



COVID-19 and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

Media Viability, Framing
and Health Communication

Edited by
Carol Azungi Dralega
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*We dedicate this volume to all frontline workers particularly journalists whose lives
have been impacted by the pandemic.
Special dedications to: Ama'ata buari, Amani, Aleni and Anders as well as Cyprian
Okirigi and Francis Ejobi.*

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Foreword

COVID-19 and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa is among the first books uniting scholars to examine media viability, framing and health crisis communication connected to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. The findings may be applicable also to other global crises, both in and outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, and may help practitioners and scholars alike to understand the complexity of preconditions and structures of media ecologies.

The highly diverse cases are characterised by the authors' first-hand knowledge of the media in the Sub-Saharan African context. Focussing on newly collected cases from a broad number of countries, the authors study whether the pandemic changed the conditions for media viability, framing, and outreach. It also covers concrete examples of how the specific health communication led to changes in social behaviour and mental health. Last, but not least, it provides gendered and marginalisation lenses to understand barriers for media users and media producers.

Throughout the pandemic, publishing houses in Sub-Saharan Africa and around the world faced severe obstacles. In different ways, the pandemic influenced the room for manoeuvres. Different conditions were involved and influenced whether media content was published, and with what quality. Three factors were key: political conditions, financial resources, and the level of journalistic expertise. If there was political room for manoeuvre, if there were sufficient financial resources, and if there was a high level of competence, the media was often found to disseminate independent, critical, and research-based information, monitor public institutions, and provide a platform for public debate and dialogue.

The authors connect these factors with media viability and media framing. Based on empirical data and theoretical perspectives, they challenge traditional understandings of media. To understand factors preventing and promoting a critical and fact-based media during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers looked at both the media's finances and priorities, the individual journalist's competence and resilience, and the political influence that publishing houses and journalists were exposed to through propaganda and restrictions on media freedom.

How Did the Political Context Shape the Media During the Pandemic?

A free and responsible media can strengthen democratic and economic development by giving public access to verified information about issues of importance

to the society. The conditions for journalism vary from country to country. In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the conditions under which journalism operates are challenging. The pandemic led to further limitations. Several African countries launched restrictive media laws curbing the freedom of expression, including the media freedom and the right to information. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities in several countries further tightened the grip on the media, with economic sanctions, threats, and violence. Journalists and media personnel were at higher risks of being attacked physically and psychologically than prior to the pandemic.

Media's ability to publish COVID-related articles was restricted by governments at various levels. Strict media guidelines and restrictions were imposed and political propaganda and disinformation were circulated, at the expense of evidence-based journalism.

This book examines how contextual conditions hindered journalists from doing their job during a pandemic. The scholars document a broad number of conditions and confirm that the pandemic made the profession of journalism much more challenging. The book sheds light on how state monopoly over media institutions can hinder the migration from analogue to digital broadcasting. Interestingly, it also documents how the pandemic facilitated a gearshift towards a more digital and more free broadcasting environment in some places. The shift led to pockets of strengthened political participation and freedom of expression, at the expense of the governments' control of major publishing houses. Examples of these dynamics were cited in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.

How Did the Publishing Houses' Financial Situation Influence Media Coverage During the Pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when the media in Sub-Saharan Africa was on the verge of financial collapse. The older economic models were breaking down, sales were collapsing, and technologies were outdated. Audiences moved online and anybody that could write a journalistic piece gained ground. With social media's emergence, people's willingness to pay for journalistic products also diminished. Tech companies and advertising agencies were taking the lion's share of adverts. On top of this crisis, the coronavirus spread, changing everything.

With the emergence of social media and with the flight of advertisers from classic publishing houses to social media, the income base shrunk. The media in Sub-Saharan Africa had, in general, limited revenues from newspaper sales or advertising sales, compared to the media in other continents. The newspapers often made losses and survived on funds from politicians or business actors, often with specific agendas. Many publishing houses failed to give their journalists employment contracts. Some did not even pay salaries; instead, they expected journalists to collect salaries by writing promotional articles, or by coupage (e.g., blackmailing). The economic situation of publishing houses in Sub-Saharan Africa was already demanding before COVID-19 as a result of scarce resources and down-prioritisation of research dissemination. The pandemic made the financial situation more pressing.

This book has a unique approach to how media institutions fared during challenging financial situations. It shows how casual sales of newspapers were affected by the lockdown, which consequently affected the advertising incomes and staff compensation. It provides insight into the multifaceted challenges female-owned community media face, compared to the mainstream male-owned media. It compares the effects of the pandemic in privately owned newspaper companies and government-controlled ones. It enlightens the reader about possibilities and limitations of different financial pull-factors. It assesses barriers to subscription-uptake and paywalls and possible enablers that make media users willing to pay for media content. It compares freemium and metered paywalls to other payment arrangements. Examples are given from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

Did the Working Conditions of the Journalists Changed During the Pandemic?

Many media houses in Sub-Saharan Africa prioritised political, financial, and sports news and had few (or no) health and science journalists on their payrolls. With the pandemic, these limitations became more precarious. The coronavirus was still new, and there was great uncertainty about spread, mutations, and effective treatment, in the media corps as in the society. At the same time, journalists' role of informing people accurately, timely, and evidence-based, had hardly been greater.

During the pandemic, many journalists from Sub-Saharan Africa lost their jobs, or their work conditions weakened and stress levels increased. With budget cuts in the publishing houses, there were less resources and fewer journalists to cover corona-related questions. The paradox was that while the media had less resources, journalism was even more needed.

The authors investigate how the pandemic made a difference among journalists and other staff working in the media and the communication business. Several complex issues shape the contexts of the journalists' work situation. Empirical examples document how the pandemic added health risks to the journalists' daily challenges. Reporters covering COVID-19 were in direct contact with the health threat they were reporting on, and without the protection offered to health personnel. They also lacked mental support and faced stigma, biases, and threats against their work and themselves. This book gives insight into coping mechanisms and crisis communication strategies, with examples from Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

What Was and Who were Given a Voice Through the Media?

During crises, media plays a key role in discourse setting, by the way they frame and communicate the crisis. How a crisis is framed by the media, and who the media choose to give a voice, play important roles for peoples' perceptions of the

crisis. The questions of framing and representation are important also to understand who gets a voice during times of crises. While people who are marginalised, excluded, or poor often are the most affected by national or global crises, and hence merit a voice in the media, the reality is that they often are non-represented in the media coverage.

The media has power and can directly influence people's health behaviour. The COVID-19 pandemic was nicknamed an infodemic since it came with confusion, distrust, and spreading of rumours, false news, and politicised news. When the media provided evidence-based information to the public, it enabled the users to take appropriate action and limited the spread of the virus. If the news instead was based on false or politicised information, people's actions were suited, and the virus likely to escalate.

This book gives insight into how the pandemic was covered and framed by traditional media and digital media in various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and shows how this could influence health-related perceptions and behaviour. It highlights examples of mainstream media using a fear-based framing strategy to try to make people take precautions and documents the counterproductivity of this strategy. It also investigates the gendered representation in print media and finds women severely underrepresented. When represented, they were mostly depicted in domestic roles, and portrayed as victims. Framing examples are given from Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Rwanda.

To What Extent Did Marginalised People Have Access to Information?

People who are marginalised or live-in poverty often lack access to information, either because the news is not available where they live or because it is unaffordable and inaccessible. There is little research on whether the pandemic changed the accessibility, availability, and affordability of media for people who were considered marginalised in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This book provides unique perspectives on who had access to information and who did not. The questions of availability and affordability were key. The book examines marginalised people's sources of information about COVID-19, their knowledge about the virus and their level of trust in the classical media channels. It concludes that health messages often do not reach marginalised groups. One of the reasons is the lack of social and cultural adjustments of the messaging. When the literacy (including digital literacy) level is low, the message needs to be shaped with extra care. The book also covers African diasporic communities. It investigates the COVID-19 information provided by the host government at different levels, measuring whether the information was understood and accepted by the diaspora.

This book brings together perspectives from 16 countries: drawn from Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan, Burundi, DRC, and Norway.

Closing

This book should be on all media studies' reading lists. It helps us understand measures that may have the potential to strengthen or weaken journalism and media in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. We get the full breadth of framework factors, from media production via the media houses' finances, priorities, and competence, to the media' room for manoeuvre and independence. We are given a unique focus on what kind of media products reach (or do not reach) marginalised people, and insight that is important during normal times. Equally unique is the insight to who are excluded from framed stories. The broad selection of topics is thoughtfully interlinked. The book gives a unique insight into real-life media challenges during a global crisis. The world needs this book and should take advantage of the findings and recommendations.

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