

ESSAY
SERIES

African
Journalism
and Media
in the
Time of
COVID-19

DECEMBER
2020



Agenda setting unpacked: A review of Zimbabwe's approach to reporting during COVID-19

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Abstract

The right to freedom of information is highly sought after by media practitioners. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many changes for journalists and their ability to freely disseminate information related to it. In countries such as Zimbabwe, where journalists are subjected to harsh punishment and even imprisonment when the state is opposed to what is being published, the protection of media experts and freedom has come under scrutiny. Not surprisingly, the World Press Freedom Index has ranked Zimbabwe within the red to nearly black category for media freedom,

highlighting the dangerous circumstances within which its journalists operate. Moreover, in most countries, presidents and prime ministers are now emerging as important agenda setters, framers and representors of the debate around the pandemic – roles that should be subjected to scrutiny. For many journalists, there lies a concern that even when the pandemic has abated, freedoms that have been suspended due to it will be challenging to restore, especially in states where free and fair expression is already fragile.

Introduction

Besova (2008) highlights that it is hard to envision our lives not persistently being bombarded by news about wars, economic changes, terrorist attacks and catastrophes that happen inside and outside our countries. As such, the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that has gripped the world is another major occurrence that nations have to deal with. To keep people informed during these uncertain times, newsrooms worldwide have made pandemic coverage a priority. Although its arrival in Africa came much later compared to other parts of the world such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), COVID-19 has taken precedence in African communication, media and journalism. The coverage of this pandemic has posed a challenge to media freedom as most governments continually introduce measures to prevent and/or curb the spread of what is termed false or fake news relating to COVID-19.

Besova (2008) notes:

The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event. The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind... We, therefore, rely on the media to explore the world around us and to construct our 'reality'.

The above quote emphasises the importance of accountable reporting by news organisations and bodies. However, reporting in Africa has sometimes shown 'a lack of uniformity in terms of constitutional mandates protecting press freedom [which] are testament to the limits on journalistic integrity and expression in many states' (Penfold 2020). The violation of media freedom has been a recurring phenomenon. Madikiza and Bornman (2007) note that politically, global communications do not only challenge the legitimacy, sovereignty and authority of the nation state, but also have far-reaching implications for international relations.

This essay seeks to examine the impact of COVID-19 coverage on media and journalism as it relates to press freedom in sub-Saharan Africa. This essay will unpack how the implementation of repressive laws against press freedom has affected authentic and fair journalism as well as media freedom, thereby leading to orchestrated agenda setters, representors and framers of debate on the pandemic (Wekesa 2020).

The Press Freedom Index

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is an international not-for-profit nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that safeguards the right to freedom of information. The NGO has established an annual World Press Freedom Index to provide information on the level of freedom available to the media in 180 countries, by assessing information about advances and declines in media freedom in each jurisdiction (RSF 2020). The release of this year's figures coincidentally came during extensive coverage of COVID-19 around the world and the results were telling.

According to the index, '25 out of 54 states [in Africa] appear in red or black, indicating that journalists, news houses and online portals in these states work in dangerous conditions' (RSF 2020). There were some positive results, however, as Namibia was ranked 23rd out of 180 states, while South Africa, Ghana and Cabo Verde were ranked 25th, 30th and 31st respectively. These positive rankings indicate that journalism and media in these countries enjoy constitutional protection against threats (Penfold 2020).

The same cannot be said for Zimbabwe, which was ranked 129th. The index noted that 'extremely harsh media laws are still in effect' and that Zimbabwean journalists are often subjected to harassment and intimidation by the security apparatus (RSF 2000).

Despite a High Court ruling in April 2020 that ordered police in Zimbabwe to stop harassing and arresting journalists for doing their jobs during the national COVID-19 lockdown, numerous incidents of press freedom violations have ensued.

Indicative of these circumstances, on 23 May 2020, *Voice of America*, an online news portal, reported that two journalists had been arrested for breaking lockdown regulations while reporting on COVID-19-related measures set to be implemented by the government (Mavhunga 2020). However, other platforms reported in June 2020 that one of the arrested journalists had helped to expose a case of overbilling for medical supplies to combat the pandemic. This story unpacked how several persons close to the government, including the Zimbabwean president's son, had been linked to the scandal. Journalists reporting on the state's failure to implement proper measures to fight the spread of COVID-19 were arrested under a claim of spreading or reporting false news or misinformation to the public.

This incident followed a Twitter post from the Zimbabwean Presidency at the start of the pandemic. Ndavaningi 'Nick' Mangwana, Secretary in the Ministry of Information, tweeted on 27 March 2020 that 'legal instruments are being put in place to deal with and punish those who cause unnecessary alarm and despondency through social and other media. During this emergency, we need to act responsibly' (Moyo 2020).

The incident in Zimbabwe in the context of media freedom baffled human rights lawyers in the country, who said the arrests and the constant suppression of journalists demonstrated

that freedom of expression was still in dire jeopardy (Mavhunga 2020). Organisations such as RSF called for the unconditional release of the journalists at the time (RSF 2020).

According to the International Press Institute, more than a dozen journalists were arrested in Zimbabwe since March, and various media rights organisations have since issued public statements condemning the treatment of the Zimbabwean press and urging authorities not to use the pandemic as ‘an excuse to silence’ the media (International Press Institute 2020).

This year’s World Press Freedom Index notes that 24 arrests, 20 assaults and 69 attacks against journalists by the police occurred over a period of five weeks in Africa, highlighting the fact that there has been a rapid increase in intimidation, threats and the introduction of new legislation to control the spread of information during the pandemic. Indeed, analysed trends illustrate that governments and authorities in Africa are empowered to use COVID-19 to perpetually prevent press freedom (RSF 2020). However, as the world becomes more globalised, knowledge about foreign countries becomes more important to the average citizen (Besova 2008). Therefore, the Zimbabwean experience cannot go ignored, especially since there have been such indecent acts of violence against those reporting on serious matters.

Agenda setters and the pandemic

The pandemic has led most countries to declare a state of emergency or implement disaster management legislation. In Africa, about 23 countries have declared a state of emergency in various forms (ICNL 2020). As emerging concepts in the media and journalism literature – such as false news, misinformed reporting and fake news – have become more prevalent, authorities have endeavoured to control information on COVID-19.

COVID-19 is a perfect illustration of how a news item can go from being localised, in a small place in Wuhan, China, to being an issue of global concern, rendering it both a domestic and global news item (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Wekesa 2020). However, as noted by Agenda Setting Theory, defined as a correlation that exists between the ‘emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (eg, based on relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences’ (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, p. 10), it becomes problematic for information dissemination to be regulated by a specific country or authority, given that the nature of this particular news item is global. One would expect these channels to comprise trusted and official agenda setters when it comes to informing governments and citizens on the development of the pandemic. Yet, in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, governments are more fixated on the control of information, so much so that they are now turning what they describe as disinformation or false news into a crime to be used against journalists who report on anything seen to be antagonising to the agenda set by the government.

In most countries, presidents and prime ministers are now emerging as important agenda setters, framers and representors of the debate around the pandemic. These representatives report on the progression of the virus and what their respective governments are doing to curb its spread. Simultaneously, these leaders introduce intervention plans to address economic deficits and other issues, such as food security, which have emerged as a result of imposed lockdown regulations. However, the measures introduced by these agenda setters in African states should be subjected to scrutiny by the media under the protection of free and fair expression (Hodgson and Mavedzenge 2020).

The criminalisation of false news in South Africa, a country that is a trendsetter on the continent, is one such example of overreach. This year the country implemented its National Disaster Management Act, which is separate from the constitutional mandate for press freedom (Hodgson and Mavedzenge 2020). Within the Southern African Development Community, Botswana, eSwatini and Zimbabwe have followed in South Africa's footsteps, effectively criminalising the reporting of false news and thus placing press freedom under threat. While governments may need to control the information that is shared on the virus, the balance between trying to curb the spread of false information and controlling the public narrative can sway dangerously towards the suspension of rights (Penfold 2020).

Conclusion

An international issue identified in this essay is the state of media freedom in Africa amid coverage of COVID-19. Agenda Setting Theory, which addresses how these news items are covered – whether through traditional print media, broadcasting or via digital networks – makes audiences notice and assess how governments use states of emergency to control information and debates relating to COVID-19, thus rendering them agenda setters and framers.

The essay also discussed how this approach has damaged press freedom and stymied the growth of fair journalism on the continent. Empirical examples of Zimbabwe and multiple accounts of threats and attacks on journalists reported by the World Press Freedom Index have raised concerns about whether some regulations passed during the pandemic will remain even after COVID-19. Some reporters have even expressed concerns that the increase in repression will remain the status quo. Indeed, only a few African constitutions are robust enough to reassert the freedoms removed under this crisis.

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About the author

Anda Mbikwana is a dynamic, forward-looking creative and critical thinker, a seasoned journalist, a former news editor and columnist with a solid background on reputation management, public relations and communication and stakeholder liaison management. He has over eight years' experience working in local government as an assistant director and acted as the spokesperson for the City of Joburg Municipality. He has extensive experience in the private sector, having worked for a reputable PR and communications company. Anda cut his journalism teeth in 2005, working for various mainstream media houses. He has received several accolades in recognition of his work as a journalist and for his opinion pieces/ letters. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Acknowledgment

This publication was made possible by the support of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) through the CHARM (Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development in Sub-Saharan Africa) project.



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: Zimbabwean journalist and documentary film maker Hopewell Chin'ono (2nd L) consults with his lawyers Beatrice Mtetwa (L) and Doug Coltart (R) while police search his office in Harare on 21 July 2020, a day after he was arrested and charged with incitement to commit public violence. (Jekesai Njikizana/AFP via Getty Images)

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