of news to even the marketing of the newspapers that we do has changed.” Yusuf noted the restrictions brought by social distancing and said “this has affected the gathering of news” as well as how stories were written and published as many were now put online.

“We now resort to publishing online and therefore use less words and a lot of pictures. The number of copies we publish has reduced because, COVID-19 has affected purchasing power,” he added.

“There was one occasion that it was late when I was returning home and the security agents manning the roadblocks will not allow me to move until I had to call my editor who called the district police officer who in turn radioed for my release,” recalled Yusuf.

However, for broadcasters the changes may have been less dramatic. Producer Linda Akhigbe said that not much had changed since the pandemic apart from taken precautions such as physical distancing and wearing masks.

“We have become more safety conscious. Those members of staff who do not have their own vehicles are taken home by the company’s buses that it had acquired. This is to prevent those who do not have the vehicles to take public transport,” she noted.

Court Correspondent Peter Fowoyo highlighted the changing operations of the judicial system which led to new ways of covering court cases.

“Prior to the COVID, as journalists we come from various media organizations to the courts to report, not just from one court. We share ourselves into the various courts. But when the COVID arrived, all the courts changed how we covered them. The Federal High Court issued a directive restraining crowds and so, it become difficult to go to the courts to listen to cases. This changed the way we worked at that point in time, the judges introduced online sittings to read their judgments,” he said

To curb the spread of COVID-19 in newsrooms, Fowoyo said that journalists were then asked to work from home and file via email. He said that the fear of contracting COVID when going out for work was stressful

“My experience throughout the period has been living on fear that you could catch COVID anytime,” he said.

The lack of physical interaction was a major factor in the changes wrought in the practice of journalism, not only among colleagues. According to one journalist who asked not to be named, “some beats/desks no longer get guests for their physical shows.” The journalist said, “some programmes that require physical presence but given the COVID-19 distancing considerations and the general apprehension for COVID-19, such shows have been forcefully modified. “Physical interactions and networking opportunities at events have been reduced. This affects my contacts base as a journalist.” She added.

This journalist also talked about the reduction in opportunities to travel outside the country to attend international events had also been reduced.

“There were not enough considerations from organisations/editors; they still ask reporters to go for physical interviews and because often, quality of Zoom interviews are not presentable and broadcast-friendly,” the respondent said.

Conclusion

Nigeria’s media responded quickly to the required change wrought by COVID in ways that minimised the disruption. But it was still profoundly impacted. Notwithstanding the impact on media sustainability, restricted in person interviews and travel, the loss in advertising revenue and the continued impact on the economy will continue to affect the sector. Some journalists continue to work from home.



Media impacted by public's ire

By Melini Moses

The media industry and media freedom

Senegal is located at the westernmost point of Africa and is widely known as the “Gateway to Africa.” French is Senegal’s official language and more than half of all Senegalese live outside cities.

According to the [BBC](#), Senegal has traditionally boasted one of the most unrestricted and diverse media scenes in its region. It says commercial and community radio stations have mushroomed in the country. There are close to 20 daily newspapers, most of which are privately owned.

[Reporters Without Borders](#) says Senegal has a diverse media landscape and the country’s constitution guarantees the freedom to inform. It also says abuses against reporters have been relatively infrequent in recent years. However, the organisation says that some subjects appear to be off limits, and that staff from several media outlets have been intimidated for reporting on corruption. Senegal is ranked 49 out of 180 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. This is two steps down from its previous ranking of 47 in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response

Senegal reported its first case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020, becoming the fourth country on the African continent, after Algeria, Egypt, and Nigeria, to announce the presence of the virus. Senegal has been lauded for its efforts to contain the coronavirus. As the second wave of infections surged in the country in 2021, it stepped up measures to respond to the anticipated increase in the number of patients who would need critical hospital care.

[Professor Daye Ka](#), a member of Senegal’s COVID-19 task force, outlined measures adopted in the country. These included proper home-based care and education campaigns. Senegal received financial aid from the [World Bank](#) in the form of the Senegal COVID-19 Response Project. Around 20 million US dollars has been committed towards the initiative.

According to [Reuters](#), more than 76 000 infections and 1800 COVID-19-related deaths had been reported since the start of the pandemic in the country by January 2022. Senegal had administered more than 2,300,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines by that time. Assuming each person needed and received two doses, that would mean just over 7% of the country’s population may be vaccinated.

COVID-19 impact on journalists

Like in many other countries around the world, COVID-19 led to a surge in fake news in Senegal. This placed added pressure on journalists to dispel the inaccuracies and provide credible, trustworthy news. In July 2020, the [Friedrich Naumann Foundation For Freedom](#) in Senegal held a webinar to discuss the phenomena of fake news, its impact, and the need for trusted sources of information.

Arona Diouf, Editor-in-chief for Education at Radio Senegal says journalists had to review the way they worked following the onset of the coronavirus. “At the start of the pandemic in Senegal, the editorial staff had established a system of worker rotation. Teams had to take turns to avoid editorial gatherings,” he said.

Diouf says his media house has been supportive throughout the pandemic. “The company doctor often came to meet the editorial teams,” he said. Diouf believes that COVID-19 played a role in strengthening national belonging.

Imoh Edet, a journalist at West Africa Democracy Radio in the country’s capital, Dakar, said COVID-19 has forced him to adapt to changing conditions. “Travel in the field has been suspended. It was difficult to get sources as one-on-one interviews were not feasible. I worked more remotely and familiarised myself with the latest technology to make working smoother. Personally, I have also spent a fortune on protective gear since the start of the pandemic.”

He says his employer has also been supportive. “My organisation has devoted more resources to acquiring technology to work effectively remotely. It tried to maintain our compensation in full and early enough, with insurance available. The organisation has during the pandemic also offered a few sessions to keep everyone abreast of the COVID-19 trends and evolution of the pandemic,” he said.

Edet told researchers that he and his colleagues ensured that accurate reports went out during the pandemic. “We are very careful in this regard and always make sure that a proper verification is done before a story is released. Much of the population really did not know what the pandemic was, and therefore became vulnerable to all kinds of information. We have created several educational messages in more than five main languages across West Africa broadcast through community and city radio stations,” he said.

COVID-19 impact on media freedom

Media companies have at times borne the brunt of the public’s frustration. In August 2020, [Article19](#) reported several worrying incidents involving attacks on the media. The office of newspaper “Les Echos” was attacked on the August 3, 2020, by criminals who also destroyed some of the publication’s equipment. The incident took place after the newspaper published an article stating that the religious leader of the Mouchtarchidines, Serigne Moustapha Sy, had tested positive for COVID-19. It’s believed the attackers were upset that this information had been made public.

According to [Article19](#), this was the fourth attack against media professionals and their property since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It says in one of the incidents, demonstrators destroyed the buildings belonging to Radio Futurs Médias in Mbacké while protesting the curfew and the restrictions introduced by the government. In another case, citizens and two journalists were assaulted by police while working in Touba.

In January 2021, [Reporters Without Borders](#) issued a statement urging Senegal to amend what it called “draconian provisions” in its new Press Code, which was signed into law, three years after its adoption. The Press Code essentially maintained penalties of up to two years in prison for defamation and three years’ imprisonment for publishing fake news, liable to “prejudice public decency” or “discredit public institutions.”

According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), news editors who couldn’t show at least seven years of journalistic experience could be sentenced to up to a year in prison, under article 194 of the new code.

“It is fortunately rare for such penalties to be imposed but, even so, their presence in the new legislation is an anachronism in a country that could aspire to be a regional press freedom powerhouse. In an age of rampant disinformation, we ask the authorities to amend the law to protect those whose job is to provide to reliable, quality reporting,” said Assane Diagne, the director of RSF’s West Africa office.

On World Press Freedom Day, in May 2021, Senegalese journalists staged a huge rally outside the Ministry of Communication. They demanded more respect for their profession. According to [Africa News](#), media rights groups in the country accused the government of clamping down on reporters. Journalists say they have faced increased levels of intimidation and harassment, especially while covering protests and unrest.

“The Senegalese press has probably never been in such danger as it has in recent times. In addition to the precariousness of their job, some journalists are now having to deal with all kinds of abuses. In recent years, violence, and violations against the principle of freedom of expression have increased in the country. Press companies and media organisations have been the target of attacks. Television channels have even had their signals cut off,” reported Africanews correspondent in Senegal, Wahany Sambo.

Conclusion

Senegal is regarded as one of the most stable democracies in Africa and has made great strides in its constitution to guarantee press freedom. However, concerns around freedom of the press remain, especially considering recent attacks on media houses. The new Press Code has failed to decriminalise offences by media personnel and may lead to self-censorship and even the closure of media houses. While COVID-19 has had some impact on the media industry in Senegal, many of the concerns raised by the media were relevant before the pandemic began and will continue to be relevant in the years to come, unless certain changes take effect. It is heartening to note however that many media houses in Senegal have been of great support to their journalists during the pandemic.



South Africa



Impacts on journalists and their families

By Ina Skosana

Media industry and media freedom in South Africa

South Africa has a well-established media sector which has experienced serious challenges over the past decade. The country's state broadcaster has been plagued by bad management, its coffers have been fleeced and its newsroom has little credibility.

Privately owned media has struggled to survive as advertising revenue moves away from traditional print outlets. Many media houses are still figuring out how to monetise digital content. The country has, however, seen a rise in donor-funded journalism outlets and a proliferation of community radio stations.

Even before COVID-19, mainstream newsrooms were retrenching *en masse* – a situation that was exacerbated by the pandemic. Recently, concerns have been raised about threats to media freedom in the country. In 2021 the country slipped one place on the [global press freedom index](#) - ranking 31st out of 180 countries.

COVID-19 pandemic and response in South Africa

The first case of COVID-19 in South Africa was reported on March 5, 2020. By the end of that month, President Cyril Ramaphosa had announced a 21-day lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. This was one of the toughest lockdowns in the world with strict stay-at-home orders on everyone except essential workers.

The government's initial response was seen as proactive, but soon some of the lockdown restrictions would come under fire. These included the ban on cigarettes and alcohol sales.

By June 2020, the reported impact on the South African media was severe. The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) [reported](#) that the lockdowns had had a devastating impact on the media with job-losses, the closure of print publications and widespread retrenchments. SANEF cited the closure of two magazine publishers, up to 400 jobs were lost in small independent publishers while workers at the big media houses were forced to take salary cuts of up to 45%. Temporary lay-offs were also been widely implemented. Community radio was also affected although no numbers exist for those. Advertising drops varied from an estimated 40% to 100%.

As the cases of COVID-19 increased and decreased, so too would the levels of restrictions. By November 2021, the country had been under lockdown for well over 500 days.

South Africa has one of the highest COVID-19 cases and deaths reported on the continent. By November 2021, [the accumulated number of COVID cases was just under three million](#). The total deaths recorded were estimated at almost 94,500 – though scientists believe this figure to be an under count.

In January 2021, the government came under fire for dragging its feet when it came to ensuring that South Africans would have access to COVID-19 vaccines as soon as they were developed. By the time the government made its vaccine procurement strategy public, countries such as the US and the UK had already started their vaccine roll-out. South Africa started rolling out COVID vaccines in February 2021. By mid-November 41% of adults in South Africa had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 35% were fully vaccinated.

The lines between home and work were blurred

The COVID-19 pandemic left no one unaffected. Journalists, too, were under enormous pressure.

“It was just madness. The health minister was giving media briefings at eight o’clock at night. You never knew what was going to happen,” said Sarah Evans, a journalist based in Johannesburg, South Africa. “There was new information coming out at all times.”

When South Africa was first hit by COVID-19, Evans was an investigative journalist at News24. The President's stay-at-home orders meant that she, like many other South Africans, had to abandon life at the office and start working from home.

But this came at a heavy price. The lines between office hours and home time became blurred.

“So you're kind of on call a lot. I think that was just the nature of the (COVID) story. Everybody was doing that,” she said.

Working around the clock was difficult. And for Evans - who is a single mom - it was simply unsustainable. The lockdown meant that schools were closed, and she had to cover breaking news with a young child in tow.

“As a mom, I need a more structured work day. Reporting on COVID at that time was a bit like election season, but every day. It was really difficult for me to cope with.”

In 2021, she joined a smaller digital outlet. Unfortunately, she had to leave the organisation as “they had some financial challenges owing to the pandemic”.

She has been freelancing for several months and is enjoying the flexibility this affords her.

Dashed aspirations

Riot Hlatshwayo is a seasoned journalist with byline in a string of local publications. His career hasn't been a smooth ride - he's even dabbled in politics. But journalism is where his heart is. When he's not employed Hlatshwayo writes and publishes news on Facebook for his online publication - RioJab media.

At the start of the pandemic the 56-year-old started what he had hoped would be his last job.

“Before COVID-19, I got this job as a news reporter for the community radio station Vision FM. Eventually I climbed the ladder to become the director of news... As a person who is already old, I was saying to myself that's where I will retire. But that didn't happen, because of COVID-19.” he said.

Hlatshwayo left the radio station as there was no longer enough money to pay his salary. Like so many other journalists he has been left without a safety net.

But this hasn't stopped him from reporting and sharing information with communities in remote rural areas.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has had devastating impacts on journalists in South Africa. Job stability has been compromised and careers ended. The impact has been worse for some than others.



Tunisia



COVID-19 threatens democracy and media freedom

By Melini Moses

Media industry and media freedom in Tunisia

Tunisia is the northern most country in Africa. It is bordered by Algeria to the west, by Libya to the southeast, and by the Mediterranean Sea to the east and north.

Tunisia's capital is Tunis. According to [Britannica](#), its population is estimated at around 11,867,000 inhabitants. Tunisia is a republic with one legislative house, the Assembly of People's Representatives. Arabic is the country's official language. French is also widely used and to a lesser extent, English and Italian.

A 2020 study published on [Statista](#) found that most Tunisians accessed their daily news from television (61.2%). Social media as a source of news stood at 41.9%, radio at 27.1% and print newspapers at just 3%. The survey, which was conducted between February 24 and March 18, 2020, involved 1200 respondents.

According to [Press Reference](#) there are 26 television stations and 29 radio stations in Tunisia. There are several major daily newspapers in Tunisia, either owned directly by the state, or privately owned but openly pro-government.

Tunisia ranked 73 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, a drop from a ranking of 72 in 2020. [Reporters Without Borders](#) says far-right politicians no longer hesitate to openly target journalists and those who defend press freedom, adding that the overall climate for the media has worsened.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response

Tunisia recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020. According to [Anadolu Agency](#), the Health Minister announced that a Tunisian citizen, who had returned from Italy had tested positive for the virus.

According to [Freedom House](#), the Tunisian government put in place a COVID-19 related lockdown in March 2020. This was in part, enforced by the army. The country also banned mass gatherings. Restrictions were eased by June 2020. However, a curfew and travel restrictions were reintroduced in October, as coronavirus infections began to increase.

Tunisia experienced its most devastating wave of coronavirus cases in July 2021, which caused the health care system to collapse. The [Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention](#) noted that civil unrest worsened since the start of the pandemic. This was largely related to rising unemployment rates, exacerbated by the COVID-19 restrictions put in place. This led to the Tunisian President, Kais Saied, claiming [extended executive powers](#) that same month.

[The World Health Organisation](#) records show that since the COVID-19 pandemic first began, up until January 2022, Tunisia has recorded more than 730 000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections, with more than 25 000 deaths.

More than 13 000 vaccine doses have been administered. According to [Reuters](#), assuming every person needed and received two doses, Tunisia would have already vaccinated more than half of its population. A survey published by the [Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention](#) found that nine out of ten respondents were either vaccinated or likely to get vaccinated.

COVID-19 impact on journalism

Non-profit organisation, [International Media Support](#) says like the rest of the world, fake news was widespread in Tunisia. It says mainstream media scrambled to provide Tunisians with a steady flow of information about the coronavirus, and often sacrificed accuracy for speed and digital traffic. This resulted in fake news sometimes making its way onto news platforms.

Independent blog and Tunisian media platform [Nawaat](#) rose to the challenge, with its journalists dedicating much of their time to debunk false news and information around COVID-19.

“First we try to identify which false stories are making the most noise and getting the most attention online. When we detect stories that are having an impact on people and get featured in mainstream media, we try to counter them by referring to laws, official sources and watchdogs and interviewing the main actors, operators and experts on the ground, before we present the facts to our audience,” Sami Ben Gharbia, one of Nawaat’s co-founders told [International Media Support](#).

The coronavirus also provided an opportunity for the youth in Tunisia to play a role in information sharing. Article 19 working in partnership with the Tunisian Ministry of Education in 2018, it set up [Ahki free la Télé](#), an online television channel linked to an interactive platform. Engaging Tunisian youth aged between 12 and 18, it embarked on an initiative to promote media literacy. It wanted to highlight the media’s role in promoting freedom of expression as a fundamental human right.

The COVID-19 pandemic does appear to have had a financial impact on some media houses. One journalist interviewed, who wished to remain anonymous told fraycollege research Dhiaeddine Bourezg, that once the pandemic set in, he started receiving payments later than usual, and eventually lost his job. He was forced to find an alternative source of income.

COVID-19 impact on media freedom

[Freedom House](#) detailed several developments in 2021 relating to the pandemic, which had a ripple effect on media freedom. It says in April 2021, the Tunisian Minister of Health issued an order that threatened sanctions against doctors and health workers who make unauthorized statements about the COVID-19 pandemic to the media. In January 2021 protests erupted on the 10th anniversary of Tunisia’s revolution. Hundreds of protestors were arrested, and several activists were harassed or physically attacked for their social media posts about the protests. [Freedom House](#) says physical assaults against online journalists also increased. It cited one case where a journalist was punched in the face due to his reporting on the coronavirus.

Earlier, in March 2020, more than forty civil society groups raised concern in a [Joint statement](#) on a draft law which they said would essentially endanger and limit Freedom of Expression and the Press. The groups warned that the draft law would inevitably cancel several Articles of Decree Law 2011-115 of 2 November 2011 on freedom of the press, printing and publishing, as it contained comprehensive legal provisions for the offences of publishing false news (Article 54) and calumny (Article 55 and 56). [Civicus](#) says the bill was submitted to the Tunisian Parliament on the March 29, 2020 but was later withdrawn. According to [Civicus](#), Korchid announced that the draft law would be withdrawn “for now” but that he remained “convinced” that it did not threaten freedoms.

On April 21, 2020, [Amnesty International](#) called for an end to the prosecution of two bloggers for criticising the Tunisian government’s approach to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The bloggers were charged for posting videos on social media alleging that the government failed to provide adequate compensation to people who were struggling financially, and to address the shortage of basic food supplies in the market.

“The last thing the Tunisian authorities should be doing in the middle of a pandemic is arresting or prosecuting people who are critical of the state’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The free flow of information and public trust is particularly important at this time. Those detained for expressing their views must be immediately and unconditionally released,” said Amna Guellali, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional director for Middle East and North Africa.

Conclusion

The Tunisian constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, thought, expression and information. However, in practice, government authorities have managed to use loopholes in the law to arrest and charge journalists. While COVID-19 has seen some growth and innovation in the media sector, reporters remain vulnerable to harassment, arrest and harsh penalties.



Uganda



Separation from sources and infection with COVID-19

By Cynthia Owuor

The media industry and media freedom in Uganda

The East African country of Uganda has diverse media with various newspapers, magazines and a growing broadcast media sector. By early 2020, Uganda's broadcast sector was made up of 40 television stations and 199 accredited radio stations. The country also has a fast-growing online media.

Press freedom in Uganda is limited. The security services, which are the leading press freedom violators, often target journalists and detain them arbitrarily. According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), acts of intimidation and violence against journalists are an almost daily occurrence in the country.

The government implemented lockdowns and established curfew restrictions in order to limit the spread of the pandemic. These interfered with the already limited press freedom as journalists became the target of security officers in their quest to inform the public on stories that were of public interest.

Uganda ranked 125 out of 180 in 2021 on the [Reporters Without Borders](#) Global Press Freedom Index.

COVID-19 pandemic and response

Uganda reported its first COVID-19 case on March 22, 2020. Uganda adopted strong lockdown and curfew measures to fight the pandemic as soon as the first case was confirmed.

President Yoweri Museveni [imposed and re-imposed](#) lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus in the country. He ordered the closure of schools and suspension of non-essential travel between districts. He took further measures by banning mass gatherings like weddings and funerals to limit the spread of the virus.

According to [Reuters](#), by early January 2022, Uganda had reported 148,542 infections and 3,313 coronavirus-related deaths. It had administered at least 9,763,030 doses of COVID vaccines covering about 11% of the population.

COVID Impact on Police and Media in Uganda

The enforcement of curfew by authorities influenced media freedom as journalists were harassed and threatened while going to gather news in the field.

News reporter Javura Twizukye had first-hand experience. "There was one time I was going home from work at around 10.30 in the evening. I met policemen who were implementing the curfew and, even though I had an ID, however much I tried to introduce myself to them, they said no.

"They arrested me alongside others. They had moved with me for a distance. It's only until later I decided to call the DPC (Division Police Commander) who is their head, to inform him that I had been arrested by his boys. Luckily the DPC told them to let us go," Twizukye recalled.

Twizukye said travelling between districts when the first lockdown was implemented became an impossible mission.

"Before COVID-19 came in, we would travel freely to districts to gather news. Now, the fact that we were restricted, some of our newsrooms had some challenges as we could not cover stories in districts because we could not manage to get there. To top it off, the continuous harassment by security officers interfered with our efforts to gather news as journalists in Uganda," said Twizukye.

He later moved to a place that was closer to his workplace as boda (motorbikes) were not allowed to operate at night.

Effect of COVID-19 on Journalists

Innocent Atuganyira who works at a local media house shared that the one thing that came from the pandemic is the fact that it taught them to execute their duties digitally as journalists. For instance, making phone calls, press addresses being done on Google, Zoom, Phone calls and others.

Innocent who later tested positive for the corona virus [wrote an article](#) about his experience with COVID-19 as a journalist in Uganda. In that article, he noted the high levels of stigma even after he was cleared.

“Although I was now free to go to the field, it wasn’t easy. Most of my colleagues avoided me, saying I was a victim. My discharge certificate was unbelievable to many. Till now, some of them call me contact of ‘contactees’ because I was apparently the first journalist in Greater Masindi to test positive for COVID-19,” he wrote.

Another journalist, Emmanuel Arineitwe, also contracted COVID-19 while in the field.

“I contracted COVID-19 during the first wave in Uganda and if you don’t work at my workplace, then you don’t get paid. I was not paid for the days I was off when I had the virus. This has been a real challenge to myself and to other journalists,” he shared.

The effects of COVID were felt by journalists as some lost their jobs while others were forced to adapt to the new normal of the changes in reporting brought about by COVID.

Conclusion

The fragile relationship between the State and the media in Uganda has worsened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government has an obligation to protect all media practitioners from any kind of violation of their rights as provided in the constitution. There is a need to have a strong institutional response to deal with challenges that journalists have been going through since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zambia



Elections may mark turning point in media freedom

By Melini Moses

Media industry and media freedom in Zambia

Zambia is a landlocked country in south-central Africa. According to the [Britannica](#), it derived its name from the great Zambezi River. The country is home to over [18 million people](#).

According to the [Independent Broadcasting Authority](#), the country has more than 100 radio stations and more than 40 television stations. Zambia has several [newspapers](#), most of which operate online. Two of its daily newspapers are owned by the state.

The covid-19 pandemic and response in Zambia

According to the Ministry of Health, the first case of coronavirus in Zambia was announced on the March 18, 2020, in the country's capital, Lusaka.

The [Minister of Health](#) announced that there would be enhanced surveillance at all the country's ports of entry after COVID-19 was first discovered in China. The country also set up a contingency emergency fund, to enhance the Zambian National Public Health Institute and its partners efforts to prepare for the pandemic.

According to the [Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene](#), public health communications regarding the pandemic have taken place largely through Facebook and local radio, making the health ministry's messages widely available.

According to [KPMG](#), Zambia had in April 2020 predominantly focused on putting in place a range of measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and minimise its impact on the Zambian economy.

COVID-19 statistics published by the [Zambia National Public Health Institute](#) show that there were more than 287 000 cases of COVID-19 by early January, with more than 3 800 people losing their lives to the virus. According to [Reuters](#), Zambia has administered close to two million doses of COVID-19 vaccines by early January 2022. Assuming every person needed and received two doses, the country may have vaccinated just over 5% of its population.

COVID-19's impact on journalism

Adjusting to the pandemic has been a challenge for journalists in the country, who have had to find new and innovative ways of doing their job.

Mungu FM Media Owner and Journalist, Liwena Mukeya, told fraycollege researcher Brenda Zulu that it's been a difficult journey.

“Personally, adjusting to the new normal has been the greatest challenge I have faced during COVID-19 times, both at work and at home,” he said.

Mukeya says some companies shut down because of the impact of COVID 19, which has had a ripple effect on people's personal growth and development, due to the limited opportunities available.

A researcher at the Zambia Editors Forum, Gershom Musonda says staff at the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation started working on a rotational basis at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Some sources could not be reached to do one-on-one or face-to-face interviews due to health restrictions. So, we had to make use of mobile phones and the internet. There has been a sense of constant fear of catching the virus, especially after close to 50 workmates tested positive for COVID-19. Nine died and four lost spouses,” he said.

Musonda said journalists raised many other issues.

“There was discrimination against those perceived or known to have underlying health conditions. Management had access to confidential information of employees and in some cases, that was used as a yardstick to send some people on leave. This was vivid before vaccines were made available. Management decided to keep a lean team of employees to prevent the spread of COVID-19.” he said.

Musonda says during the pandemic, the government owned [Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation](#) benefited from the economic support structure put in place by the state.

“ZNBC benefited greatly from government’s digital migration programme that coincided with the pandemic. All they need is initiative to use their new capacity to exploit economic opportunities that have come with the pandemic,” said Musonda.

According to an [IPSOS survey](#) conducted in April 2020, 69% of Zambians trusted the information provided by government on COVID-19 and 68% were satisfied with the government’s response to the pandemic. However, Musonda believes the levels of trust may be falling.

“Misinformation online has even threatened the existence of traditional media, including ZNBC. Online and social media platforms produced news instantly and it was interactive. This meant that our news was always stale and weak,” explained Musonda.

He says misinformation also impacted the public’s response.

“One example is vaccine reluctance, as people relied mostly on misinformation and traditional media remained rigid and reactive,” said Musonda.

In August 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, Zambians headed to the polls to [vote](#) for a new President. Reporters had to therefore focus on election coverage, while keeping the nation informed on the latest from the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19’s impact on media freedom

Civil Society Organisations led by the [Chapter One Foundation](#) strongly condemned the threats against and harassment of *News Diggers*, a registered independent media house, over their investigation into Honeybee Pharmacy.

According to [Freedom House](#) an online journalist was physically attacked, along with a newspaper reporter in May 2021. It said the government also sought to intimidate online critics.

On legal issues, *MISA ZAMBIA’s First Quarter State of Media* report noted that the [Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act](#) No. 2 of 2021, was enacted in March 2021. The Act was a point of [controversy](#).

The Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act 2021 provisions were revoked on 12th August 2021. On this day, when the national election also took place, access to social media was blocked. According to [Access Now](#), authorities in Zambia intentionally blocked access to social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. This action also affected the media.

The [Zambian government](#), through its Information and Broadcasting Services Permanent Secretary, Amos Malupenga, denied the reports, calling them “malicious.” He also reportedly said that the government would not tolerate abuse of the internet and if any mischief occurred, there would be no hesitation to take appropriate measures.

Mukeya said it was difficult for him to gauge whether media freedom under the new government had been influenced by COVID-19. However, looking back at the rule of the Patriotic Front government, he cited the example of *Prime TV* owner Gerald Shawa, whose television station was closed after he asked the government to make funds available to enable the station to run programmes on COVID-19. The station [re-opened](#) after the new government was voted into power.

The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) noted that ruling party supporters on December 21 2021 raided Mpika FM Radio and stopped a programme where opposition Member of Parliament Francis Robert Kapyanga was being hosted.

On a positive note, the Technical Working Group on Statutory Media Self-Regulation on November 11, 2021 presented the draft *Zambia Media Council Bill* to the [Ministry of Information and Media](#). The Access to Information Bill has been stalled since it was first raised for discussion in 2002. The newly elected government has shared the draft bill with civil society organisations and the media for review.

Conclusion

The [Constitution of Zambia](#) and the the [Bill of Rights](#) guarantees freedom of the media but it’s evident that the state still has a long way to go in ensuring that these rights are freely exercised. COVID-19 has changed the way the media operates, and journalists have had to use innovative methods to continue performing the tasks required of them. One of the major changes which has taken place is a shift to online platforms. There is need for an open line of communication between the Zambian government and media houses in order to foster a healthy relationship.

Zimbabwe



Personal impacts of the pandemic

By Ina Skosana

Media industry and media freedom in Zimbabwe

The arrest of [arrest of journalist](#), Hopewell Chin'ono, made international headlines during the pandemic but [media repression](#) in the southern African country of Zimbabwe dates as far back as the 1960s when the country was under white minority rule.

The country's media [landscape](#) is made up of a mix of the stated owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and number of private newspapers and radio stations.

Little has changed since the government's very public clashes with journalists under former [president Robert Mugabe](#). Media freedom in Zimbabwe remains precarious. The country rates 130 out of 180 on the [World Press Freedom Index](#) compiled by reporters without borders.

According to the International Press Institute, there was a [surge](#) of arrests and harassment of Zimbabwean journalists during the pandemic.

COVID-19 pandemic and response

The first case of COVID-19 in the country was reported in January 2020. [By mid- December 2021](#), a cumulative of 155,817 cases were confirmed and 4,723 deaths reported. The COVID-19 [vaccine rollout](#) in Zimbabwe started in February 2021. By December 2021 an [estimated](#) 23% of the population was fully vaccinated.

In April 2020, the government introduced a lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. It issued [stay-at-home](#) measures allowing people to leave their homes only for the most essential of reasons. [Restriction levels](#) have been eased and increased as the country moved in and out of COVID-19 waves.

"Lack of care for one another as human beings"

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way TV, print and radio journalist, Nelly Moyo (not her real name) works. She and her colleagues had to get innovative by producing shows remotely and changing how they interact with guests. While her job remained largely secure, Moyo was confronted with a lot of challenges in her personal life with little to no support.

"I actually had COVID-19 myself. It was not pleasant. And it affected me quite a deal quite a lot," she said.

Moyo recalls being so ill that she was unable to do her various jobs.

"I was stuck in that house and also just physically unwell. Even after I was negative (for COVID-19) I was still not well. So, it was difficult for me to study, I still had aches and pains."

Moyo had support from her workplace where she was able to get tested for COVID-19 and was given access to medication. "But I think it wasn't it wasn't enough. I'm a breadwinner and a single parent."

While her extended family offered some help, Moyo said the company she worked for "didn't even know where to begin to help".

"I may work for a communication company. I think there's still a lack of communication within the organisation. A lot of my bosses didn't even know I had COVID-19," she said.

In addition to dealing with the physical effects of being ill with COVID-19, Moyo struggled mentally. Seeing the daily reporting on the number of people infected with the disease and the many deaths left her traumatised.

“Sometimes these numbers included people that you actually know. So even when I got COVID-19, every time I heard those numbers, I would think ‘I’m one of those’.”

The whole experience changed how she viewed her relationships at work.

“We spend a lot more time at work than at home. So, there should be an understanding in the working space that we are family. When we are family, we need to check up on everybody. I personally check up on everybody. But this was not reciprocated.”

Moyo’s story shows that beyond the professional challenges journalists were faced with over the course of the pandemic, the toll on individuals were worse in some cases.

As someone with multiple streams of income, she was hard hit by the lockdowns imposed to curb the spread of the virus. Some of the companies she moonlights for had to scale back and she saw her income decrease.

“There was a lack of humanity. Because even though the government had told landlords to give people who are renting some respite, my landlord was expecting payment all throughout.”

While her job security was not affected, Moyo struggled to make ends meet due to significant cuts in her income.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe’s journalists continue to face challenges that include press censorship, harassment and the need to build a sustainable media in a fragile economy.

4. Appendix IV: Researchers

Azzeddine Bensouiah

Journalist by training and profession, with thirty years of professional experience during which he had to cover key events in his country, Algeria, but also in the countries of the region. He has also spoken at with many regional and international summits and events.

During his career, he also had to cover major elections in Tunisia, Morocco, and even the USA on two occasions, not to mention all the elections in Algeria.

Trilingual (Arabic, French, English), he has had several times to direct the editorial staff of national dailies, as he worked with many international press agencies.

Brenda Nglazi Zulu

Brenda Zulu is a journalist and blogger, founder of the Africa Interactive Media (AIM) and the Zambian Bloggers Network (ZBN). She is a technology and science steward, designer and builder of online interaction spaces (blogs, dgroups, online campaigns, collaborations, events, new media teams, learning groups). She has done extensive work with “Web 2.0 and Web3.0 gatherings and online focus groups.

Brenda has experience in working in intercultural settings and is a team player working with people from Sub-Saharan Africa and produce bilingual publications in French and English which have also included African local languages.

Cynthia Owuor

Cynthia Owuor is a communication and research specialist with an eight-year track record of quantitative and qualitative data collection, team supervision, fieldwork management, client service and social media management. Cynthia’s research skills have been honed through various research and training programmes through the SBO Research Company and Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

Cynthia holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Journalism and Media Studies with a major in public relations from the University of Nairobi. She also holds a diploma in journalism from Shang Tao College, Nairobi.

Dhiaeddine Bourezg

Dhiaeddine Bourezg is an Algerian freelancer journalist, he previously worked for Echorouk News TV and is currently freelancing.

He holds a high-tech media certificate specializing in WAP programming and multimedia development from the Institute of Training Bin Toubal Salman Tebessa, and a BA in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Larbi Tebessa, Tebessa.

Douce Namwezi N’lbamba

Namwezi N’lbamba is a multimedia journalist and founder of Uwezo Afrika Initiative (www.uwezoafrika.org), a non-profit initiative promoting women’s empowerment through journalism, job training and social entrepreneurship. Douce started producing radio at the age of 16 when she joined a youth initiative of Radio Maria, a local catholic radio station. At that time the Congo was at war, and Douce reported stories on former child soldiers, and mass crimes of rape. 2 years after, she joined AFEM, the Women Media Association where she spent 10 years. Douce, with her fellows, found MAMA RADIO, the first women’s radio station in Congo devoted entirely to promotion of gender equality. Douce’s work has been recognized with awards from the [bbc100 most influential women in 2020](#), the “100 jeunes pages d’espoir” (in partnership with UNESCO), The IWFM’s African Great Lakes Initiative, The Center for Non-violence and Peace Studies at the University of Rhode Island and UN Women. She currently lives in Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of Congo with her husband and three children.

Francis Kokutse

Francis Kokutse, a 1990 Press Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge is a free-lance journalist based in Accra, Ghana. He is the Ghana Bureau Chief for Africa Today magazine. He also writes for several other media organisations including, Associated Press, Dow Jones Newswires, and the Inter Press Service.

He was born in Accra and trained as a journalist. He started work with the Ghanaian Times in Accra and later moved to work for African Economic Digest (AED) in London. Later he joined NewsAfrica magazine as the Assistant Editor also in London. During the 1980’s he served as the Ghana Correspondent for many media organisations including All Africa Press Service of Nairobi, Kenya and Southern African Economist of Harare, Zimbabwe.

Ina Skosana

Ina Skosana is the health and medicine editor at Conversation Africa. She was a health researcher at Africa Check based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Prior to that she was a journalist at Bhekisisa, the Mail & Guardian's Centre for Health Journalism. Before joining Bhekisisa in February 2013, she was the health reporter at The New Age newspaper. Ina has won several awards including the Discovery Health Journalist of the Year and the Discovery Young Health Reporter of the Year.

Melini Moses

Melini Moses is an experienced News Editor with a demonstrated history of working in the broadcast media industry. More than 21 years of experience in Community, Private and Public broadcasting. Skilled in Breaking News, Investigative Journalism, media relations, radio production, social media and corporate communications.

Rhodes University Graduate, World Press Institute Fellow, Dag Hammarskjold Fellow, Mail and Guardian Top 200 Young South Africans (2013), CNN Africa Radio Journalist of the Year (2011). Judge in Liberty Radio Awards and SAB Environment Awards.