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# Coverage of Senegal's pandemic response in western online news and algorithm filtering

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## Abstract

Senegal, a small and politically stable coastal West African nation, has been hailed for its rapid response to combat the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19), for which it has received significant attention in Western media. This essay examines Western online news coverage of Senegal's swift action against COVID-19 and the innovation the country employed to tackle the outbreak. It does so against the backdrop of the international flow of information and how algorithm filtering challenges this notion.



# Introduction

A simple Google search for news about Senegal's response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) provides a snapshot of news recommendation systems and search algorithms at work.

To access news about Senegal from outside the country, one would have to rely on Western search engines, such as Google and Bing. A search query for 'Senegal news' yields results from major Western online media and, on closer inspection, these organisations rely primarily on international news agencies like *The Associated Press* (AP), *Reuters* and *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) for their coverage of the country.

The proliferation of digital media in the last few decades has improved access to technology that has democratised news and, in theory, should have translated into a more equitable flow of information between nations.

These technologies have improved access to news from distant parts of the world, but recommendation systems and search engine algorithms may negate these advancements as personal preference trumps general interest.

## News from Senegal

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the measures nations implemented to curb the spread of the disease have dominated the news cycle since the first cases were reported in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019.

Amid the reporting of the exponential spread of the contagion and rising mortality rates, there have been some examples of positive developments in the fight against the virus – whether it is the development of potential treatments or improving testing capabilities.

The West African nation of Senegal was one of the first sub-Saharan Africa countries to report a positive COVID-19 case, on 2 March 2020.

At the time, Senegal caught the attention of the global media with the announcement in early March that it was developing a COVID-19 diagnostic kit that would cost \$1 and return a result within 10 minutes. The diagnostic kit would work similarly to a pregnancy test and would significantly reduce the turnaround time from testing to producing a result.

Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) noted that 'the Senegalese team, which helped the WHO through the region's Ebola epidemic from 2014 to 2016, was one of the first two labs on the continent to be able to identify the coronavirus, fielding samples from other countries'.

The West African nation also adopted some of the most stringent measures on the continent in its initial response to curb the spread of COVID-19 when President Macky Sall declared a state of emergency on 23 March 2020.

## Positive developments in a time of negative sentiments

Senegal's efforts to limit the spread of the pandemic received extensive coverage from global media outlets during March and April.

Following on the news about the testing kits, Senegalese engineering students from Dakar's *École Supérieure Polytechnique* made headlines for their contribution to the fight against the virus. The students designed automatic sanitiser dispensers and medical robots that would reduce medical staff's exposure to infected patients.

According to *France 24* (2020), the medical robots would be 'guided by a mounted camera and controlled via an app' that would allow doctors to communicate with patients remotely.

Highlighting African innovation, news about Senegal's rapid and innovative response to the COVID-19 pandemic received coverage in some of the largest Western media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and *CNN*.

Coverage of the diagnostic kit was not limited to the so-called Western media, but it also received attention in the rest of the African continent and further afield. An *AFP* article by Ba (2020) detailed how a Senegalese TV drama 'in the Wolof language dubbed *The Virus* has aired on social media and on a private channel, focusing on the day-to-day of life during the pandemic'. The article forms part of the narrative of how Senegal is using innovative ways to educate people about COVID-19 and how to stem its spread.

In an article for American non-profit media organisation *NPR*, Shryock (2020) provides an overview of how Senegal tackled the outbreak, saying 'in this country of 16 million known for its peaceful democracy and sense of community, Senegal's response to the coronavirus is notable not only for its humanity but for its thoroughness'.

The Senegalese government's initial swift action was born from its response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014. The country set up a Health Emergency Operation Centre that served as a leading entity to combat the COVID-19 outbreak. As noted by Shryock (2020):

*Over the past five years, that center, working with the ministry of health and the support of international partners such as the World Health Organization, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF, have run simulations of mock outbreaks and crafted emergency measures to activate in case of an epidemic.*

# What does the coverage tell us?

Thussu (2007) contends that the 'convergence of television and broadband has opened up new opportunities for the flow of media content'. He adds:

*Though the Northern conglomerates continue to shape the global media landscape, the flow of global media products is not just one way from the media-rich North (and within it the Anglo-American axis) to the media-poor South. There is evidence that in an increasingly global communication environment, new transnational networks have emerged, including from the periphery to the metropolitan centres of global media.*

He argues that the traditional one-way flow has been replaced by 'multiple and horizontal flows, as subaltern media content providers have emerged to service an ever-growing geo-cultural market'.

At first glance, the extensive coverage of Senegal's response to the pandemic seems to challenge the hegemonic status quo of a one-way flow of information from North to the South.

The traditional international flow of information refers to an unbalanced and one-directional flow of news from the rich and developed world or 'the Global North' to the developing nations in the 'Global South'.

According to Paterson and Sreberny (2004), the lopsided movement has been the subject of academic study for decades and received global attention in the mid-1970s which led to the call for a so-called New Information and Communication Order. They note that 'debate about the amount, the focus, and the adequacy of international news coverage is not new but rather one of the longest-standing political and academic debates with international communications'.

Paterson and Sreberny (2004) also write that international news flows have been dominated by a handful of Western news agencies like *Reuters*, *AFP* and *AP* serving as gatekeepers of the global news system. They add:

*There was a quantitative imbalance in news flow, with the Third World receiving far more materials about the First World than vice-versa. There was also far more attention paid to the continual coverage of the global centres of the industrial world which contrasts with the intermittent images of the South in some form of crisis, whether Haiti, Bangladesh or Zimbabwe, whether political, economic or natural disaster.*

International media agencies have played a leading role in the dissemination of the news about the development of the Senegalese testing kit and other innovations.

Chang, Itai and Dong (2009) write that the dependency theory represents a one-way flow from the centre to the nations on the 'periphery', saying:

*...the dependency theory postulates that, as a result of such historical forms of dependence as colonialism and interstate economic exploitation, the global system is fundamentally a two-tier concentric market, with the western developed countries and Japan at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery (e.g. Dos Santos, 1996; So, 1990), especially countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Oceania (e.g. Kim and Barnett, 1996).*

This pattern is reflected in the coverage from Western media during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Western media's gaze turned to the African continent over the low rate of COVID-19 infection despite exponential community spread in nations like Italy, Spain and the UK.

Scientists purportedly scratched their heads over this phenomenon, raising the question of whether African countries' health systems would cope should the virus gain a foothold on the continent. This is demonstrated through the reporting of Hodal and Okiror (2020) in *The Guardian*, Letzing (2020) for the *World Economic Forum* and Wood (2020) for *The Atlantic*, to name a few. But, as mentioned above, Senegal induced positive sentiments as it took a leading role in the global battle against the disease.

Digital technology such as the internet enables the transnational flow of information, enabling news of Senegal's innovative efforts to combat COVID-19 to speedily reach other parts of the world.

While news from the Global South does reach audiences further afield, this reach is dependent on the size of the medium and who owns the platform.

Senegal's response to the pandemic may have received extensive coverage beyond its borders but it was still heavily slanted in favour of Western-dominated media, which dictate what news from the Global South reach audiences in the North.

## Effects of information filtering

Debates over the unequal flow of information may be moot considering the changing behaviour of news consumers.

The 2020 Reuters Institute Digital Report reveals an equal split between television and online as a source of news for consumers surveyed across five continents.

Some of the news that people access online is automatically selected through artificial intelligence and algorithm filtering based on their past search behaviour.

While organisations like *CNN*, *BBC* and others may report on Senegal's successes in combating the spread of COVID-19 or other advancements, the news may not reach a person who has filtered out news from different parts of the world, or news that does not reflect their tastes or interests.

According to Liu, Peter and Elin (2010), information filtering is the process by which platforms like Google and other recommender systems select news based on data from a person's behavioural traits, interests and preferences. They note:

*Information filtering plays a central role in recommender systems, as it is able to recommend information that has not been rated before and accommodates the individual differences between users. In the domain of news, this technology particularly aims at aggregating news articles according to user interests and creating a 'personal newspaper' for each user.*

Users in the Global North whose news diets consist of regular visits to outlets that publish a balance of views and content from other parts of the world are more likely to come across news about the Global South. Competing for a share of consumers' attention in the Global North, however, becomes a more significant challenge for sub-Saharan countries like Senegal thanks to recommendation systems, algorithms and automation. Unless they are part of the diaspora, consumers who have no interest in news from Senegal may not be aware of the country's achievements in combating COVID-19 due to information filtering.

## Conclusion

The deliberate search for news about Senegal's response to the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to induce the desired result. The converse may be true for people who get their news through algorithmic selection or recommendation systems based on their previous behaviour. Past behaviour is not necessarily an accurate reflection of a person's interests.

News recommendation systems or algorithm filtering may further entrench a one-way or reduced international flow of information as consumers opt for more personalised news based on their interests and preferences.

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## About the author

Ockert de Villiers is a South African journalist with more than 14 years of experience working in the media industry. He has covered national and international news with a special focus on sport for organisations that include the *SA Press Association*, *Agence France-Presse*, *The Star*, and *Media24*. Ockert is pursuing his master's degree in Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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## African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19

This essay forms part of the *African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19* series. It is an output from a 2020 master's course in international communication at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), where discussions revolved around the coverage of the African dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic by international and African media. After the completion of the course, students submitted assignments in the form of essays, choosing one African country and its media or any international media outlet as the focus of analysis. The students made presentations on their essays in a workshop program and received feedback from a group of 10 African journalism and media scholars under the auspices of the African Media Salon. These essays, therefore, constitute an early contribution of knowledge on the intersection of media and international communication, drawing on concepts such as public diplomacy, soft power and the international political economy of communication.

The series is a partnership of Wits University's Journalism Department, the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) and the Africa Portal, a project of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).



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Photo credit: A hygienist looks out of a decontamination area in a COVID-19 coronavirus treatment centre that cares for positive patients that show little or no symptoms in Dakar on 26 June 2020. (John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images)

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