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The impact of COVID-19 on journalism in Emerging Economies and the Global South

Damian Radcliffe

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EMERGING ECONOMIES AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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FOREWORD



ANTONIO ZAPPULLA

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

Exactly a year ago, news of a flu-like deadly virus affecting the central region of China began grabbing international headlines. It was the beginning of what would become a global news event; one that would raise unique challenges for the information industry and usher in a series of lethal threats to media freedom.

Doing good journalism in the era of COVID-19 has been likened to war reporting. Journalists have been risking their lives to document the frontlines of a battle against an invisible enemy. They placed themselves at the epicentre of the disease to bring us the information we needed in order to protect ourselves.

Increasingly, though, it has become clear that the threat is not only in the form of a deadly virus. The pandemic is also being used by malign forces as an opportunity to disrupt, sabotage and hamper the free flow of trusted, independent information. The pandemic has been weaponised to kill free speech. COVID-19 has provided a convenient excuse to usher in a range of reporting restrictions on a sliding scale of severity – from limiting access to data, right through to punitive

legislation and even threats to life. In addition, the relentless onslaught of misinformation and disinformation riddling social media platforms has created real obstacles to truth-telling.

The media landscape is simply unrecognisable from a decade ago. Continually in flux, constantly buffeted by the next wave of change, the profession has faced unprecedented challenges - from upended business models, to the global erosion of trust in journalism, to fake news. The sweeping devastation of the global pandemic has exacerbated existing issues that had already caused fissures in the industry to a level where it is hard to see a clear path to recovery. As a result, 2021 will be a defining moment for the news business.

The challenges faced by journalists as a result of COVID-19 must be understood and addressed in order to safeguard a diverse and healthy media ecosystem and freedom of speech. From user behaviour to news consumption, to the approach adopted by social media platforms, this pandemic has set significant precedents. And whilst much of the turbulence in the profession has been well documented since the beginning of the pandemic, it became clear over the past few months that there was an additional, important and untold dimension to this narrative: the way the COVID crisis affected journalists and the media industry specifically in the Global South, where the Thomson Reuters Foundation has a very strong footprint, having trained and mentored thousands of journalists over the past 35 years.

This report captures the voices of our alumni who speak, for the first time, about how COVID-19 has impacted on their ability to do their job. Their real-life experiences bring an invaluable addition to the insights of industry leaders and media experts, also featured in this report. With grateful thanks to its author Damian Radcliffe, Professor of Journalism at the University of Oregon, this report uniquely brings together extensive research into how the pandemic has affected the profession of journalism in these specific regions, alongside personal experiences ranging from day-to-day operational challenges to broader press freedom issues, as told from those who have lived it.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation's focus on promoting and protecting media freedom has never been more relevant. We believe that societies around the world should be free, fair and informed. The media is fundamental to achieving this. And when information can be the means by which lives are lost or saved, news is an ever-more valuable currency.

It is our hope that this research provides useful industry insights for all those who seek to protect and promote a free and vibrant independent media – and beyond that, to uphold the fundamental civil liberty of free speech.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the 55 journalists, all alumni of training programmes run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, who kindly shared their thoughts and experiences with us. These first-hand insights on the impact of COVID-19 on journalism in 26 countries were gathered in September and November 2020. They form the bedrock of this report.

Alongside this, we are especially grateful to the eight expert commentators who shared more detailed responses with us. Their contributions, exploring the biggest challenges faced by journalists as a result of the coronavirus crisis, bookend the four main chapters of this paper.

This study would not have been possible without the enthusiasm, commitment and unwavering support of Antonio Zappulla, CEO of the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF). From the outset Antonio championed the potential of this report – the first of its kind produced by the Foundation – and the importance of hearing directly from journalists on the ground.

Numerous other TRF staff offered invaluable support, encouragement and ideas as this project progressed, including Tendik Tynystanov, Jenny Vereker, William Church, Zeina Najjar and others too numerous to mention here. Their warm welcome, inclusiveness, great ideas and enthusiasm made this project a pleasure to work on from day one.

From this vibrant cohort, Gréti Balázs played an invaluable role in organising and coordinating input from a broad spectrum of TRF alumni, without whom this report would be all the poorer.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Dr Richard Fletcher at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University offered support and input at the early stages of this project, and Rasmus was also kind enough to make the initial introductions.

Special thanks to Nura Ali for all of her wonderful design work and patient revisions, the team at AddTwo for their help with data visualisation, Paula Dear for gently proofing my increasingly mid-Atlantic writing and grammar, and everyone involved in the digital production and distribution of this new report.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Damian Radcliffe is the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, a Professor of Practice, an affiliate faculty member of the Department for Middle East and North Africa Studies (MENA), and a Research Associate of the Center for Science Communication Research (SCR), at the [University of Oregon](#).

Alongside holding the Chambers Chair at the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC), he is also a [Fellow](#) of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an [Honorary Research Fellow](#) at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies, and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

An experienced digital analyst, consultant, journalist, and researcher, Damian has worked in editorial, research, policy and teaching positions for the past two and a half decades in the UK, Middle East and USA. This includes roles in all media sectors (commercial, public, government, regulatory, academic and nonprofit/civil society) and all platforms (print, digital, TV and radio).

Damian continues to be an [active journalist](#), writing monthly columns for the International Journalists' Network (IJNET), [ZDNet](#) and [What's New in Publishing](#), and frequently appearing in [journalism.co.uk](#) and other media outlets. He writes about digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution of journalism.

Follow him on Twitter [@damianradcliffe](#)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01.

01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 is a generation-defining pandemic, impacting families and communities in every country on the planet. In this report, we explore the consequences of the COVID crisis on journalism in developing economies and the Global South.

To help us do this, 55 alumni of training programmes run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF) shared their experiences about living – and working – in the COVID era. These insights, coupled with extensive desk research and analysis, inform the narrative of this new report.

Together, these elements shine a spotlight on journalism outside of the Global North, in particular North America and Western Europe, to focus on areas where coverage of the journalism industry tends to be less well told or understood.

We hope that by hearing directly from journalists, in their own words, we can contribute to valuable discussions about the future of journalism in the COVID and post-COVID eras.

Here are some of the main themes featured in the report:



REUTERS/Thomas Mukoya



1. NEW LIMITS TO MEDIA FREEDOM

There are concerns that the COVID crisis is being used to curb media freedoms around the world. This is taking numerous forms, including limiting access to information, attacks on journalists, government closures of news media and new laws that limit press freedom.

Amnesty (and others) have [commented](#) on how these measures can jeopardise lives, by limiting reporting – as well as important debate and discussion – about the approaches being taken to tackle the pandemic.

“There is no hope of containing this virus if people can’t access accurate information,” said Ashfaq Khalfan, Amnesty International’s Director of Law and Policy. “It is truly alarming to see how many governments are more interested in protecting their own reputations than in saving lives.”

Governments have deployed a range of techniques designed to control the pandemic narrative.

The Austria-based International Press Institute (IPI) has [identified](#) 17 countries that have passed ‘fake news’ regulations since the COVID-19 outbreak began, giving them broad-ranging powers that can reduce the ability to cover the crisis.

“On the one hand,” IPI [observes](#), “while many of these laws stem from an understandable desire to combat falsehoods, their vague definition and broad scope means that they can be easily manipulated to censor critical reporting.”

RSF (Reporters Without Borders) argues these types of COVID-triggered “emergency laws spell disaster for press freedom”, [noting](#) how “weapons of repression against individual journalists as well as news organisations have been greatly strengthened in many countries” and adding that “the arsenal of sanctions has been hugely expanded”.

Aside from the need to push back on these efforts, a major risk to journalism is that this pandemic-era landscape becomes the norm.

REUTERS/Amr Abdallah Dalsh

2. REPORTING CHALLENGES AND RESTRICTIONS

These considerations are not new to COVID, but the crisis may have encouraged some regimes to double down on efforts to control the news agenda.

The Center for Media Data and Society at the Central European University has [shared](#) how independent media have been banned from attending government news conferences in countries such as Nicaragua and the Philippines.

As countries went into lockdown, many nations implemented curfews and travel restrictions. Although, while working, some journalists might be able to bypass these constraints, this has not always been the case.

“In the Philippines,” Meera Selva at the Reuters Institute [recounts](#), “the President’s office

banned all journalists from travelling to areas in lockdown without a specific identification card issued by his communications office.”

“Several media organisations did apply, but the system was unable to cope with all the applications so only a few passes have been issued and apply only to individual reporters,” she noted. And if those designated reporters “get sick or have to self-quarantine, a colleague will not be able to take their place”.

Elsewhere, there are concerns about access to data, and that coronavirus deaths have been under-reported. As *The Economist* [explains](#), official statistics may “exclude victims who did not test positive for coronavirus before dying – which can be a substantial majority in places with little capacity for testing”.



REUTERS/Carlos Garcia Rawlins



3. MISINFORMATION AND THE 'INFODEMIC'

Discussions about these complexities can be further exacerbated by misinformation and a lack of agreement about what constitutes 'facts' and 'truth'.

In China, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [has documented](#) efforts by the Chinese government to encourage news outlets to remove articles and reports featuring "negative facts".

At the same time, there is a hunger for information about this new virus among members of the public. However, especially in the early days, there has also been a great deal of confusion about the nature of this novel coronavirus and the best ways to respond to it.

Journalists continue to face a number of challenges in combating the 'infodemic', including the speed with which misinformation travels, propagation by public officials and figures, and having the skills to discern fact from fiction.

Obstruction and obfuscation on the part of public bodies can also make a journalist's job harder and, in this vacuum, misinformation can flourish. In many cases, that activity takes place on social networks and private messaging services, like WhatsApp.

In August, Reuters [reported](#) that Facebook had removed more than seven million pieces of content with false claims about the virus. However, these are only posts deemed to risk imminent harm. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes and false information may be identified on the social network yet remain in place.

Each major platform (YouTube, Twitter et al.) has its own policies in terms of how this content is flagged, fact-checked, or potentially taken down, which can sow further confusion among users.

4. HEALTH AND SAFETY

In a new [report](#) published in September 2020, UNESCO found that between January and June this year "journalists have been increasingly attacked, arrested and even killed".

These attacks don't just come from politicians and public figures. They also come from members of the public, in person or online, with their actions emboldened by the anti-press rhetoric deployed by increasing numbers of politicians and other critics.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) [highlighted](#) how, in the early days of the pandemic, violence against journalists reporting on lockdowns could be seen in many countries, with journalists often being specifically targeted while they were doing their job.

Journalists have also faced further challenges in terms of access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and training on how to report safely during a pandemic.

As the Geneva-based [Press Emblem Campaign](#) (PEC) [reminds us](#): "Journalists are at great risk in this health crisis because they must continue to inform, by going to hospitals, interviewing

doctors, nurses, political leaders, specialists, scientists, patients."

By 15 November 2020, according to the PEC's [data](#), at least 462 journalists had died from COVID-19 in 56 countries.

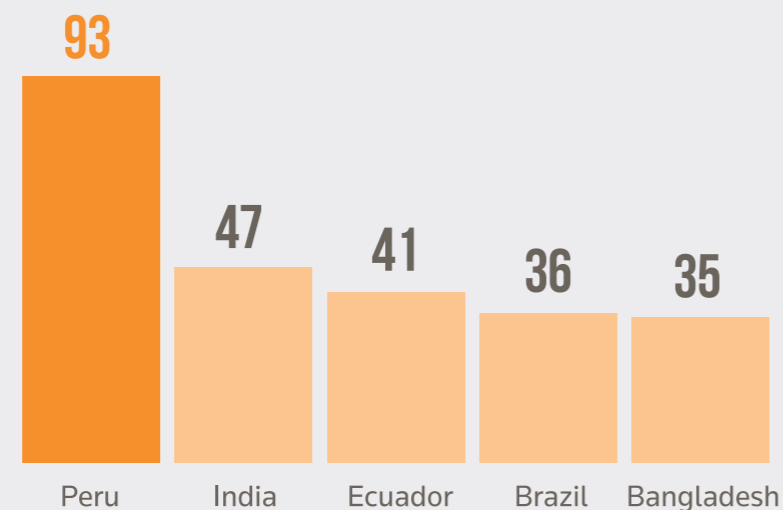
Within this, the highest number of journalists killed by coronavirus can be seen in Peru, with 93 reporter deaths. Hugo Coya, the former president of Peru's [public television and radio institute](#), (IRTP) [reflected](#) that "journalists are expected to go to the frontline but they weren't trained how to protect themselves from points of contagion".

PEC's data suggests this picture can be seen in multiple countries, with COVID taking the lives of journalists across the globe, including India (47 deaths), Ecuador (41) and Brazil (36). In Bangladesh, more than 1,000 journalists from nearly 200 media houses have contracted COVID-19.



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NUMBER OF DEATHS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES



Infographic Data [via](#) the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) and the Global Investigative Journalism Network.

5. NEGATIVE ECONOMICS

COVID-19 has [accelerated long-term financial trends](#) that have beset journalism, in particular newspapers, for some time. Reduced revenues, particularly advertising income, have contributed to the closing of news outlets, as well as major job losses, pay cuts and furloughs.

There's an irony here in that this financial free fall comes at a time when – in the early stages of the pandemic at least – many news outlets and media platforms have been enjoying [record traffic](#). This consumption, however, was not enough to offset declines in revenue primarily caused by a sudden advertising downturn.

Some commentators initially predicted that the pandemic could create an “[extinction-level event](#)” for the [media industry around the world](#). These fears now look somewhat overblown. But, whatever the outcome, it's [clear](#) the news industry that emerges on the other side of this crisis will look very different from the one that went into it.

Although few journalists have been immune from these impacts, freelancers may be among the hardest hit. Reduced opportunities, a broader freelance pool (due to laid-off journalists going freelance) and the rates paid by in-country media outlets (as opposed to international news organisations) are among the factors affecting this demographic.

6. DIGITAL DEPENDENCY

For journalists who have remained employed, the physical closure of most newsrooms has presented a series of unexpected difficulties.

This includes access to reliable broadband connections, high data costs, unsuitable equipment, power outages and having to negotiate new ways of working. That many journalists are also having to do this on reduced pay – and often with increased costs as a result of high data charges – has merely added to their stresses.

At the same time, there have been some potential benefits to this situation, such as the growth of online output, development of digital skills and opportunities to engage in online-delivered training.



REUTERS/Eloisa Lopez

7. MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

COVID-19's influence on incomes, job security, work habits and locations, doubts about the effectiveness of public health advice and policies, alongside the spread of fake news, and concerns about an unclear future, impact on everyone. Journalists included.

These anxieties do not look likely to ease anytime soon, and many journalists reporting on the coronavirus will continue to see their personal experiences of the pandemic closely entwined with the stories that they are covering.

Because of this, it's more important than ever for journalists to look after their physical and mental health.

Acknowledging this, Dr Cait McMahon, Director of the Dart Center Asia Pacific, [cautions](#) that reporting on the coronavirus is "different to you going to work on a story that's happened to someone else, which you may or may not have experienced".



REUTERS/David Mercado



REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun

SUMMING UP: A LEGACY OF RENEWED UNEASE AND UNCERTAINTY

COVID-19 has had a twin impact on journalism: not only has it presented a unique set of challenges for journalists, but it has also accentuated and accelerated several major structural issues that predate the pandemic.

These issues include encroachments on press freedom, the news industry's faltering business model, the erosion of trust in journalism and combating fake news.

Laws banning 'fake news' can be used as instruments to support government crackdowns on media freedom and on reporting with which political elites disagree. The pandemic has offered a justification for more countries to introduce these types of laws, tighten current restrictions or suspend existing laws.

Even if these developments are rolled back, journalism and the news industry is unlikely to return to its pre-pandemic state. Many of the [jobs and outlets that have been lost](#) will never reappear, and those that do may look very different to the way they were.

We do not know what the [long-term impact](#) of the coronavirus will be on journalism, the news industry or our world as a whole. However, we do know that the impact of the COVID crisis has already [been significant](#).

Even with vaccination programmes on the horizon, COVID-19 will continue to play a major role in our lives, as well as in the work that journalists do – and how they do it – for a long time to come.

METHODOLOGY

02.

02. METHODOLOGY

The Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF) has nearly 40 years' experience supporting independent media and training journalists. Since 1983 TRF has worked with more than 15,000 journalists in more than 170 countries across the globe.¹

This work includes initiatives focused on the role media plays in democracy and development, the safety of journalists and the future of journalism. As part of this work, TRF delivers journalism training **including** editorial judgement, elections coverage, video news, interviewing skills, mobile journalism and court reporting.

In September 2020, TRF's Journalism and Media programmes team reached out to 30 journalists in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and

Latin America, to ask for their perceptions of the key issues facing journalism today. A further 25 TRF alumni were approached in November 2020 as we sought additional insights into the impact of COVID-19.

These 55 journalists are all recent alumni of **journalism training** delivered by TRF. Their expert insights and commentary have informed many of the issues covered in this report and can be seen throughout this paper. Building on the themes identified by TRF alumni, the author undertook comprehensive desk research during late summer and November 2020, to provide further analysis and context.

The alumni who shaped this report represent a broad cross-section of the news and media industries in emerging economies and the

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Infographic Data [via Thomson Reuters Foundation](#)

¹ <http://www.trust.org/media-development/#>



REUTERS/Bob Strong

Global South. They work across commercial, non-profit and government media, and in a wide variety of roles including editors, photojournalists, multimedia storytellers, data journalists and freelancers.

We identified this strategic sample based on our desire to capture the experiences and concerns of working journalists outside of North America and Western Europe.

Respondents work in 26 different countries: Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Philippines, Romania, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, Ukraine, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Given the challenges that many journalists face in these countries, and to encourage open and honest responses, we agreed to protect

the privacy of respondents by guaranteeing anonymity for their responses (unless they indicated otherwise). These comments and observations, which were provided by email and through a secure online platform, can be seen throughout this paper. They may have been lightly edited for clarity and space reasons.

Although the TRF alumni featured in this study are not statistically representative, nor a random sample, many of the issues they identified reinforce conclusions from existing research and news reports. In multiple cases they also reflect the long- and short-term concerns and priorities being addressed by numerous media development agencies, including TRF and many others.

INTRODUCTION: COVID IN CONTEXT



03.

03. INTRODUCTION: COVID IN CONTEXT

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 “can be characterized as a pandemic”. [At the time](#), WHO said there were more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people were known to have lost their lives to the virus.



World Health Organization (WHO)
@WHO

BREAKING

“We have therefore made the assessment that #COVID19 can be characterized as a pandemic” - @DrTedros #coronavirus

Mar 11, 2020

Tweet via:

twitter.com/WHO/status/123777021742338049

“Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly,” Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director General, [told](#) the media.

“It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.”

As a result of the coronavirus’s spread, towards the end of April, over a third of the world was on lockdown.

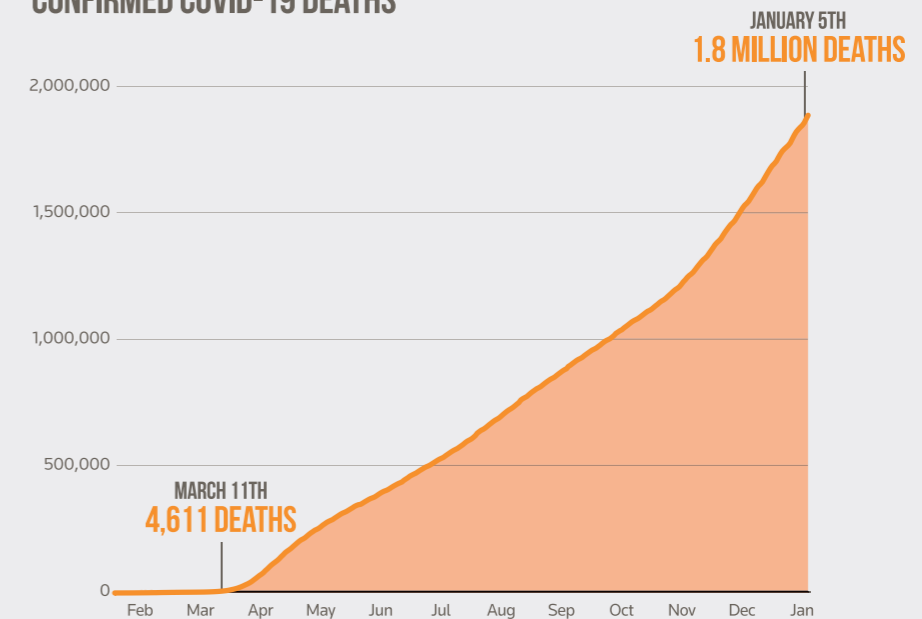
Demonstrating this break from normality, websites and newspapers were full of [striking imagery](#) showing iconic, notoriously people-packed locations, such as the [Grand Mosque at Mecca](#), [Tokyo’s Shibuya Crossing](#), and [Times Square in New York](#), looking eerily empty.

These photographs encapsulated the apocalyptic nature of these [initial lockdowns](#) as the novel coronavirus redefined economies, employment and education, as well as our media habits and physical interactions with the world around us.

At the start of 2021, much of the world was grappling with a second wave of cases and lockdowns. By 5 January – just under 10 months after the pandemic was declared – there had been 84,474,195 confirmed cases of COVID-19,

REUTERS/Issei Kato

CONFIRMED COVID-19 DEATHS



Infographic Data [via](#) the WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard.

including 1,848,704 deaths, according to [data](#) published by the WHO.

The starkness of these numbers, coupled with the austere stories and images that continue to be captured by the world’s media, highlight the global impact of the coronavirus and the speed with which it has upended the lives of billions.

It’s too early to determine the economic and social cost of COVID-19, or its legacy in terms of reshaping markets, working and personal lives, let alone our long-term health and wellbeing.

We can, however, evaluate some early effects of the pandemic on the media and journalism. With a resurgent virus ripping through much of the world once more, it is these lessons which we explore in this report.

Based on the reflections of 55 TRF alumni in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, as well as a comprehensive analysis of existing

research and news coverage, this paper examines the key challenges that journalists have faced (and continue to face) during the COVID crisis.

In doing this, we explore how the sector has responded, highlighting insights from journalists in emerging economies and the Global South, as well as addressing the challenges they face and shining a much-needed spotlight on examples of creativity and innovation.

Lastly, using the feedback and suggestions proffered by TRF alumni, we conclude with recommendations for news organisations, funders and media development agencies that are designed to strengthen journalism, as we all contend with the next stage of this global pandemic.

We hope you find these insights and case studies as interesting as we do.

CHALLENGE ONE

04.

04. CHALLENGE 1 – REPORTING FROM THE FRONTLINE: THE STRUCTURAL IMPACT ON NEWSROOMS

The impact of COVID-19 on newsrooms was as rapid as it was sudden. As Hannah Storm, Director of the Ethical Journalism Network [pointed out](#) during the earlier stages of the pandemic: “News organisations had to reinvent decades of working practices in days.”

“

Nothing compares with the events of recent weeks in terms of the global impact on media around the world of COVID-19 and the unprecedented scale of the story, and the demands it is making on our journalism and on us as journalists.

Not surprisingly, given the all-encompassing nature of the pandemic, it has left an indelible mark on the working practices of a wide variety of journalists. Social distancing while reporting, working from home (where possible) and using new equipment, platforms and formats to do it, have all become part of the ‘new normal’.

This is also a story being told beyond the bylines of health or science reporters. COVID-related reporting can be found across all beats, from business to culture, technology to the environment, and sport to education. In doing this, as one Sri Lankan journalist reminded us, there have been a number of



REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

challenges, including “*understanding the virulent nature of the virus as well as translating facts and figures into stories that are of human interest*”.

Furthermore, they added, “*because it was a global pandemic every media institution had its eyes on the story so standing out of the usual headlines was of paramount importance*”.



REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

MAKING SENSE OF A FAST-CHANGING LANDSCAPE

To inform and update the public, journalists need access to reliable and credible data, sources and other information. This is especially true during a pandemic.

In terms of COVID-19, this has been further complicated by the fact that our [understanding of this disease](#) has been evolving since the beginning of the outbreak. As a result, especially at the start of the pandemic, journalists have been reporting rapidly-changing – and sometimes contradictory – guidance from public health officials. The most obvious example of this, perhaps, was seen in [early advice](#) about the [efficacy of mask-wearing](#).

Many journalists have also been stymied by obfuscation, reduced access and concerns about the politicisation of government data. This has meant that in some countries we have seen [disquiet](#) about COVID cases going [under-reported](#), while in other nations there have been claims that the crisis has been purposefully exaggerated.

“

When the government rushed to impose a lockdown, when the country had barely registered 36 cases, it aroused curiosity and suspicion among many Malawians. When the lockdown was successfully blocked, it reinforced the narrative that the government was trying to use coronavirus to stop elections.

This hardened the hearts of Malawians against the government. People stopped following the measures the government put in place because they thought most of the information, especially figures of infections, were being deliberately exaggerated to find an excuse to defer fresh elections.

SENIOR NEWSPAPER REPORTER,
MALAWI, TRF ALUMNI

Elsewhere, some journalists have been exposed to criticism that they have toed the party line, sometimes taking government data and advice at face value.

“

In my region many journalist(s) were a public relations service for politicians.

REGIONAL NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT,
NIGERIA, TRF ALUMNI

“

I think Indonesian media are doing a great job in covering COVID-19 in general... But there are just a few media who dig deeper, such as looking for other data and perspectives from experts and epidemiologists instead of quoting what the government said to the public.

RICHALDO HARIANDJA,
FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR,
INDONESIA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Eldson Chagara



REUTERS/Arko Datta

TRF alumni further identified how the crisis had shone a spotlight on skills and knowledge gaps within their newsrooms.

“

I think that the majority of our media didn't cope well with the COVID-19 challenge. We lack journalists who specialise in covering medical and scientific issues. We lack resources and many Ukrainian journalists just do not have time to find the truth.

But I believe that situation will change for the better as many professionals seek more knowledge and have a desire to improve and develop their skills.

JOURNALIST,
UKRAINE, TRF ALUMNI

In addressing these issues, our cohort shared examples of their resilience – no doubt seen in newsrooms everywhere – in developing their skills and seeking to tell the emerging story of the pandemic.

“

In the initial days, one dilemma was how safe was it for us or for the communities for [journalists] to engage in on-the-ground reportage. Reporters also struggled in the field with transportation and PPE kits.

Another challenge was working on data stories around COVID-19. It was difficult to go about doing in-depth analysis without adequate training. I did a few courses online to get a grip around the issues. However, formal training was missing.

NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI

Several TRF alumni also mentioned how the pandemic had forced them to lean into technology, as well as learning new skills related to data and health reporting, which they saw as offering benefits that potentially extend past the current crisis.

REUTERS/Louafi Larbi



“

Technology and journalism are inseparable. COVID-19 further re-emphasised the role of technology in journalism.

NEWS AGENCY EDITOR,
NIGERIA, TRF ALUMNI

“

There is the opportunity to go in-depth and also opportunities to venture into unexplored digital platforms that are more accessible and more cost-effective. There is also the opportunity for solidarity and collaboration. [And] the opportunity to avail of various learning events on the internet as one stays home and works from home.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT,
PHILIPPINES, TRF ALUMNI

DISTRIBUTED NEWSROOMS AND WORKING FROM HOME

“The coronavirus crisis will eventually end, but the distributed newsroom is here to stay,” [Tom Trewinnard](#), a co-founder and chief operating officer of the digital journalism consultancy [Fathm](#), [predicted](#) in April.

Put simply, as a briefing note compiled by DW Akademie – Deutsche Welle’s centre for international media development and journalism training – [explained](#): “Distributed newsrooms are newsrooms that work decentralised, use digital tools to communicate and collaborate, and explore new opportunities to enhance viability and audience engagement.”

Supported by the Google News Initiative, Fathm’s [Distributed Newsroom Playbook](#) responded to the challenges faced by many newsrooms as they adopted this distributed model and confronted new working habits induced by the pandemic.

“

Working from home has been the biggest challenge as it was something I had never done before. It was both a challenge and a good learning experience.

NEWS EDITOR,
MAJOR NEWSPAPER GROUP,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI

The speed of the shift to remote working presented [complexities](#) for many journalists and their newsrooms. Across the globe, outlets scrambled to address issues related to workflows, [tools and technology](#), training, management, newsgathering and engagement both with each other and their audiences.

Many TRF alumni spoke of the challenges that this situation created. For journalists in developing countries, a recurring consideration



REUTERS/Carlos Garcia Rawlins



was the reliability of home internet connections, as well as the unanticipated costs associated with remote working. These costs sometimes came on the back of salary cuts, or the reduced range of opportunities mentioned by multiple freelancers.

“

There was a time when I would work from home and this posed a great challenge on my part; in terms of internet issues these include exorbitant data charges and a poor network. COVID-19 also affected my income which was cut by almost 50 percent.

JOURNALIST,
ZIMBABWE, TRF ALUMNI

Other journalists pointed out that distributed working – especially when established in a hurry – did not lend itself to certain types of work. As one Kenyan journalist told us: “Employees had to work from home despite some duties demanding media equipment such as a studio for editing voice-overs, and video clips”.

Ivana Jeremić from Balkan Insight and Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach of the Russian Language News Exchange, have also [stressed](#) the risk of burnout, not least because of the blurring of boundaries between work and home life.

However, some journalists didn’t seem to mind this, citing increased output and the ability to tap into online training – and events – as potential benefits of the situation.

“

I worked more during the COVID-19 staying at home than going to the office... It was really a productive period for me. I could write an average of five stories a day. It was because I had time solely for reporting.

EDITOR AND CORRESPONDENT,
NEWS AGENCY,
NIGERIA, TRF ALUMNI

SOCIALLY-DISTANCED REPORTING

For many newsrooms, working from home was a conscious choice, designed to protect their journalists. For others, the decision was taken out of their hands, as a result of curfews and reduced freedom of movement.

“

In our country the government restricted movement, and public transport was banned for several months. This greatly affected me since even when restrictions were lifted the price of transport doubled.

REPORTER, INDEPENDENT DAILY NEWSPAPER,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI

In order to do their job, some journalists were exempted from these restrictions. But that wasn’t always the case. Reduced – or prohibited use of – public transport also hindered the ability of journalists to reach destinations from which they wanted to report. In these instances, access and financial considerations often came into play.

As one freelance journalist based in the Philippines explained:

“

Another challenge is [the] logistics, making it hard for me to travel to another place for coverage or for fixing jobs due to the lack of enough public transport and stringent documentary requirements for travel.

A number of TRF alumni also hinted at some of their frustrations as a result of having to work from home, although this was often tempered by concerns about contracting COVID and access to PPE.

As a different correspondent in the Philippines observed:

“

When is it safe to go out and interview sources for your stories? Is it enough to wear a facemask, face shield, and wash your hands every so often?

This sense of trepidation is often well founded. In May, the BBC wrote about how [“COVID-19 is ravaging India’s newsrooms”](#), citing the example of a Mumbai news network where 15 staff out of 120 had tested positive for the virus. Other reports suggested 35 journalists were [infected in Chennai](#), and [19 employees of the Punjab Kesari media group in the city of Ludhiana](#).

Vinod Jagdale, president of Mumbai's TV Journalist Association, explained to BBC India correspondent [Soutik Biswas](#) why this was happening:

“

There's a bunch of reasons. Initially, there was a lot of editorial pressure on TV journalists at some networks to go out and get visuals of the lockdown. Then there were some over-enthusiastic journalists who possibly didn't take enough precautions. They were going to hotspots and filming and doing interviews.

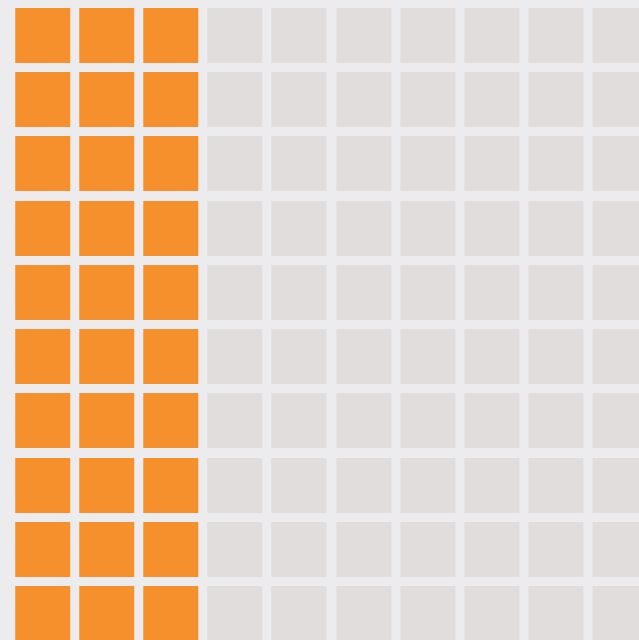
While the pandemic has led to some changes in journalistic practice, exemplified by modifications to recording equipment and socially-distant press conferences, being at the frontline of covering the pandemic can still carry a lot of risk.



**30% OF FIELD REPORTERS
NOT GIVEN ANY PPE
DURING THE FIRST WAVE
OF THE PANDEMIC**

According to a [survey](#) conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, 30% of their respondents – comprising 1,400 English-speaking journalists from 125 countries – said their news organisations had not supplied field reporters with any PPE during the pandemic's first wave.

TRF alumni indicated similar issues, as well as alluding to a potential tension between staying safe and doing their job.



Infographic Data [via](#) survey conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.



REUTERS/Thomas Peter/Pool

“

The biggest challenge has been the lack of PPE in my line of duty. There were times when I would not attend an important diary [event] on the pandemic due to the lack of PPE.

JOURNALIST,
ZIMBABWE, TRF ALUMNI

“

Staying safe but still being able to follow that big story. Often, I end up having to compromise my safety.

Our respondents also indicated that even if a journalist has taken all of the necessary precautions, they still need to instil confidence in their sources that interviews can be conducted safely. These fears can also spill over into their personal lives, too.

“

90% of sources that I contacted to get in-person interviews rejected meeting me. That's fair and I understand their concern. Some friends were scared to meet even with social distancing. They simply told me, 'you traveled around the city, so do not come to our home'.

STORYTELLER AND PROGRAMME PRODUCER,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Juan Mabromata

MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic has had a profound psychological impact on billions of people globally. Mental health considerations, the United Nations [says](#), “must be front and centre of every country’s response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”.

“

There was a big gap in terms of bonding, sharing ideas, and loneliness...

SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT,
KENYA, TRF ALUMNI

As the WHO [explains](#): “Added to the fear of contracting the virus in a pandemic such as COVID-19 are the significant changes to our daily lives as our movements are restricted in support of efforts to contain and slow down the spread of the virus.”

TRF alumni also shared some of these impacts. One senior Indian journalist spoke of how “*the sudden drift from print to online created huge stress on me*”, while another Kenya-based correspondent shared how “*the psychological stress eventually affected my work delivery*”.

For newsrooms, there’s a growing recognition that COVID-19 has [impacted](#) journalists by disrupting working practices and pervading their day-to-day lives.



REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon



REUTERS/Amanda Perobelli

“

With train and bus services all halted, it was hard to do any on-the-ground reporting. It was something of a puzzle to me that my neighbourhood continued to function quite the same as usual, even though reports of a huge spike in cases in my city were reported.

One neighbour who was quite young, at about 45, suffered something of a paralysis and was admitted to a nearby hospital – no proper diagnosis was made, and the man died, quite unexpectedly.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI

In some cases, the crisis has resulted in a welcome, long overdue, discussion about the need to talk about mental health matters. However, this is not always easy, especially in some cultures where this remains a taboo subject, or in environments where responses to COVID-19 share parallels with darker periods in a nation's history.

In their [analysis](#) of 'Democracy And The State Of Emergency' during the corona crisis in the Western Balkans, Croatia and Slovenia, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation noted how "the coronavirus has triggered more than just a health crisis in Serbia".

“

Riots spread throughout the streets of Serbian cities, police brutally against citizens, lack of credible information, biased and misleading media reporting, together with neighbouring countries closing down the borders, dauntingly resemble the images from the 90s.

News organisations, funders and commenters must be cognisant of this context, the potential impact of COVID reporting on the mental health of journalists (as well as the wider citizenry) and the support mechanisms needed now, and in the future, as journalists navigate a gamut of mental health concerns.

Accordingly, as Director of the Dart Center Asia Pacific Dr Cait McMahon [advises](#), journalists need to be tuned into their own mental health, as well as that of their sources and audience.

“

We all have our own experience of this at the moment and we are all part of the story, albeit to different degrees. That means journalists need to be more in tune with what their anxieties are, and what the anxieties are of the people they're interviewing.

Perhaps most importantly, newsroom leaders need to encourage and prioritise mental health considerations.

After all, as the WHO [reminds](#) us: "Faced with new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, it is important that we look after our mental, as well as our physical, health."



REUTERS/Tyrone Siu

EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM INDIA



While remote working has been catching on in news start-ups and the digital media, print newsrooms have largely continued to function in a linear way – morning meetings, reporters going to their respective beats, a second round of editorial meetings in the evenings, followed by the production of newspapers.

By March, newsrooms were in a fix – will remote working be the new norm? If so, then how do they move forward? While bigger news organisations enabled employees to work from home, the relatively smaller ones struggled with software and the crunch of resources.

Remote production continued to be a challenge for a number of newspapers. So, while reporters were granted opportunities for remote working, the production desk continued to work from offices in many organisations.

Despite not having to report to the office, there were umpteen challenges for reporters. Even before the nationwide lockdown was imposed, reporters struggled to get entry into ministries, as they cited the threat of COVID-19. Reporters needed specific appointments to get into ministry buildings which proved to be a bigger challenge for the newsgathering process.

Once the nationwide lockdown kicked in, it was unsettling. There was the dilemma of one's own safety and the source's safety, with very little information to guide journalists. At several places across the nation, journalists faced trouble moving around even with their identification cards. Later, the government issued an advisory that journalists should be able to move around smoothly.

Accessing transport was the biggest challenge. For those without private transport, the only option left was office cabs. Here, I must point out again that what may be basic resources for bigger organisations is often a challenge for smaller ones. Resources were scarce with printing of several papers suspended and revenues plummeting. So many organisations struggled to afford the basic amenities previously offered to their employees.

To my knowledge, television reporters did receive PPE kits. As far as print journalists are concerned, I do not think many organisations provided them. However, this would vary from one organisation to another. But from my overall experience, there was little dialogue on the safety of journalists.

In terms of physical distancing, the concept was a luxury for many newsrooms. Most



REUTERS/Sanna Irshad Mattoo

organisations started scaling down from April. Many newsrooms shut shop at smaller locations, unable to afford either the salaries of reporters/sub-editors or the rented accommodation, and in some cases both. Salary cuts were across the board. Salary payments remained delayed in most organisations, and job losses were reported at most news organisations.

Because of the massive structural changes impacting the newsroom, both editors and reporters perhaps tried to cope with new ways of storytelling. A lot of us had to opt out of regular ground reporting, and instead settled for telephone interviews which we would not do under normal circumstances or if we had more resources at our disposal. We also moved to data and research-based stories in order to make up for the void of the buzz of on-the-ground reporting. Some organisations,

including the print media, are now encouraging reporters to travel and move towards mobile journalism.

One thing that needs to be addressed immediately is the mental health condition of journalists who continue to function with the looming threat of job loss or having already suffered job loss, the paradigm shift in the practice of journalism, and the lack of conversation around it.

**JOURNALIST BASED AT A MAJOR INDIAN NEWSPAPER
TRF ALUMNI**

EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM EGYPT



At the beginning of the pandemic, some journalists, including me, decided to stay at home even before a decision was issued from the board of directors to work remotely. Personally, I have not worked at the office since the outbreak of the pandemic.



REUTERS/Amr Abdallah Dalsh

When the government imposed partial lockdown measures gradually, it was allowed for journalists – approximately 80% of the workforce [at my publication] – to work at home as long as it would not impede the flow of the news on the websites. However, the number of those who are working on the print side is higher.

Most events became virtual amid the variety of online apps that facilitate remote work like Trello, Slack, WhatsApp, Zoom, Teams, and Hangouts. Online meetings for staff were convened to follow up on how working from home was working out.

Telecommuting in journalism has advantages and disadvantages; it saves more time for some journalists to apply for online workshops and courses in order to enhance their careers. For instance, I took two online workshops, and I am right now completing a diploma in journalism and audiovisual translation, besides studying German.

When it comes to the demerits of telecommuting for journalists, it was very difficult to reach sources face-to-face amid the lockdown, particularly [an issue] for the investigative journalists. But the silver lining of the COVID-19 is the pandemic is a fertile ground for thousands of journalistic ideas and pitches.

Later, when the government started easing the closure measures gradually, some journalists returned to their work at the offices, while others see it is preferable to do their jobs remotely.

Unfortunately, a wide number of journalists in Egypt don't abide by protective measures and

do not socially distance, and the result was that some people in newsrooms got infected and home-isolated, while the departments where the infection was spotted continued working after only disinfecting the place. Sadly, this is because the government and other pro-government institutions – whether state-owned or private – are following the policy of herd immunity in dealing with the disease.

As for the PPE, it is the responsibility of most of the journalists to get PPE on their expenses. At some media outlets, they believe it is enough to disinfect the offices.

However, the Journalists' Syndicate developed its health service by providing more discounts on the PCR tests and opened exceptionally the registration for the health services, including providing PPE at reasonable prices.

When my family and I got infected with the virus in June, all tests we did were subsidised.

MAGAZINE JOURNALIST,
EGYPT, TRF ALUMNI

CHALLENGE TWO

05.



05. CHALLENGE 2 – COMBATING FAKE NEWS AND THE ‘INFODEMIC’



REUTERS/Kham



REUTERS/James Akena

The picture [painted](#) by Kathy Katella, a senior clinical writer for Yale School of Medicine, will be familiar to almost everyone.

“

You read about [COVID-19](#). Then, you read some more. Then, you read things that contradict other things... COVID-19 is worrisome enough, so when you add in the tsunami of information surrounding it – and whiplash accompanying it – it can wear you down. If you’re overwhelmed, you’re not alone.

This dynamic led to the WHO [acknowledging](#) that the outbreak, and response to it, has resulted in “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it”. They dubbed this development an “infodemic”.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

As we have seen, from the early days of the pandemic COVID has thrown journalists a number of curveballs. Aside from shifting scientific sands, they have also had to contend with major changes to their working practices and potentially unclear – or incomplete – data.

Alongside this, the coronavirus crisis has also unleashed a wave of misinformation, particularly online. The motives for this can be complex, ranging from content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm, through to misleading content, and material that is entirely fabricated. They are all potentially dangerous.

Keeping up with, and counteracting, misinformation was *already* a huge undertaking for journalists, social networks and consumers. In the COVID era, that challenge has only grown.

Part of the reason for this, as Tanzania-based journalist Marc Valentine Nkwame Mwandambo reminded us, is that *“with the emergence of digital platforms and social media, almost anyone can publish themselves on the internet, blogs, or run personal live TV and videos through sites like YouTube”*.

Researchers looking at the [early impact](#) of misinformation and fake news in Africa noted that: “Africa is besieged with so many

misconceptions and/or misinformation about COVID-19 via the media, astute politicians, social commentators as well as the social media.”

The authors noted the spread of conspiracy theories such as one claiming COVID-19 is being used “a biological weapon to break the economic power of China”.

Health claims, such as those promoting the “use of local herbs or products (e.g., coconut oil, ginger, garlic) to cure the virus” have also been spread. As a consequence of inaccurate, misleading and potentially dangerous information circulating online, researchers noted that “the general public may be tempted to turn to unproductive, unsubstantiated and somewhat harmful medications for the cure of the virus”.

Other regions have been affected in a [similar fashion](#).

“

Battling with fake news increased as mischief-makers created more fake news, putting more pressure on our workload.

REGIONAL NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT,
NIGERIA, TRF ALUMNI

MIS-, DIS- AND MAL-INFORMATION

FALSENESS

Misinformation

Unintentional mistakes such as inaccurate photo captions, dates, statistics, translation, or when satire is taken seriously

Disinformation

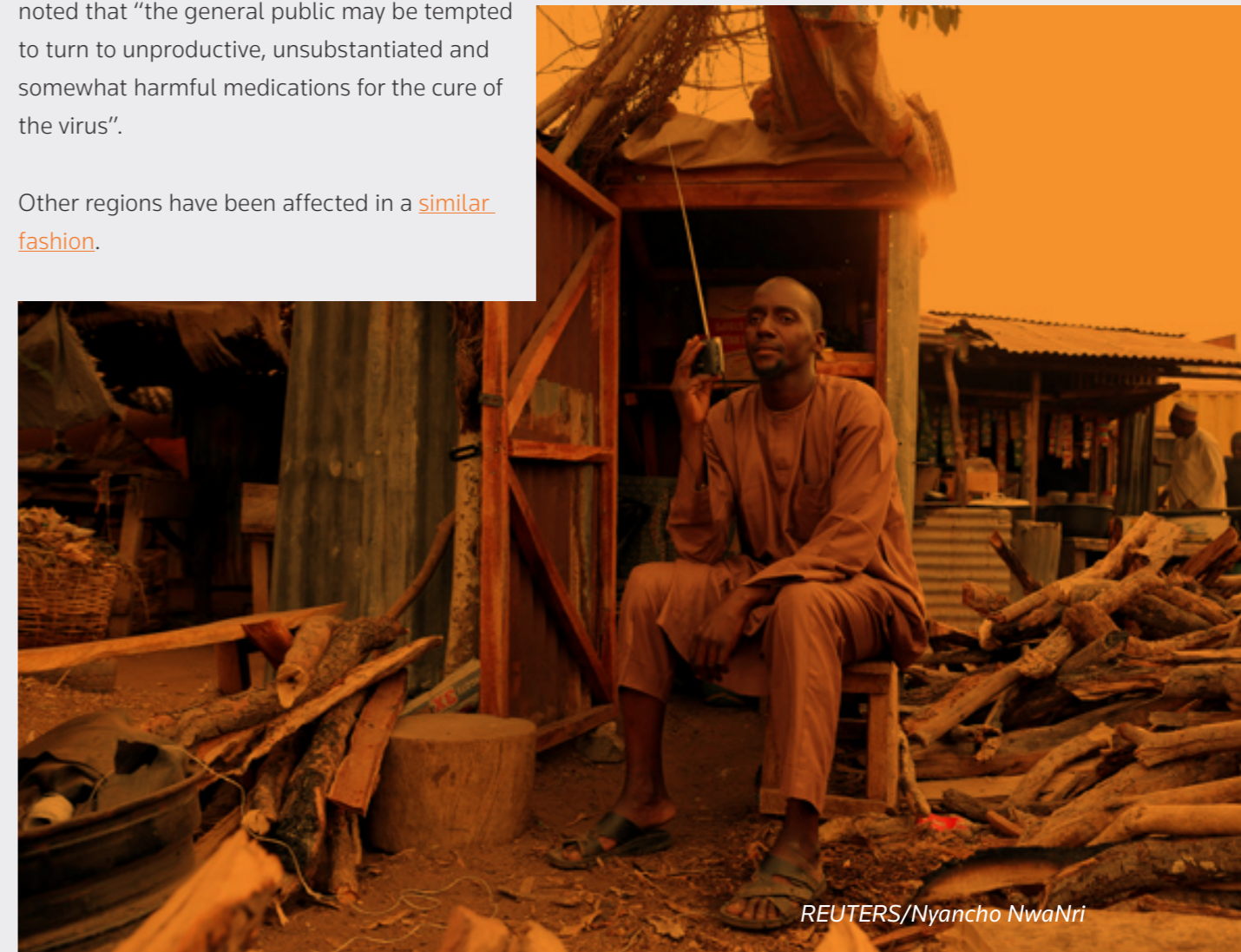
Fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio/ visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours

INTENT TO HARM

Malinformation

Deliberate publication of private information for personal or corporate public interest. Deliberate change of context, date or time of genuine content

Image: Explanation of three types of information disorder. [Via First Draft](#).



REUTERS/Nyancho NwaNri



REUTERS/Ahmed Jadallah

The global nature of major digital platforms and our communication networks also means that misinformation can transcend borders and quickly circumnavigate the globe.

As a result, we are living in an environment where, the WHO [argues](#), “fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous”.

In April, [analysis](#) from the non-profit activist group Avaaz demonstrated this by using a sample of 100 pieces of misinformation, produced in six different languages. This content was “shared over 1.7 million times on Facebook and viewed an estimated 117 million times”.

A month later, findings [published](#) by the *British Medical Journal* found that “over one-quarter of

the most viewed YouTube videos on COVID-19 contained misleading information, reaching millions of viewers worldwide”. The authors also noted that: “Previous studies have shown that YouTube has been a source of [both] useful and misleading information during public health crises, including the H1N1 pandemic, Ebola outbreak and Zika outbreak.”

“

The pandemic saw a rise in fake news being peddled through social media platforms and unverified news sites.

JOURNALIST, ONLINE NEWS SITE,
ZIMBABWE, TRF ALUMNI

INDUCTIVE TYPOLOGY OF CLAIMS MADE WITHIN PIECES OF COVID-19-RELATED MISINFORMATION

Type	Description
Public authority action/policy	Claims about state policy/action/communication, claims about WHO guidelines and recommendations, etc.
Community spread	Claims about how the virus is spreading internationally, in nations/states, or within communities. Claims about people, groups or individuals involved/affects, etc.
General medical advice and virus characteristics	Health remedies, self-diagnostics, effects and signs of the disease, etc.
Prominent actors	Claims about pharmacy companies or drug-makers, companies providing supplies to health care sector, or other companies. Or claims about famous people, including claims about which celebrities have been infected, claims about what politicians have said or done (but not if the misinformation is coming from politicians or other famous people).
Conspiracies	Claims that the virus was created as a bioweapon, claims about who is supposedly behind the pandemic, claims that the pandemic was predicted, etc.
Virus transmission	Claims about how the virus is transmitted and about how to stop the transmission, including cleaning, the use of certain types of lights, appliances, protective gear, etc.
Explanation of virus origins	Claims about where and how the virus originated (e.g. in animals) and properties of the virus.
Public preparedness	(Normative) claims about hoarding, buying supplies, social distancing, (non)-adherence to measures, etc.
Vaccine development and availability	Claims about vaccines, the development and availability of a vaccine.

Typology of types of claims found within COVID-19 misinformation.

Via: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.

POLITICIANS AND PUBLIC FIGURES

Research has consistently highlighted the difficulty of combating misinformation, both in terms of managing the distribution of false and misleading material, the speed and impact of fact-checking and corrections (or lack of, as the case may be), as well as the very real risks that can be derived from people accessing – and acting upon – misleading health information.

During COVID-19 this has been further aggravated when political leaders act in ways that contravene, or contradict, guidance from public health officials.

“

The information from the government on coronavirus has not always been trustworthy, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. The reasons are mainly political in nature.

SENIOR NEWSPAPER REPORTER,
MALAWI, TRF ALUMNI

Human Rights Watch [accused](#) Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of “putting the people of Mexico in grave danger with his reckless disregard for providing accurate information on the COVID-19 pandemic”. They noted that Obrador had countered the [recommendations](#) of health authorities by encouraging Mexicans to [continue going out](#) in public, and that he had also continued to [hold rallies](#) and [attend events](#)

across the country. Health officials had [urged](#) the opposite.

“

The media in Mexico have missed the opportunity to do a deep coverage of the pandemic...

Investigations into possible under-reporting of cases (in Mexico City, for example) have come at the initiative of international media bureaus, such as the New York Times.

Mexico is one of the countries with the highest accumulation of cases and, at the same time, one where the least coronavirus tests are carried out. But the press has not made it easier to understand the seriousness of the problem.

JUAN GARCIA HERNANDEZ,
JOURNALIST,
MEXICO, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Damir Sagolj

Similarly, Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro posted an online video in which he “claims the anti-malarial drug, hydroxychloroquine, effectively cured 78 out of 80 COVID-19 patients in a study”.

Although the efficacy of this drug is unproven as a cure for coronavirus, by mid-August 2020 the video had been [viewed 1.6 million times](#) on Facebook. By mid-November it was still on the site. In contrast, YouTube [removed](#) it for violating its Community Guidelines. (Bolsonaro continues to prominently feature the dead YouTube link on Facebook.)

Image:

Video [via](#) Facebook posted by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.



The different approaches taken by platforms – often to the same content – coupled with the global nature of major social networks, also makes it harder to control, and address, potentially dangerous health advice and misinformation.

CNN [reported](#) in March that officials in Nigeria had issued warnings over the use of chloroquine after three people in the capital city of Lagos were hospitalised after taking the drug. The anti-malaria drug had been repeatedly championed by US President Donald Trump, which CNN’s interviewees suggested gave credence to these unproven medical claims. Nigerian officials later issued a statement cautioning against using the medication to treat COVID-19.



Gboyega Akosile
@gboyegaakosile

Please note: Hospitals Now Receiving Patients Suffering from Chloroquine Poisoning, Says GOV that @jidesanwoolu’s SSA on Health, Dr @Oreoluwa_Finnih She urged people against massive consumption of Chloroquine as a measure to fight #coronavirus.

Mar 20, 2020

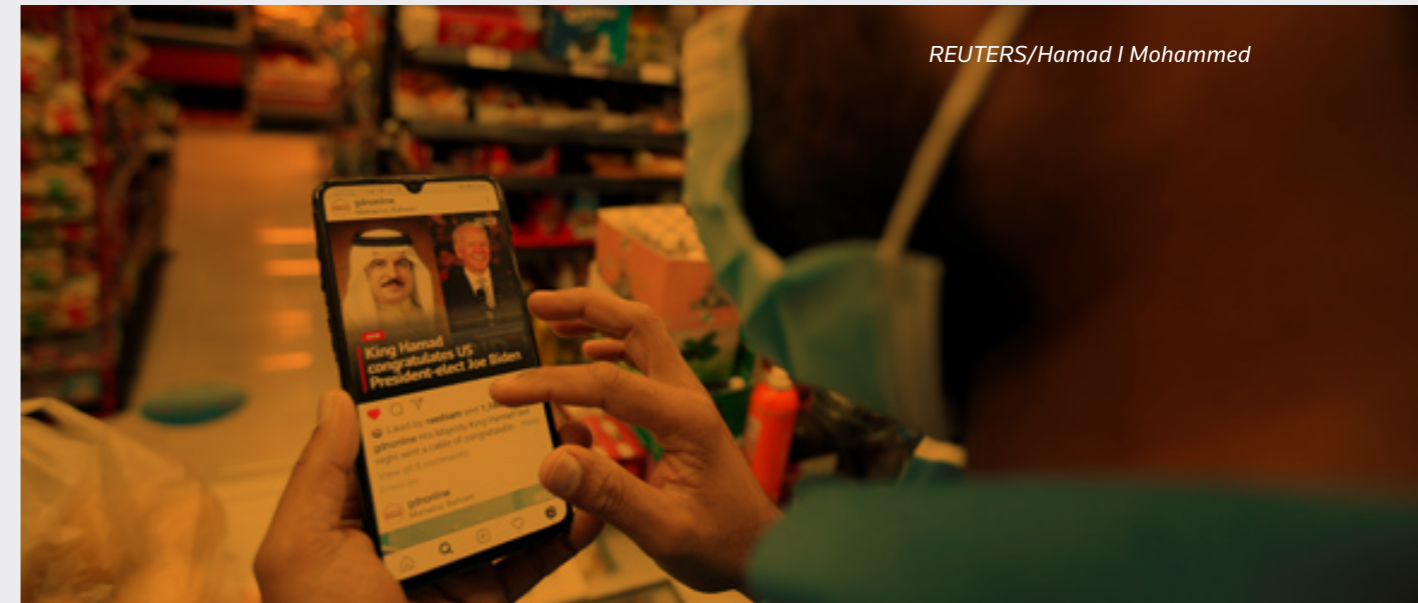
Tweet from Gboyega Akosile, Chief Press Secretary to Lagos State Governor.²

As [research](#) from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) has found, “prominent public figures... play an outsized role in spreading misinformation about COVID-19”. Although the majority of misinformation comes from ordinary members

² As of 7 December 2020 this account is currently suspended by Twitter.

of the public, this seldom gets the same traction as claims from public figures, such as politicians, celebrities and online influencers.

“Top-down misinformation from politicians, celebrities, and other prominent public figures made up just 20% of the claims in our sample but accounted for 69% of total social media engagement,” RISJ observed.



REUTERS/Hamad I Mohammed

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks have played a major role in changing our news habits, becoming a key source of news and information for many digital consumers around the world. They can also be a popular means for politicians and other public figures to directly engage with the public, by-passing traditional intermediaries such as journalists and the mainstream media.

The implications of this, as Nic Newman [explained](#) in RISJ’s 2020 Digital News Report, are that:

“

Journalists no longer control access to information, while greater reliance on social media and other platforms give people access to a wider range of sources and ‘alternative facts’, some of which are at odds with official advice, misleading, or simply false.

“

There remains a lot of confusion around COVID-19. Medical professionals aren’t entirely sure of all of the methods of transmission, and in a flurry of panic, social media has overflowed with claims that are, literally, dangerous to the public.

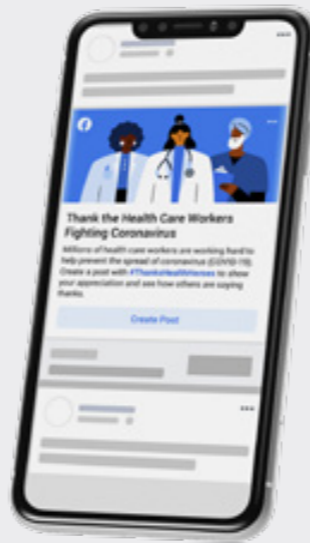
Because of this, we have seen considerable discussion about the role of social media as a potential [facilitator](#) for misinformation. These conversations have only grown during the pandemic. As Wasim Khaled, CEO at Blackbird.AI – a US-based company that uses machine learning and interdisciplinary human intelligence to combat disinformation – has [reflected](#), one reason for this is the way in which these networks have filled an information void.

Recognising this, and under pressure to address their role in spreading disinformation, social networks have been working with public health providers, NGOs, journalists and governments, to [adapt](#) to the information challenges of the COVID age.

These challenges are not exclusive to social networks, but their scale – and the speed with which information (accurate or otherwise) cascades across them – means that they will continue to be a key focus of many of these conversations.

EFFORTS BY SOCIAL NETWORKS TO CURB MISINFORMATION, AND TO PROMOTE ACCURATE PUBLIC HEALTH TIPS AND GUIDANCE, INCLUDE:

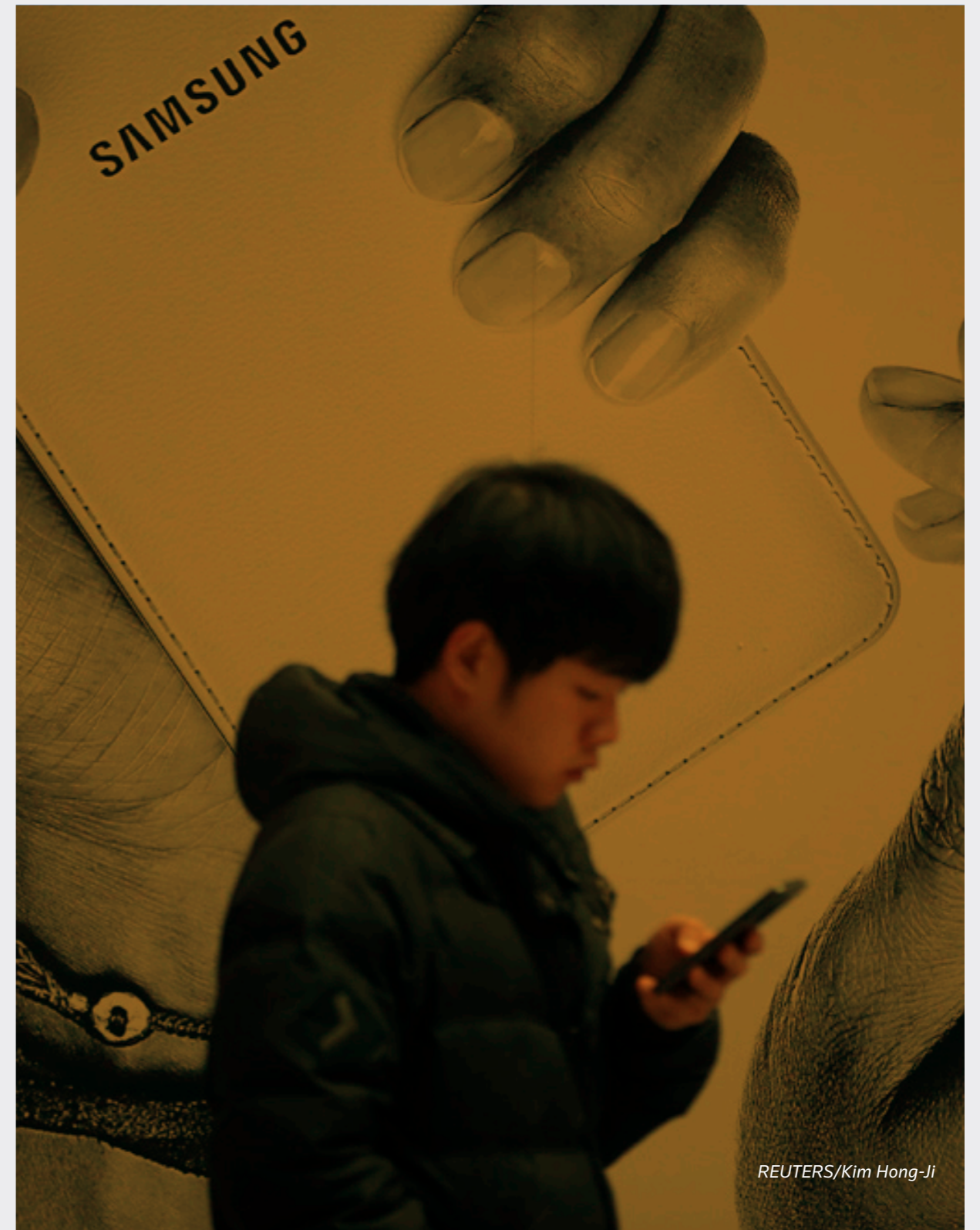
- [TikTok](#) donated \$10m to the WHO's Solidarity Response Fund and hosted live streams – accessed in more than 70 countries – with WHO experts.
- [Snapchat](#) created new filters, Bitmoji stickers, [mental health tools](#), and the ability to use Augmented Reality (AR) technologies to donate to the WHO.
- Facebook's efforts included putting [coronavirus tips](#) at the top of users' Instagram feeds, [reducing](#) the number of times WhatsApp messages can be forwarded – in a bid to reduce the sharing of possible misinformation – and encouraging media partners to share posts from the WHO and local health providers, as well as creating stickers and enabling [fundraising](#) donations on the network.
- Twitter [updated](#) its approach to misleading information, adjusted the platform's ad policy and created a new COVID-19 search prompt, working with partners in more than 50 countries.
- YouTube [published guidelines](#) and updated its monetisation policy, as it related to sensitive COVID-19 content.



Images: An example of how to use AR donation on Snapchat. Donations can be made using 23 international currency notes across 33 countries. [Via Snap](#).

These efforts are welcome and demonstrate some of the steps that major social networks have taken to help inform and support their users, offset [criticism](#) from public figures and researchers, and reassure brands and advertisers.

Nonetheless, it is clear – given the [volume](#) of false and misinformation and the potentially harmful nature of this – that there remains work to be done.



REBUILDING TRUST IN MEDIA

Journalism faces a number of existential challenges which go beyond the short-term challenges of navigating the COVID crisis. These include tackling issues of public trust in the profession and how well (or not) journalists represent a breadth of views in society.

In a 2014 paper, Bernd Blöbaum, a Professor for Communication Studies at the University of Münster, in Germany, [explained](#) why this matters, noting that:

“

Journalism provides people with knowledge and experience that individuals usually cannot obtain. This is where trust comes into play: because the audience cannot check the content journalism provides, it has to trust journalism. Trust is a basis for journalistic operations.

Multiple studies have highlighted the present-day challenge of trust in media, which pre-dates the pandemic.

In 2019, the market research company Ipsos [found](#), in a study covering 27 different markets, that people were divided on whether they trusted traditional media (magazines and newspapers, TV and radio) or not.

Ipsos' data identified two main reasons for this trust (or distrust) dynamic, namely “the prevalence of fake news and doubts about media sources' good intentions”.



REUTERS/Dinuka Liyanawatt



REUTERS/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa

When it comes to the coronavirus, research [published](#) by YouGov found that, across 26 different countries, trust in the media tends to sit between 50% and 70% of the population.

Only in four countries did the media score higher: Vietnam (89%), Malaysia (82%), Singapore (75%) and the Philippines (72%).

And if this figure doesn't sound too bad, then consider this: in almost every country polled by YouGov, the media tended to rank behind the government for trust in COVID-19 matters.

More worryingly still, in all countries bar one (Malaysia) people said they were more likely to trust their friends and family on information regarding COVID-19, than the media.

WHO DO PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD TRUST ON COVID-19?

HOW MUCH DO YOU TRUST WHAT EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SAY ON THE COVID-19 SITUATION?
% WHO SAID "COMPLETELY TRUST" OR "SOMEWHAT TRUST"



ONLY IN MALAYSIA IS TRUST IN THE MEDIA **HIGHER** THAN IN FRIENDS AND FAMILY.



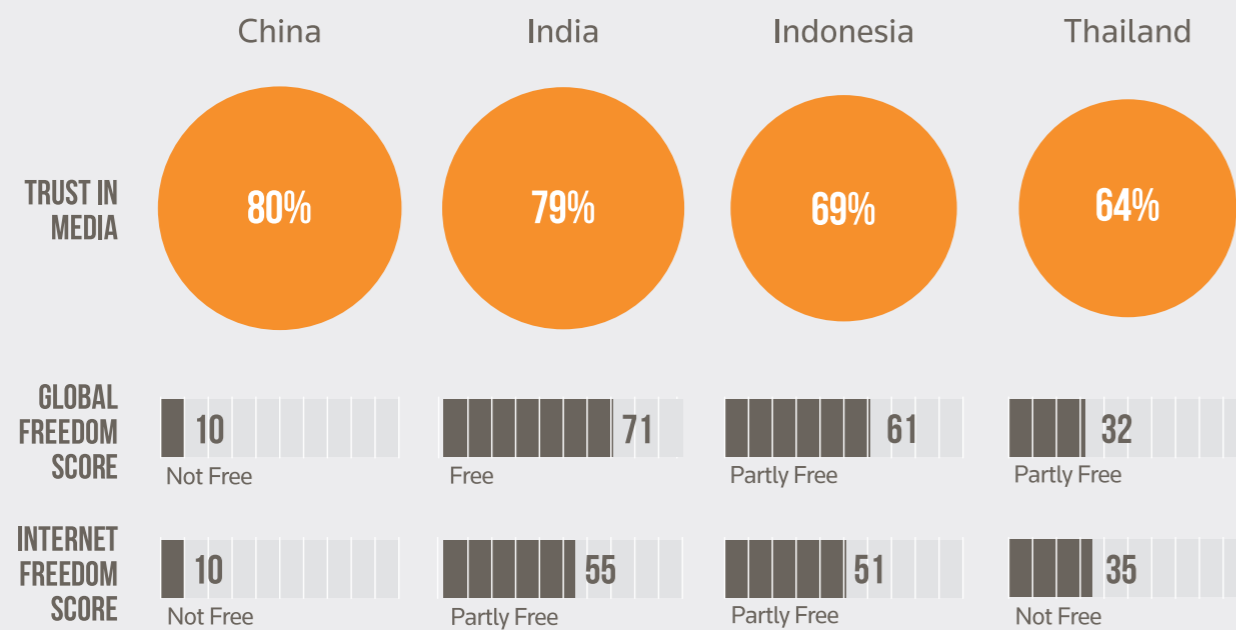
REUTERS/Aziz Taher

FEWER THAN HALF OF PEOPLE TRUST **MEDIA** IN BRITAIN, ITALY, FRANCE, SWEDEN, MEXICO, USA AND POLAND

“Trust in journalists is complicated,” Gallup’s Zacc Ritter [cautions](#): “A high level of trust may mean the media and journalists are doing a good job, or it may indicate an acceptance of false narratives by society.”

Elements of this can be seen in the [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), where the top four nations for trust in media, identified in a study of 28 markets, were China (80%), India (79%), Indonesia (69%) and Thailand (64%).

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD STATUS



Freedom House, global freedom statuses (September 2020). See their [methodology](#).



REUTERS/Dinuka Liyanawatte

This complexity was further reinforced by the insights of TRF alumni. On the one hand, there were those who felt the pandemic had been good for trust in journalism:

“

Journalism has become the most trusted organisation in disseminating information about COVID-19 to the public due to research and frequent updates.

SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT,
KENYA, TRF ALUMNI

Other alumni had a different view, arguing that in some countries the lack of independent media, coupled with media ownership models, was damaging to the reputation of the press:

“

Various laws have been enacted to restrict journalists from carrying out their duties freely and transparently. So they find themselves reporting on issues that the government wants and if the media goes against it then it is banned from providing public information services. And this means the public won't have much trust because they know what is reported is based only on satisfying the government's needs.

NEWS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
TANZANIA, TRF ALUMNI

“

In a third world country like Zambia, 90% of media houses are either owned, funded or controlled by political parties. A majority of journalists live on meagre salaries and are mostly given instructions from gate-keepers not to publish certain stories.

As the saying goes, ‘a hungry journalist is a dangerous one’, the choice to succumb to directives or get fired has cost several journalists their professionalism, integrity and, most importantly, public trust.

MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST,
ZAMBIA, TRF ALUMNI

Issues of trust in the media, combating misinformation and the role of both public figures and social networks in these developments are not unique to the pandemic. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the COVID crisis has added new dimensions to this age-old issue.

Although the pandemic may represent an opportunity for journalism to rebuild trust through its reporting, there remain concerns that many consumers will by-pass these efforts – or be unable to discern between fact and fiction. COVID-19 is the start of a new chapter in our misinformation wars, and a story that continues to be written.

EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM MEXICO



In Mexico, the government is an obstacle to the fight against fake news and the infodemic. The authorities have shown resistance to some conclusions of the WHO. To date, the president has not used a mask, and at the beginning of the pandemic the authorities discouraged anyone who was not a doctor from using one, raising doubts on a supply problem.

Although the Mexican press has exercised criticism of this and other actions, it has lost the opportunity to go further, investigate, and challenge the response of the authorities on these issues.

Journalists, in general, realise their role. But the agenda is imposed by the media which they work for. Media outlets are more interested in their reporters covering the government's daily conferences than verifying the words of the authorities.

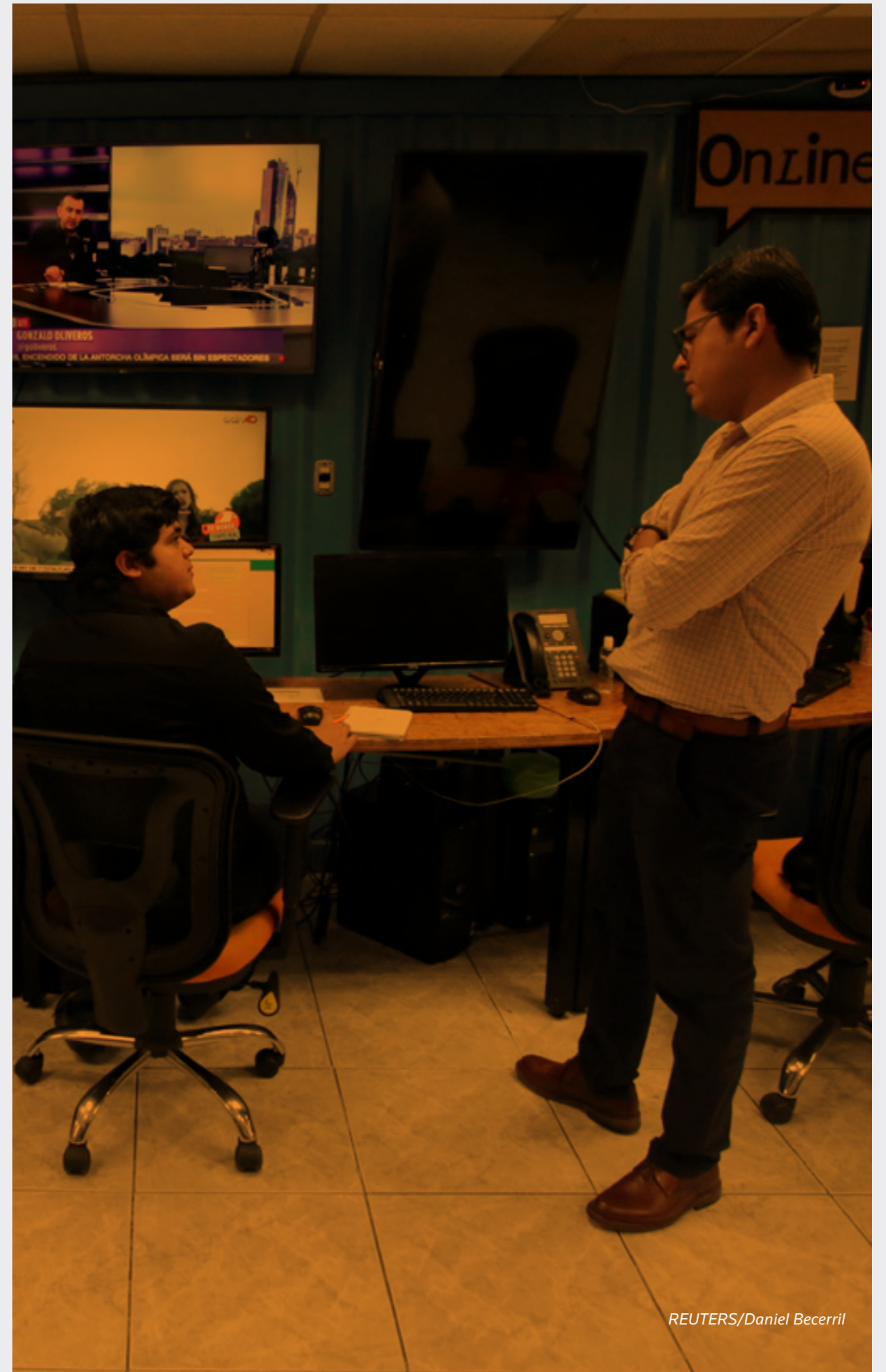
In most of the cases, it is not an officialism issue, but a clickbait one, which deteriorates the quality of the work of the press to combat the infodemic. Thus, the best efforts of verification or investigation arrive by international outlets or independent initiatives.

Far from government speeches, fake news also propagates and gains strength in networks such as WhatsApp, where the person who shares the information is not a stranger, but your close circle: family and friends.

Although the media have denied some fake news, some with a dedicated team for it such as AFP, the Mexican press, in general, has not been so effective in reaching the same populations that create this false information.

This is because the press does not use the same channels, in this case WhatsApp, as the Mexican population. An analysis of misinformation in Mexico found that 16% of fake news came through WhatsApp, in contrast to 13% on Facebook and 12% on Twitter.

**JUAN LUIS GARCÍA HERNÁNDEZ,
DIGITAL NEWS REPORTER
MEXICO, TRF ALUMNI**



EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM MALAWI



Combating fake news and the infodemic is proving difficult despite most countries having enacted laws that criminalise peddling false information.

Part of the problem is because governments have no control over social media platforms where fake news is mostly shared. This limits the influence of instruments to enforce the law and deal with suspects. Therefore, there is a need for close cooperation between governments and tech giants in Silicon Valley for success in reducing the spread of false information via social media.

Malawi, like any other country, has also suffered a fair share of fake news. It must be noted that levels of fake news soar with particular events. Between 2019 and 2020 Malawi has experienced high traffic of fake news due to fresh elections and the COVID-19 pandemic.

During elections, candidates, political parties and (special) interest groups produce more fake news as they try to woo voters using manipulative messages. The pandemic produced more fake news because it is new. As such, there were many information gaps regarding its origins, signs and symptoms and

treatment. Perpetrators took advantage of this gap to provide information, most of which turned out to be fake news.

For those involved in the fight against fake news, it has been an interesting time and a learning process at the same time.

We have learned that bad governance can give impetus to the spread of fake news. This is because when there is bad governance, people lose trust and confidence in both the government and political authority. When that happens, people resort to fake news as a way of protesting, venting anger and attempting to discredit and remove the government.

This scenario played out in the fresh elections which took place in Malawi in June this year. Leading up to them, Malawi was faced with a dilemma: to hold elections amid the pandemic and risk infections or defer the elections and prioritise taming the pandemic.

The government led by former president Peter Mutharika wanted to prioritise fighting the pandemic and hold elections later. But the opposition and a majority of Malawians wanted the elections first and to deal with the pandemic later. This conflict provided a fertile ground for the spread of fake news.

Every time the government, through the Ministry of Health, published figures of new infections, a majority of Malawians disregarded the figures, eyeing them with suspicion. Most people felt the government was deliberately amplifying the figures to build a case against the elections. People felt this was a plan by Mutharika to prolong his stay in power.

This lack of trust in the government and political leadership contributed to the spread of fake news. At one point a rumour spread that the former president Peter Mutharika was no more. Some people publicly disputed the results of their COVID-19 tests in the media because of mistrust in the government. This completely undermined the national response against COVID-19.

At one point, former head of state Joyce Banda told people at a rally that there was no COVID-19 in Malawi. In the end Malawians paid a price as infection figures increased dramatically after the elections.

Trust in the government only returned after a new government was elected to power, led by

Lazarus Chakwera and Saulos Chilima, under the Tonse Alliance Party. People started taking COVID-19 messages seriously and observing preventive measures.

These are some of the challenges involved in fighting fake news. Good governance can help reduce fake news. Even civic education can work only in an environment where citizens trust their political leaders.

KANDANI NGWIRA,
NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST,
MALAWI, TRF ALUMNI



CHALLENGE THREE

06.

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Shimbashi Station
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06. CHALLENGE 3 – ENCROACHMENTS ON MEDIA FREEDOM



REUTERS/Issei Kato

Writing in Foreign Policy at the end of June 2020, Sushma Raman, executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, [reflected](#) on “the global deterioration of press freedom”, adding that “an increasing number of attacks on the media have come in places where press freedom was once enshrined”.

One of the primary reasons for attacking, or threatening, journalists is to try and influence their reporting. As Gavin Rees, director of Dart Centre Europe, has [explained](#):

“

The basic headline is that if somebody is threatening you, they are trying to get into your head and to destroy your resilience. That’s what they are doing; they are trying to shut you up, either by death threats or by some other forms of disparaging or threatening comment or behaviour.



REUTERS/Mohammed Ameen

Political figures in countries ranging from the United States and Mexico through to the Philippines and Hungary have all sought to [erode confidence](#) in the media, in trends that pre-date the pandemic, by criticising journalists and the wider profession. It should be noted that other institutions and ‘experts’ have been similarly [undermined](#), and that multiple surveys show [low levels of trust](#) in institutions.

COVID-19 may further exacerbate these pressure points.

UNESCO [warns](#) that besides “the importance of the media and of access to verified information” government responses to the coronavirus crisis “could lead to more restrictions and danger to journalists, and the suppression of the rights of the press to impart information and the rights of people to seek and receive information”.

Governments around the world have tried to [“control the narrative”](#) through a variety of

means including new legislation and efforts to reduce media freedom.

As a result, many journalists have had to navigate [reduced access](#) to health agencies, [government press conferences](#) and COVID-19 data, alongside restrictions on where and when they can report (for example, in [hospitals](#), or due to curfews). In numerous countries it has also become harder to [question policy decisions](#) and public health practices.

Lay-offs in newsrooms may further intensify these challenges, as outlets operate with fewer reporters and their financial situation worsens. One potential consequence of these developments is that it may make news outlets more susceptible to external pressures, and it may be harder to push back with more limited resources.

GOVERNMENT DATA AND OFFICIALS

It remains to be seen whether some of the issues that journalists are currently traversing as a result of COVID-19 – including changes to response times for freedom of information requests, restricted access and curbs to freedom of movement, as well as other emergency measures – will remain in place after the crisis is under control. For now, however, there’s no doubt that this backdrop is making a difficult job even harder.

In Egypt, [a report](#) on how official figures may be severely underestimating the actual infection rate of COVID-19 led to *Guardian* journalist Ruth Michaelson [having to leave](#) the country. She had lived in and reported from Egypt since 2014.

“The report proved explosive,” Michaelson wrote, “with Egypt’s health ministry labelling it ‘a complete disgrace to health.’” In an article for *Deutsche Welle* she [explained](#) how online trolls attacked *The Guardian* and the scientists she had interviewed for the story, “before the Egyptian State Information Service revoked my press accreditation and the Egyptian security services [demanded my immediate expulsion](#) from Egypt”.

“Officials were furious at the scientists,” she said, “and accused me of ‘spreading panic’ for citing the scientists’ report, [later published](#) in the medical journal *The Lancet*.”

““

Journalists and most Egyptians do not trust the Ministry of Health’s data on COVID-19 cases because many infected people do not report their infection.

Also, the Ministry of Health spokesman most of the time refuses to respond to the journalists’ questions... For example, when I asked for the rates of infection in every governorate, he – as usual with most journalists – declined to comment.

NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST,
EGYPT, TRF ALUMNI

As one Kenyan journalist shared with us, reporters are often having to contend with the twin challenges of “restrictions in access to information by authorities” and “threats from authorities when investigating capacities in human resources and finance in response to the pandemic”.

One participant in TRF’s [Coronavirus Crisis Reporting Hub](#) – an initiative equipping journalists with the skills and information needed to report on the pandemic’s impact on economies, healthcare systems and communities – shared how they’d witnessed this type of scenario first-hand.

““

My project was to investigate the quality of food distributed during the COVID 19 crisis. Even though the story was fully balanced I was labelled anti-government by the Office of the Prime Minister and threatened. My station stood its ground because of the facts of the story.

TV NEWS REPORTER,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI

Concerns about the accuracy of data, the risk of it being politicised, issues of access, and who should ‘own’ and distribute it, can be seen globally. These problems impact on the ability of journalists – and the public – to fully grasp the reality of what is happening in their country.



REUTERS/Kim Hong-Ji

In response, some outlets are taking matters into their own hands. Six mainstream Brazilian news outlets reported in June that they [would work together to compile and release joint statistics](#).

The move followed [concerns](#), expressed by researchers, about the coronavirus data released by the health ministry.



Image: Push notifications announcing that Brazilian media companies are working together to share COVID-19 data.

Elsewhere, even if there is access to data, understanding and interpreting it can be equally difficult.

Darren Long, creative director at the *South China Morning Post*, [explained](#) to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) that official coronavirus figures for China

were “misleading” due to holes in the data. “For instance, his team knew that the government [did not include asymptomatic cases](#) in the total case count until April 1, but it didn’t know if the government counted victims with underlying conditions as COVID-19 deaths,” said the CPJ.

The [Wall Street Journal](#), [Economist](#) and the [BBC](#) are just some of the outlets to have highlighted inconsistencies in data collection in different countries.

Alongside this, in the age of COVID the protection of sources (in terms of both data and people) has become even more important, especially in the light of government responses to points of view that may challenge official narratives.

Privacy International has rounded up some examples of these types of incidents, including [Turkey investigating doctors](#) who discussed coronavirus in media interviews.



REUTERS/Marco Bello

UNDUE PRESSURE AND INFLUENCE

Questions related to coronavirus testing and cases, as well as the trustworthiness of government data and information, can also be explored in the context of how politicians are potentially trying to ‘spin’ the crisis.

Fact-checking public figures is a key task for many journalists, but it’s often not an easy one. Cristina Tardáguila, Associate Director of the [International Fact-Checking Network](#) (IFCN), [observes](#) that “COVID-19 is the biggest challenge fact-checkers have ever faced”.

“This is not politics,” she says. “We have to work fast because health issues can really cause harm. When you debunk something related to politics, half of the country doesn’t care about what you say. But when you talk about health, everybody cares. So the pressure for us to be fast is very high.”

Yet, as we have seen, there are some concerns that it can prove difficult to be critical of how your government is handling the situation,

which may be exacerbated by issues such as incomplete (or unclear) data, access to political leaders and their criticism of your reporting.

“

In the first few weeks, there was a rush of news around the clock but not enough analysis of what was going on. As media outlets got on a surer footing, they were confronted with another dilemma – do they take government-disseminated information at face value, or do they question the soundness of policy decisions?

Each path comes with its own costs because the authoritarian governments in this region do not take kindly to criticism.

INDOCHINA BUREAU CHIEF
TRF ALUMNI

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- **Iran** – the *Jahan-e Sanat* newspaper was [shut down](#) after publishing an interview with an epidemiologist in which they claimed: “The figures announced by the officials on coronavirus cases and deaths account for only 5% of the country’s real tolls.”
- **Tanzania** – Kwanza Online TV was [suspended](#) for 11 months by the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority after “generating and disseminating biased, misleading and disruptive content”. The move came after the station shared a health [alert](#) on Instagram from the US Embassy, noting the Tanzania government had not published any numbers on COVID-19 cases or deaths since 29 April.
- **Zambia** – authorities [shut down](#) Prime TV, an independent television news channel, after cancelling its broadcasting licence. Amnesty [reports](#) the cancellation came after an alleged refusal by the station to air government COVID-19 campaigns, as the advertising-funded station was still owed money from previous state advertising campaigns.

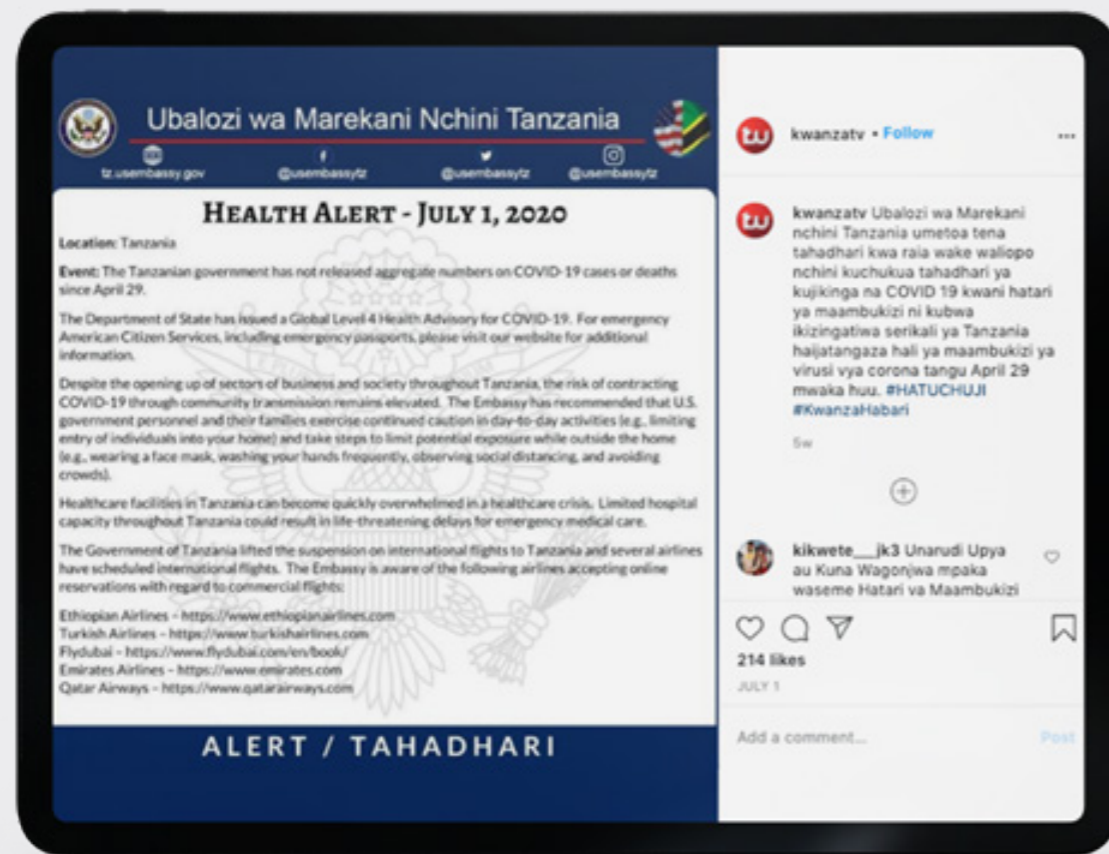


Image: Kwanza TV's [offending Instagram post](#), a [reshare](#) from the US Embassy in Tanzania. The caption offers a summary of the Health Alert for Swahili readers.

Not surprisingly, these responses can exacerbate some of the mental health issues already touched on in this report, which are faced by many journalists.

“

I covered all the materials about embezzlement of budget funds, lack of medicines in hospitals and pharmacies, the stalemate that people faced – I felt a lot of psychological pressure on myself from the authorities.

RUSSIAN JOURNALIST,
TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Caren Firouz

NEW LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Oman and several other Middle Eastern countries have taken a different approach. While not enforcing media closures *per se*, they dramatically reduced the distribution of news in physical form, ostensibly for public health reasons.

In March, the Supreme Committee for dealing with COVID-19 in Oman [issued a decision](#): “Stop the printing of newspapers, magazines and publications of all kinds and preventing their circulation, and preventing the sale and circulation of newspapers, magazines and publications issued outside the Sultanate.”

Jordan, Morocco and Yemen followed suit. CPJ [commented](#) that, according to local news reports, “the suspensions cover both independent and state-owned media outlets, and were imposed to limit spreading the virus during the printing, delivery, and distribution of the papers”.

Alongside closures and other forms of pressure exerted on news outlets and journalists, ostensibly under the guise of COVID-19, some governments have also moved to tighten laws around press freedom and ‘fake news’.

Taking their cues from leaders in the United States, Mexico, Brazil and numerous other countries, the term ‘fake news’ has often been weaponised by political leaders. New cyberlaws and regulations mean that journalists risk jail time if they tell stories deemed to be ‘fake news’.

As the IPI [notes](#), an emergency decree signed by the Romanian president in March “gives authorities the power to remove report[s] or [close](#) websites that spread ‘fake news’ about the virus, with no opportunity to appeal”.

“This restriction can be used to efficiently control [the] media and the public narrative,” [Attila Biro](#) of the RISE Romania journalism platform told them.

Biro, who in 2018 [was detained](#) in Bulgaria while investigating a story about possible fraud involving European Union funds, commented that these new moves have “nothing to do with public safety and will seriously restrict the ability of the media to do its job properly”.

By summer 2020, IPI had identified 17 countries – ranging from Cambodia to Jordan and Thailand – where these types of pandemic-era regulations had been passed.

LIST OF COUNTRIES THAT HAVE PASSED ‘FAKE NEWS’ REGULATIONS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



- Algeria
- Azerbaijan
- Bolivia
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Brazil
- Cambodia
- Hungary
- Jordan
- Philippines
- Puerto Rico
- Romania
- Russia
- Tajikistan
- Thailand
- United Arab Emirates
- Uzbekistan
- Vietnam

Source: International Press Institute (IPI) Tracker on Press Freedom Violations Linked to COVID-19 Coverage.

Image: Map of countries who have passed ‘fake news’ regulations during the pandemic.

Alongside these efforts, other countries have passed emergency legislation that can give the government new powers over the media.

“

The government of Azerbaijan has used the COVID-19 pandemic to suppress the freedom of media. Starting from March, strict quarantine started in Azerbaijan. As a result, only journalists with labour contracts can travel outside Baku or work in Baku to cover the stories. Because of Azerbaijan’s situation, many journalists don’t have a labour contract and hide their identity to work.

Even though some journalists had contracts, they still couldn’t be outside for more than two hours... The only way to get information was directly from patients, but many were not willing to talk. The few stories on the internet that went public proved the terrible situation in the country. All work was only possible via the internet and no fieldwork.

JOURNALIST,
AZERBAIJAN, TRF ALUMNI

New laws and decrees in places such as [Puerto Rico](#), [Vietnam](#) and [Tajikistan](#) have typically said that the purpose of these rules is to stop the spread of misinformation or false information that may provoke panic. However, in doing so, countries have often suspended existing laws related to media freedom and freedom

of expression, and frequently fallen back on vague cyberlaws. There are [fears](#) that these emergency powers could become the norm.

In Thailand, a [decree](#) gave Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha power “to censor or shut down media if deemed necessary”. Broad-ranging emergency powers have also been given to leaders in Hungary, the Philippines and [elsewhere](#).

Unchecked, and without the international community throwing a spotlight on these moves, we may see more of these kinds of unilateral efforts.

“When independent media is silenced, governments are able to promote self-serving propaganda rather than facts,” writes Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. “Of course, a free media is not a certain antidote,” he added. “Responsible government is also needed... But at least a free media can highlight such irresponsibility; a silenced media allows it to proceed unchallenged.”

SAFETY AND HARASSMENT

The presence, and enforcement, of legislation such as that described above can act as a further means to apply pressure, and journalists may find themselves working in an environment in which they experience criticism and interference from a range of sources.

Ana Lalić, a reporter for the Serbian news website Nova.rs, is just one journalist to have fallen foul of these rules. In April, she was detained after publishing a story describing a hospital in Northern Serbia as being “at breaking point” due to the lack of PPE.

Global Voices [notes](#) that the move came after the hospital pressed charges “due to inaccurate, unverified and malicious reporting by the Nova.rs portal about the work of this

health institution”. Lalić was later released but the charges were not initially dropped.

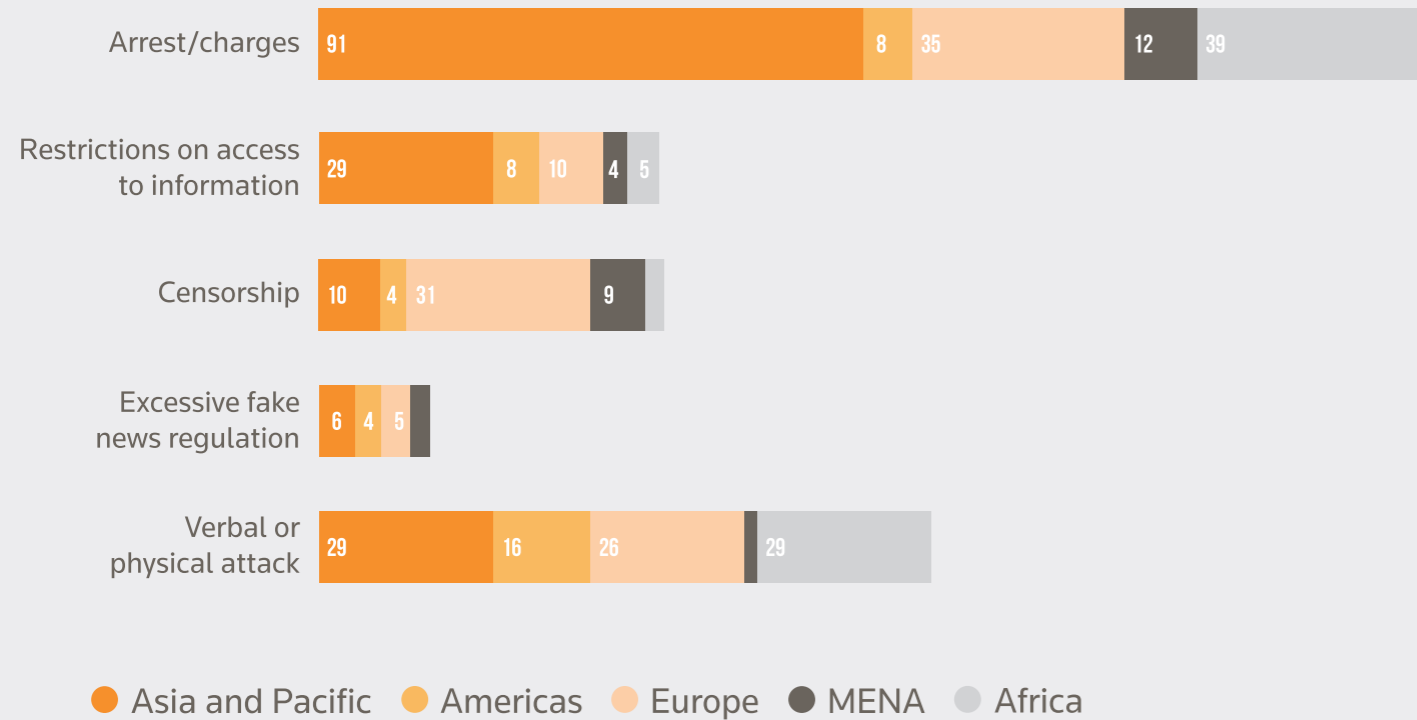
Evidence indicates that in the COVID era worrying long-term trends related to diminished media freedom – and the safety of journalists – [have accelerated](#). Journalists have been physically attacked, doxed, detained and arrested, while [covering the crisis](#).

Elements of these issues are captured by IPI and other organisations. As of mid-November 2020, IPI had recorded 473 media freedom violations around the world that could be linked to COVID-19 coverage.



REUTERS/Jalal Al-Mamo

COVID-19: NUMBER OF MEDIA FREEDOM VIOLATIONS BY REGION



Infographic Data [via](#) the International Press Institute (IPI). Date accessed, 15 November 2020

Their website provides details on each of these cases, including those in which journalists have clashed with governments during this crisis.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- **Algeria** – [accusations](#) by the Minister of Communication that the media was spreading falsehoods about COVID-19. Journalists were threatened with jail time.
- **Cambodia** – the publisher of the *Khmer Nation* newspaper was [arrested](#) for criticising the prime minister, via their personal Facebook account, for not helping people struggling with debts during the crisis.
- **Mexico** – the *Reforma* newspaper was [threatened for coverage of the president and his management of COVID-19](#), with a man purporting to be from an organised crime group threatening to “blow up” its newsroom.

Further examples of pressure being exerted on journalists during the COVID crisis can be seen in numerous nations, including:

- **Indonesia** – Journalists have been [arrested for criticising government responses](#) to the pandemic.
- **Senegal** – An attack on the offices of the newspaper *Les Echos* in August “is the fourth in a series of violence against media professionals and their properties since the outset of the coronavirus pandemic”, [notes](#) Article 19, a British-based human rights organisation.
- **Armenia** – State of Emergency-related press restrictions have [resulted](#) in the police ordering 22 different media outlets to remove or edit material they considered misleading or incorrect about the coronavirus.

These developments take place against a backdrop of wider concerns that the coronavirus may be used, particularly by authoritarian-minded leaders, to expand their powers.

Within this, one area of concern focuses on how ‘track and trace’ apps – tools primarily designed to map and monitor the spread of the pandemic – are a potential data source that could be used for more nefarious purposes. Recognising this, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [urged](#) government leaders to ensure that this data is “not used to spy on journalists or violate the confidentiality of their sources”.

Others have argued that once the coronavirus crisis has dissipated, these tracking mechanisms – like wider emergency decrees and legislation related to the freedom of the press and information during the pandemic – must cease, so they do not become part of the ‘new normal’. Whether that happens or not, of course, remains to be seen.

“Authoritarians hate to squander an emergency,” Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, [cautioned](#) earlier this year. “In the pandemic, they’ve found the perfect one.”



EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM KENYA



The COVID-19 pandemic has cast an eerie shadow on Kenyan media; there have been cases of police brutality meted out on journalists in the line of duty, an apt example being NTV cameraman Peter Wainana, who was assaulted by the Administration Police as they enforced a curfew. However, the larger and more detrimental effect of the pandemic has been the business disruption that has seen more than 500 journalists lose their jobs as advertising revenues plummeted.

Those who have not been laid off have faced pay cuts; this will indirectly harm the practice of journalism. In Kenya, five of the leading media groups, namely Nation Media Group, Standard Media Group, Radio Africa Group, MediaMax Networks and Royal Media Services enforced pay cuts of about 50 percent amidst shrinking advertising revenues.

The political class is smelling blood and has pounced on the opportunity. The Council of Governors recently called on all county governments to stop advertising with the Nation Media Group after the media house published a story titled 'Eight governors on graft hit list'. The story shed light on how

the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission was probing abuse of office and corruption allegations against the eight governors.

The uptake of digital news has been steadily gnawing at the revenues of newspapers in Kenya and the larger East African region, and the COVID-19 pandemic has just put the pedal to the metal.

Credible journalism, especially from print media, has for a long time been the lifeblood of democracy; this is not just the practice of journalism at peril. As journalists are laid off, it is estimated that the government, which remains the biggest advertiser in Kenya, presently owes media organisations USD\$3m.

Over the past seven months, media houses have quickly jettisoned outmoded business models through restructuring newsrooms, converging work teams, remodeling their websites and erecting paywalls for premium content.

As media houses innovate during a pandemic, they are up against fierce competition from nimble independent digital publishers that have mastered the agility to produce quality journalistic content without being bogged down



REUTERS/Siegfried Modola

by the complex organisational structures used in traditional newsrooms.

Though media houses in Kenya have been making changes, characterised by rebranding exercises and product launches, over the past 10 years, they paid little attention to rapidly-changing consumer preferences driven by seismic technological shifts. They now have to chew gum and walk at the same; they are hastily innovating technologically while dealing with profit dips occasioned by a pandemic.

**NICK THIONG'O,
FINANCIAL JOURNALIST,
KENYA, TRF ALUMNI**

EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM BRAZIL



REUTERS/Sergio Moraes

Media freedom in Brazil has been shrinking in the country since the 2016 election of Donald Trump and, then, Jair Bolsonaro's victory in late 2018. Trump is a huge inspiration for Bolsonaro, and he does almost the same as the Americans do. Even the term 'fake news' has become a popular expression in Brazil.

Both leaders criticise and attack the press almost on a daily basis. They try to depict themselves as victims of the press and journalists as bad people in the service of evil forces who are not working for the good of the country. Some of them even use the term "bad Brazilians".

More than the legitimacy of the press, both attack democratic institutions that are part of the democratic state, such as Congress or the Supreme Court.

By doing so, leaders give legitimacy to other people – be they politicians, authorities or common people – to adopt the same treatment towards the press and journalists. It became common to see journalists being criticised on the streets during their work, people screaming at them, telling they are against the country. This certainly reduces our media freedom and capacity of working as these actions can turn violent.

With such speeches, leaders and a part of society are erasing what are the boundaries of truth and facts. They tell people only to believe in themselves, which is very dangerous, but somehow is working. I see the rise of skepticism and denial towards the press when people see

something that is a fact but "they disagree". They prefer WhatsApp or Facebook.

This is worse amid an environment of populists who deny the role of the press; people who do not understand the exact function of journalists in society, nor how the work is done.

As journalist Peter Baker wrote in the New York Times, the concept of public trust in "an established set of facts necessary for the functioning of a democratic society" is being eroded.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND POLITICS REPORTER,
BRAZIL, TRF ALUMNI

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CHALLENGE FOUR

07.

07. CHALLENGE 4 – JOURNALISM'S FINANCIAL FREE FALL

“It’s a paradox that, as more and more people realise they need high-quality factual information to navigate the crisis, the business models that sustain that information are collapsing,” the non-profit International Media Support (IMS), [explains](#).

“The global economic shutdown has severely reduced the advertising revenues that many media outlets depend on.” As a result,

“worldwide, countless independent news providers are being forced to scale down, lay off reporters or close altogether”.

This financial backdrop is just one factor shaping the response of news organisations and journalists to the pandemic. But it is an [important part](#) of the COVID equation.



REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

ADVERTISING'S CLIFF EDGE

Globally, many companies have cut their marketing budgets, or switched their advertising spend to digital platforms, often dramatically cutting revenues for news providers in the process. As industry commentators Media Post [reported](#):

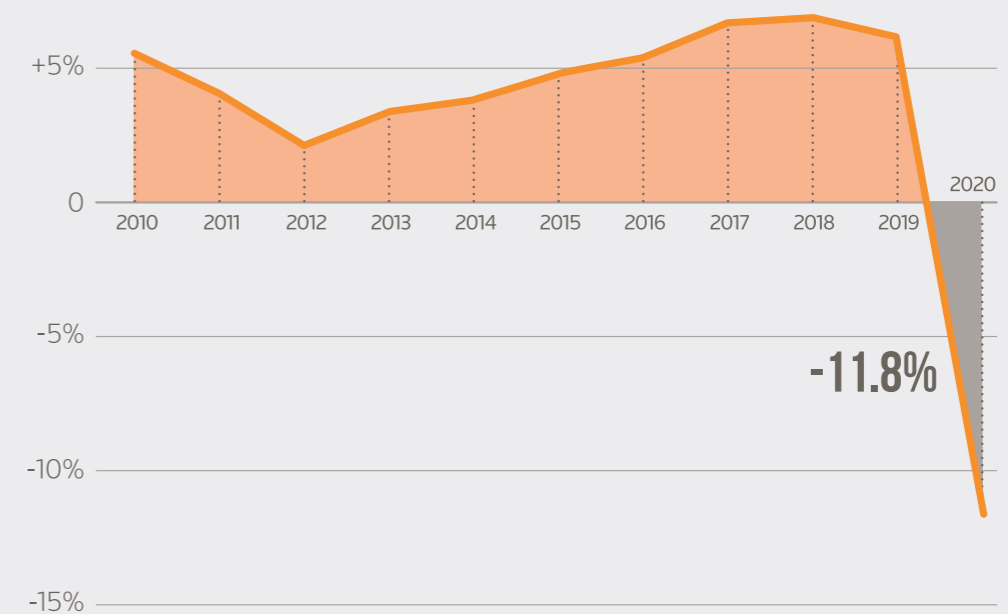
In contrast, they add, “a year ago when the firm issued its first forecast for 2020, it expected to see healthy growth of 4.8%”.

Other companies offer slightly different projections, but the trendlines are clear. Across most platforms and advertising verticals, advertising spend is down, often substantially.

“**The global advertising economy will shed \$70 billion this year and will fall 11.8% (excluding US political advertising) to \$517.5 billion, according to the latest forecast by GroupM (including political, the drop will be 9.9%).**”

GLOBAL AD ECONOMY ANNUAL GROWTH

The global advertising economy will shed \$70 billion this year and will fall 11.8%



Infographic Data [via](#) Media Post.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON FORECAST 2020 GLOBAL AD SPENDING

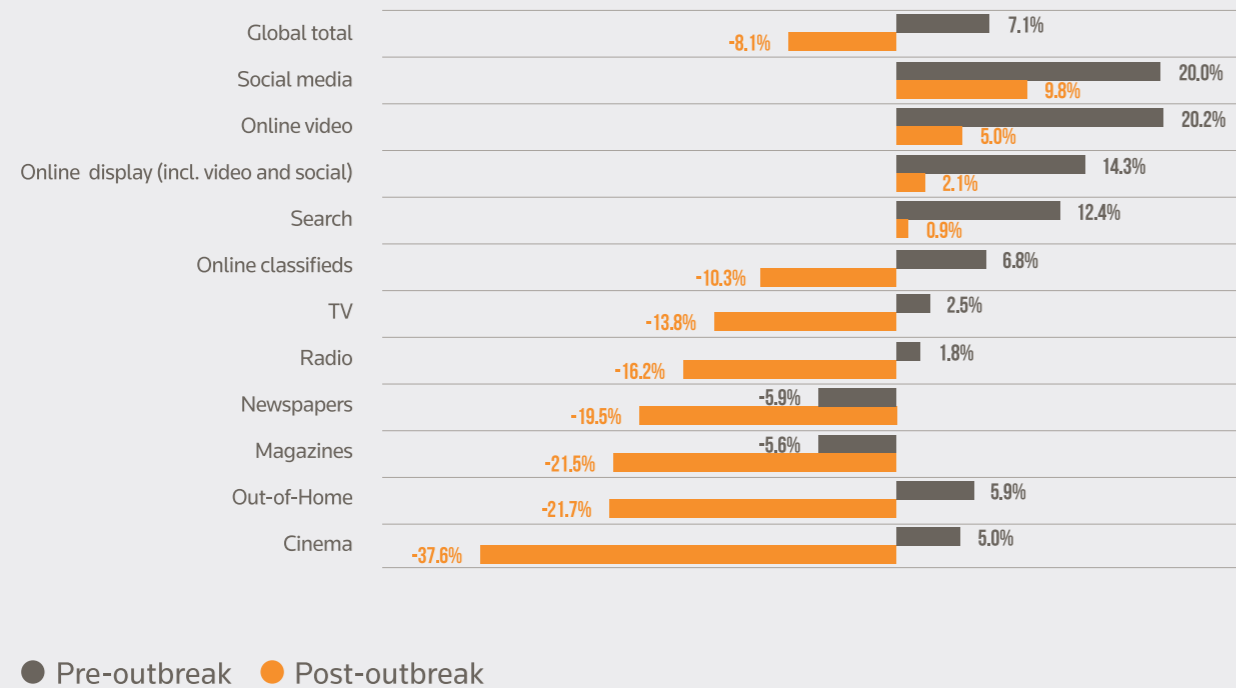


Image: Projected impact of COVID-19 on advertising platforms, Via Marketing Charts using data from WARC.

Subsequently, with many media outlets still heavily reliant on advertising income, there have been fears that the pandemic could create an “[extinction-level event](#)” for many news providers [around the world](#).

This situation can be further compounded in emerging economies and the Global South where TRF alumni have suggested that advertisers may be more likely to use their marketing budgets as potential leverage over content.

“

It is common for advertisers on the TV station to strike down stories they think are not in their best interest.

TV NEWS REPORTER,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI

Moreover, with many newsrooms under increasing financial pressure as a result of the pandemic, there are also legitimate fears that these types of pressures may escalate, and even become more commonplace.

“

Kenya’s mainstream media is heavily dependent on advertising revenue for its survival. Though debatable, advertisers wield more power on press freedom than the state and powerful politicians.

Most recently, Kenya’s Council of Governors, Wednesday September 9th, decided to stop advertising with the Nation Media Group after the media group published a story the governors found unfavourable.

This set a precedent, particularly for other journalists exposing graft (political corruption) at the time of a pandemic.

TV JOURNALIST,
KENYA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Thomas Mukoya

REUTERS/Joe Penney

THE IMPACT ON NEWSROOMS AND JOURNALISTS

As a result of lost advertising revenue, layoffs, furloughs and closures have been seen across all media sectors worldwide.

In South Africa, for example, 17 magazine titles disappeared as a result of the [closure of two publishing houses](#), Caxton and Associated Media Publishing (AMP), in May. Two months later, Media24 – another South African company – [announced](#) the closure of five magazines and two newspapers.

It's a story that has been seen [time and time again](#), regardless of the country. The one constant is that no type of organisation appears to be left unscathed.

There are a number of direct consequences for journalists and journalism. The most obvious is that thousands of journalists have lost their jobs and there are fewer opportunities for them to be re-hired elsewhere.

“

Many jobs were laid off and this included journalists and freelance correspondents losing their jobs. Where is the job security in the midst of a pandemic?

NEWS EDITOR,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI

Those that remain often face continued uncertainty, pay cuts and increased workloads, all while often working from home – with all of the potential additional [complexities](#) that this introduces.

“

Employees [had their] salary cut to half without any consultation apart from a circular issued through email.

SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT,
KENYA, TRF ALUMNI

Freelance journalists can also face these, and other, challenges. TRF alumni described a landscape of reduced opportunities and greater competition.

“

I have been a freelancer for over a year. With several journalists having lost their job in India in the lockdown, the number of freelancers suddenly swelled – I was told by some outlets that I had been submitting to that they could not take as many reports each month as before, as they were stranded for funds and had a flood of reports from freelancers.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI

“

As a freelancer, the biggest challenge is the reduced opportunity to pitch more stories to publications. I understand that funding, particularly of smaller media outlets, has been affected by the pandemic as well, so editors have been very picky with pitches.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST,
PHILIPPINES, TRF ALUMNI

Freelancers who have been commissioned to work on assignments also outlined further challenges related to their personal safety – especially regarding PPE – and to navigating increased access restrictions to many locations as a result of lockdowns.

“

I am a freelancer and have got limited assignments during this time... Most clients have shown a lot of concern though few have offered hazard pay.

But all the risky shoots have eventually fallen through. Just yesterday a US-based publication decided to cancel an assignment due to security concerns as it required travelling to a remote area where mask protocols may not be followed. They were gracious enough to offer me a kill fee.

As a freelancer, I have had no training on how to cover COVID yet. I have largely been told to keep distance and wear masks. I have read up written guidelines shared on social media by other journalists. But one does feel very vulnerable especially when you have to travel, as no organisation tells you how much they will help if you show symptoms and need to be quarantined outside your home state.

FREELANCE PHOTOJOURNALIST,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI

AN ACCELERATION OF LONG-TERM TRENDS

Job insecurity is nothing new in the world of journalism.

The Great Recession (from December 2007 onwards) [saw](#) large numbers of job cuts in newsrooms. Meanwhile, the decade-long migration of advertising revenues to digital platforms like Google and Facebook has impacted on the traditional business models of many news outlets.

Shifting revenue and delivery mechanisms for news have meant, to an extent, that the sector appears to be in a state of constant flux. Restructures (such as pivoting to digital, or increasing efforts related to video, social, etc.) have become a way of life for many journalists, creating instability and job insecurity in newsrooms around the world.

“

I have to admit it takes into huge consideration to stay in this career when it comes to compensation. Still, I choose to stay in this industry because I believe in its value. Besides, I hope that if I prove myself to be someone with values and abilities, it will be paid off in the end.

ONLINE JOURNALIST,
THAILAND, TRF ALUMNI

Back in 2018, the Pakistani journalist Umer Ali [shared](#) with Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) how in Islamabad “reporters had gathered to [protest random and immediate layoffs](#) by their

media organisations”.

“Over the past few weeks, [dozens of journalists had been fired](#), their employers said, because of ‘financial crunch’. A [television news channel shut down](#); salaries at several others remain either unpaid or have been drastically cut.”

Jump forward to 2020, and Shakeel Qarar, the president of the National Press Club in Islamabad, told Voice of America [earlier this year](#) that in some cases newspaper owners and television channels had not paid their employees for at least 10 months.

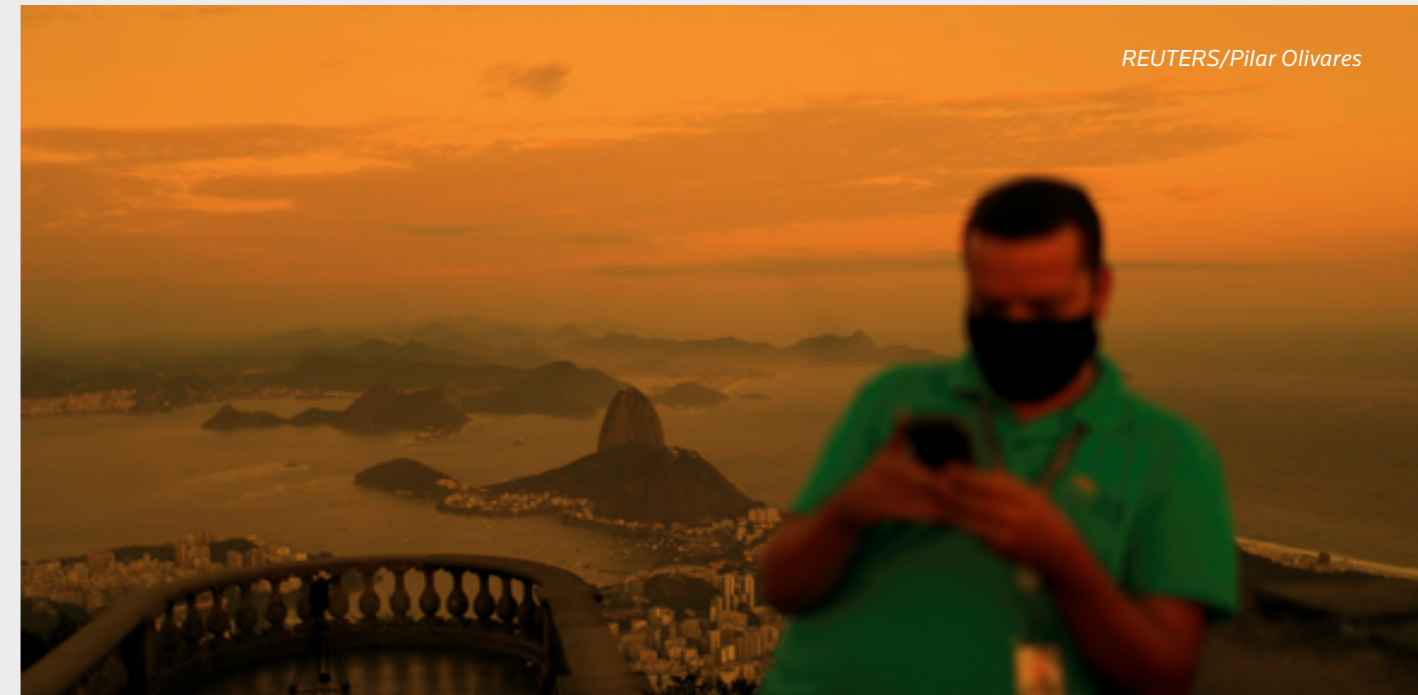
This type of behaviour is not unique to Pakistan, nor the pandemic. But the financial impact of COVID-19 has made incidents like this more commonplace.

“

The pandemic has further worsened the job security and salary. While many are working without proper safety measures, a good number of journalists have lost their jobs whereas some are working on a salary reduced by a half.

People also seem to be losing respect for the profession gradually as the journalists oftentimes do not get treated with proper dignity or find cooperation in getting information.

SUB-EDITOR,
BANGLADESH, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Pilar Olivares

NGOS AND PLATFORMS BRIDGE THE GAP

In response to some of these financial issues, a [range](#) of funders, NGOs and platforms have mobilised to support journalists and newsrooms. In some cases, revenues from readers – in the form of subscription, donations and membership fees – have also increased.

EXAMPLES OF SOME OF THESE EFFORTS INCLUDE:

- Internews launched a [Rapid Response Fund](#) which supported more than 80 local media outlets and individuals in more than 40 countries, to ensure that life-saving health information can continue to be shared.
- The [European Journalism Centre](#) (EJC) and the [Facebook Journalism Project \(FJP\)](#) launched a USD\$3m fund to support community, local and regional European news organisations operating “with minimal resources during the COVID-19 crisis”. The fund is part of a wider [\\$25m emergency grant-funding](#) programme, administered through the FJP.
- By [late July](#), \$39.5m in funding had been allocated to more than 5,600 publishers in 115 countries through the [Google News Initiative Journalism Emergency Relief Fund](#) (JERF).

\$39.5M IN FUNDING DISTRIBUTED TO 5,600+ NEWSROOMS ACROSS 115 COUNTRIES

\$10.9M

NORTH AMERICA

\$12.2M

EUROPE,
THE MIDDLE
EAST & AFRICA

\$6.4M

ASIA PACIFIC

\$10M

LATIN AMERICA

Image: Regional Distribution of the Google News Initiative Journalism Emergency Relief Fund (JERF), July 2020. Via Google.

While these efforts are laudable, and provide a welcome stopgap, they are nonetheless far from a panacea. Funders have been overwhelmed with applications and it's clear that the need for financial assistance is greater than these initiatives can support.

"It would be a great mistake to think that the industry has saved itself, or that it will be able to in the nearby future," cautions Rieneke Van Santen, a global media consultant and press freedom advocate based in the Netherlands.

"Governments need to step in and commit themselves to supporting independent media and press freedom projects for the coming years if they want to save journalism," she says. "Information saves lives. Journalists save lives. Period."



REUTERS/ Fadi Al-Assaad

EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM MOLDOVA



International rankings continue to place the Republic of Moldova, just as during the communist government, among the states with a “partially” free press. One of the causes – and probably the most important reason behind this ranking – is that a lack of financial resources creates the dependence of some media institutions on political factors.

Independent media institutions that survive from international grants and projects are not sure they will have the money to pay their employees. They have to constantly apply for project funding, but they also have to learn to survive on their own, from advertising that is dependent on views. And here comes the dilemma between ethics and fairness and the need to survive.

For example, two years ago, TV8 Television – which reported numerous times on how the foundation of the politician and oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, ‘Edelweiss’, offered donations of obscure and non-transparent money – broadcast an advertisement for the foundation he owned.

Ziarul de Gardă, the first and only investigative newspaper in the Republic of Moldova, is reluctant to include advertisements in the newspaper. Each time they had to check who was behind a construction company that placed an advertisement, to see if the owner was not listed in corruption or fraud cases. That is why it was a long period in which newspaper advertising was practically non-existent or too little to cover the expenses of the editorial office.

This made the dependence on projects and grants even greater because the money coming from newspaper subscriptions was too small even to cover the circulation. That is why diversification of income sources is a problem for those who refuse dubious advertising.

In the Republic of Moldova, the only national television in the state budget is ‘Moldova’, which should report objectively. On 8 June 2018, while people were protesting, the channel broadcast songs and dances. In recent years, there have been several cases when biased materials have been observed on the part of those in charge.

The state has no interest in cultivating press freedom and developing a truly equitable and non-partisan press. And according to polls,

television stations that are politically controlled enjoy the greatest popularity, which leads to misinformation and manipulation of the population.

There is also the issue of transparency in media funding, as opposed to the editorial independence that we can estimate by analysing the content.

LILIANA BOTNARIUC,
JOURNALIST,
MOLDOVA, TRF ALUMNI



EXPERT COMMENTARY: THE VIEW FROM ZAMBIA



REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

“Embracing the Fifth Estate – A Solution to Journalism’s Financial Free Fall?”

It is no secret. Social media is overtaking mainstream media worldwide. In clear examples, print media has fallen tremendously in previous years, and the majority of news today is reported and shared directly by citizens with their phones.

The news they share is almost always on the internet before it airs on television or in newspapers, causing a migration of audiences to online platforms. Some newspapers have tried to circumvent the handicap that social media has created, to no avail.

A majority of Zambian news outlets struggle to make money online and have grown so fond of the traditional methods of disseminating news.

Zambia has not had a backbone of digital media save for a few independent media organisations like News Diggers, who from their inception realised that mainstream media was fighting a losing battle against the fifth estate: social media. The rest have sadly failed to adapt to new times, and this has cost them their readership and made them vulnerable to capture by political interests.

Traditional models of income generation in journalism are outdated and therefore require modification if journalism is to survive the financial free fall it is currently experiencing.

If mainstream media is to thrive, it must understand the era it is in. Media outlets need to embrace change. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a vast number of media houses to

shift to digital news amid their plummeting sales, revenue losses and staff lay-offs.

However, as much as digital media carries immense optimism for the future of journalism, it is not accessible for all. Internet access in many African countries is slow and expensive, not just for readers but journalists as well. Not everyone in the Global South can afford data costs to access news on the internet, let alone subscription fees.

Weak economies continue to affect the quality of journalism, causing a loss in readers and eventually the independence of journalists.

The saving grace of journalism financially is digital news – with the condition that it is affordable for most.

ZANJI SINKALA,
GENDER ACTIVIST AND MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST,
ZAMBIA, TRF ALUMNI

SOLUTIONS

08.

08. SOLUTIONS

This report has primarily focused on the core challenges being faced by journalists reporting on the coronavirus. Through their work, the news media has attempted to hold governments to account and translate public health information into a format that audiences can make sense of and apply to their daily lives.

As the second wave of the pandemic takes hold around much of the world, this presents an opportunity to take stock of earlier reporting and showcase some of the fresh approaches newsrooms have used in covering COVID-19.

With the pandemic moving into its next phase, we hope that these examples offer inspiration and affirmation for journalists, as they continue to explore new ways to cover this crisis.



NEW PRODUCTS AND APPROACHES

Many news media outlets saw record levels of traffic and engagement in the [early stages](#) of the outbreak. Large audiences were hungry for information about this rapidly-changing situation.

As the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) has [shown](#), various media outlets launched new products such as coronavirus-themed podcasts, alerts and newsletters designed to cater for this demand.

Some news providers also dropped their paywalls for COVID-19 content, removing

a potential barrier to accessing important, potentially life-saving, information. Other players looked to develop new methods of storytelling and distribution, enabling audiences to receive important public health messages in a variety of formats.



Image for a COVID-19 podcast from the [South China Morning Post](#).

In this vein, explainer videos and infographics proved highly popular, with their production going beyond just traditional newsrooms.

The [WHO](#), [Stanford University's School of Medicine](#), Canada-based YouTube channel

[AsapSCIENCE](#), and the Indian medic [Dr G Bhanu Prakash](#) are among those successfully using explainer videos and animation to communicate key health messages.



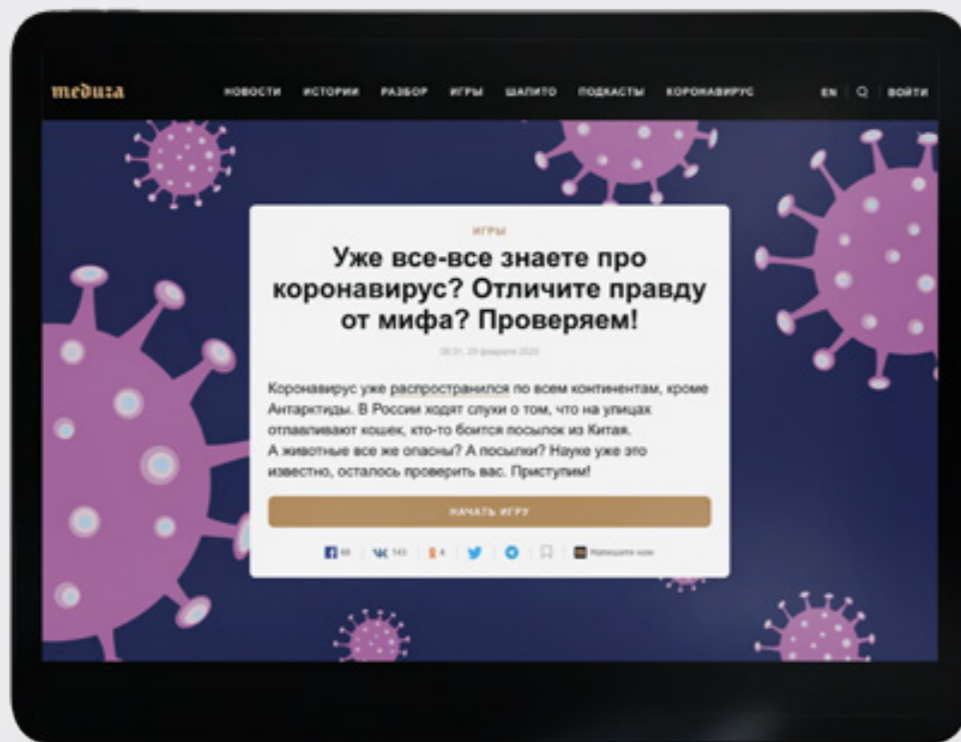
Image: from "The Coronavirus Explained & What You Should Do" by 'Kurzgesagt - In a Nutshell' on [YouTube](#).

Other approaches and delivery mechanisms have also been used to engage audiences and communicate COVID news to audiences.

These efforts reflect the ability of journalists to creatively communicate vital public health messages and meet audiences where they are. They also stress the importance of traditional media, in particular radio, as a means to reach large audiences in parts of the Global South.

SOME OF THE EXAMPLES THAT CAUGHT OUR EYE INCLUDE:

- A Facebook Live interview in the Philippines, with human rights lawyer Chel Diokno, on the rule of law in a pandemic. The video has been viewed [nearly a quarter of a million times](#). It was hosted by the online news website Rappler.
- To support Rohingya communities in Bangladesh, BBC Media Action produced short audio episodes (5 minutes or less) called [Soiyi Hota](#) ('correct information') designed for dissemination via loudspeakers.
- Jakarta-based Kantor Berita Radio (KBR), [described](#) by Internews as "the first independent national radio news agency in Indonesia", is using a range of multimedia platforms to discuss how climate change and COVID-19 intersect.
- Radio stations across Africa [pivoted their programming](#) to address the pandemic. Eagle FM in the Namibian capital of Windhoek countered fears that "5G had caused coronavirus, or that it was man-made or that Chinese people were intentionally bringing the virus into our country".
- [Meduza](#), a Russian and English-language news provider based in Latvia, created an online game in the form of a 'true or false' quiz, with [questions about the coronavirus](#).



Screenshot: Start of the coronavirus quiz on the [Meduza website](#).



Image: Rappler's interview with Chel Diokno.



REUTERS/Thomas Peter

PARTNERSHIPS

Given the speed and complexity of the infodemic, it is imperative that stakeholders work together to maximise their efforts.

Partnership working can be hard, however, we have already seen a broad spectrum of different collaborations emerge.

THESE EFFORTS CAN COVER A BROAD SPECTRUM OF ACTIVITY, INCLUDING:

- Investigative journalism:** Centinela Covid-19 is a collaborative cross-border project examining the response to COVID-19 in Latin America. The venture features organisations from 12 Latin American countries, as well as Univision Noticias in the USA. It is coordinated by the [Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism](#) (CLIP) and supported through funding from Oxfam and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.³
- Content sharing:** [Habertürk](#), one of Turkey's three biggest news channels, is broadcasting [one-minute explainer videos](#) produced by journalists working for [Teyit](#), an independent verification platform based in Turkey. [According](#) to the European Journalism Center, "the short clips debunk the most widely-circulated myths about the outbreak and highlight practical fact-checking tips". The partnership enables this content to reach a wider audience than through Teyit's digital channels alone.
- Data sharing:** with support from Internews, three newsrooms in the Kyrgyz Republic – [24.kg](#), [Kaktus Media](#) and [kloop](#) – are working together [to consolidate information about COVID-19 in the country](#), working with the School of Data Kyrgyzstan to create a national [dashboard](#) and [open data portal on COVID-19](#) in the Republic.
- Creative Commons:** [Meduza](#), a Riga-based online newspaper and news aggregator operating in Russian and English, has also made their coronavirus coverage freely available, subject to attribution, under a [Creative Commons](#) licence, allowing stories (but not photos) to be used for free without the need for prior approval.
- Research:** the [Journalism and the Pandemic Project](#) is a research partnership between the [International Center For Journalists \(ICFJ\)](#) and the [Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University](#). Blending experienced journalists and academic researchers, their work aims to understand the scale of the crisis for journalism.

³ Alliance members include: the Latin American Center for Journalistic Investigation (CLIP), [Chequeado](#) (Argentina), [El Deber](#) (Bolivia), [Agência Pública](#) (Brazil), [El Espectador](#) and [La Liga Contra el Silencio](#) (Colombia), [La Voz de Guanacaste](#) (Costa Rica), [Ciper](#) (Chile), [GK](#) (Ecuador), [El Faro](#) (El Salvador), [Non-Fiction](#) (Guatemala), [Quinto Element Lab](#) (Mexico), [El Surtidor](#) (Paraguay), [IDL-Reporteros](#) (Peru) and [Univision Noticias](#) (United States), with the support of [Oxfam](#) and the [Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting](#).

Alongside these journalistic efforts, we are also seeing partnerships between journalism outlets and tech companies, such as:

- **Facebook:** the social network's Fact-Checking Programme [includes](#) more than 60 independent fact-checking organisations, working in more than 50 languages.

In the early phases of the pandemic, the company established a \$1m grant programme to support coronavirus fact-checking. Twenty-six projects have been [supported](#) in Italy, Spain, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Greece, Turkey, Montenegro, Lithuania, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, India, Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United States, Australia, France, Indonesia, Canada, Jordan, Kenya, Taiwan and Ukraine.

- **Google:** the search giant is [providing](#) \$6.5m in funding to fact-checkers and non-profits fighting misinformation. Organisations they have supported include First Draft and [LatamChequea](#), a single hub to highlight the work of 21 fact-checking organisations across 15 countries in the Spanish-speaking world and Latin America.

The company also pledged to train 1,000 journalists across India and Nigeria in spotting health misinformation. Google's new [Question Hub](#) is also being used to address COVID concerns. The Hub identifies topics that internet users are looking for, but which do not (yet) yield high-quality answers.

Findings are passed on to partners – such as the information initiative [DataLEADS](#), the fact-checking website [BOOM Live](#) in India, and [Africa Check](#) in Nigeria – to create content that fills these known gaps.



Recipients of the second and final round of the Coronavirus Fact-Checking Grant programme managed by the International Fact-Checking Network, with support from Facebook. Image via [Poynter](#).



Examples of these attributes in practice can be seen throughout this chapter. Here are some further illustrations of these core principles in action:

- **Accountability reporting** – El Surtidor [investigated](#) the cost of ventilators, revealing that “fierce competition for respirators faces smaller countries, such as Paraguay, in a scenario of price manipulation, cargo seizures, excessive costs and possible shortages of this critical input”.
- **Data storytelling:** [According](#) to Amr Eleraqi, founder of [Infotimes.org](#), the first Arabic website to specialise in data journalism, “COVID taught people in this region to love data... They want comparisons about cases and deaths in their own countries and across borders”.
- **Undercover reporting:** Two journalists, Ana Poenariu and Andrei Ciurcanu, went undercover to [highlight Romania’s trade in black market masks](#), working with [RISE Project Romania](#) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ([OCCRP](#)) in the process.
- **Supporting marginalised communities:** Haitian journalist Milo Milfort wrote about [the impact of the pandemic and mask wearing on Haiti’s deaf population](#). “The article contributed to starting a public conversation about the fate of a neglected group of people in our society,” Milfort [told](#) IJNet. “It exposed the weakness and the lack of responsibility shown by the state towards one of many marginalised social groups in Haiti.”

IMPACTFUL AND INNOVATIVE WORK

Through this broad spectrum of activity, journalists have delivered work that has [underlined the demand](#) for accurate news and information, as well as the requirement to tailor it for the needs of given communities.

During a public health crisis, journalism’s fact-checking role is [crucial](#). This is especially true of

a new virus, which we are learning more about every day. The core values of journalism – the importance of accuracy, facts, and clarity – are perhaps more important than ever.

In addition to these efforts, journalists and news outlets have continued to creatively explore delivery mechanisms for news and information.

A number of these efforts have harnessed WhatsApp, a service with more than [2 billion users worldwide](#).

In the Ivory Coast, WhatsApp is being used to [distribute daily updates](#) on the pandemic and to address rumours and misinformation. Material is also shared on Facebook and Twitter.

COVID-19 has, correspondingly, encouraged some journalists to launch entirely new ventures.

[The Continent](#) is a Pan-African weekly newspaper produced in partnership with the *Mail & Guardian (M&G)* a South African weekly newspaper. By mid-August it had published 16 editions, disseminated to 8,000 subscribers in 48 African countries.

As South African journalist Pontsho Pilane [explains](#): “The PDF publication features news from across the African continent and is easily shared and read on mobile phone screens. The articles are short, on average about 250 words, and a news edition is distributed mainly on WhatsApp every Saturday.”

“WhatsApp was almost always the source of fake news and that’s when we realised that we had to start thinking very seriously about how we can get our credible news onto WhatsApp,” Simon Allison, *M&G*’s Africa editor and co-founder of *The Continent*, said.

Together with their colleague, Sipho Kings, they said they “started asking ourselves what product can we make that can showcase the news that we’re doing in a way that works on that particular medium”.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, [Agência Mural](#), a non-profit that produces news, data and analysis about the outskirts of the Grande São Paulo metropolitan area, has [created](#) a daily 8-minute WhatsApp podcast called *Em Quarentena (Quarantined)*.

Another new enterprise, [saludconlupa.com](#) (Health with a Magnifying Glass), focuses on collaborative investigative journalism developed and distributed in different formats. ICFJ Knight Fellow Fabiola Torres launched the new digital site – which is dedicated to public health in Latin America – in Spanish and English.

These examples demonstrate that for all the trials journalism faces as a result of COVID-19, journalists remain creative creatures seeking to cut through the noise and communicate with audiences. News outlets are continuing to produce important, impactful and inspired stories, offering journalism and news products that offer real value to the communities they serve.

FREE DELIVERY EVERY SATURDAY

The Continent is a weekly newspaper designed to be read and shared on WhatsApp. It showcases the best of African journalism. And it's free.



Get your copy delivered to your phone or inbox every Saturday. And if you like what you read, forward it to your friends, family and colleagues – not indiscriminately, but only with people who might appreciate it.



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CONCLUSION

09.



09. CONCLUSION

As we have seen throughout this report, journalism in 2020 faces a long list of challenges.

The unprecedented nature and scale of COVID-19 upended many industry norms almost overnight. Subsequently, journalists had to rapidly contend with new ways of working, while making sense of the implications of the crisis in their personal, as well as professional, lives.

In doing this, they have encountered numerous hurdles, ranging from access to PPE, modified equipment and safety training, to the trials and tribulations of working from home, to frequent difficulties accessing data, officials and other sources.

Despite this, we have seen numerous examples of resilience and valuable reporting. Journalists continue to support the information needs of tired, weary, and scared, audiences by blending traditional journalistic ideals with new opportunities for engagement and innovation.

These efforts are often playing out against a backdrop of reduced freedom of the press, growing unease among some potential sources about talking to journalists, as well as a financial landscape that has resulted in major job losses and pay cuts.

In many countries, these wider issues pre-date the pandemic. However, the coronavirus crisis



has both accelerated these trends and emphasised why journalism matters.

Browbeaten and frequently under attack from multiple directions, this is a vital time for champions of journalism to stand up and ensure that their voices are heard.

NGOs and media funders, leaders across multiple sectors, and journalists themselves, must continue to stress the valuable work being produced by the press, and strongly push back against moves to undermine it.

Without this, there is a [very real risk](#) that some of the temporary measures outlined in this paper may become permanent. This could have major consequences for both the immediate information needs of communities, and the long-term picture of media freedom.

Protecting, and promoting, media freedom is now more important than ever. Yet these principles are being actively undermined by multiple regimes, meaning that the risks to media freedom worldwide are possibly greater than ever.

“At a time where people’s health and livelihoods are at risk, countries should not be using the spread of ‘fake news’ and the crisis sparked by COVID-19 as an excuse to repress online critics,” Amnesty’s Yasmine Kacha [writes](#).

However, it is clear that in some countries, that’s exactly what’s happening.

Numerous autocratic regimes around the world have determined not to let a good crisis go to waste. Under the guise of tackling the ‘infodemic’ and trying to avoid panic, media

freedoms have subsequently been restricted in many countries.

The irony, of course, is that while battering journalism from multiple angles the pandemic has also underlined the need for reliable news and information, even as many journalists find their ability to do their job hindered by new restrictions and constraints.

Journalism matters. Especially during a pandemic. Accurate informed reporting can save lives and prevent unnecessary deaths and illness. It can also speak truth to power and ensure that governments and public health providers are held accountable.

At the same time, COVID-19 has also heightened the wider systematic challenges – contending with online falsehoods, finding new and effective ways to reach audiences, an uncertain financial backdrop, questions of trust and partisanship, and threats to media freedom – that news outlets were already grappling with day in, day out.

Because of this, while being alive to the ramifications of this bigger picture, the journalism sector also needs to try to be its own best advocate.

One way to do this is by continuing to produce important, impactful, high-quality work, which demonstrates the value of the profession and the breadth of output that it produces.

The external pressures on journalism are great, but so are the internal pressures on journalism to adapt and evolve. COVID-19 has further reinforced this.



As several TRF alumni have noted throughout this report, the pandemic has offered an opportunity to embrace new tools, skills and storytelling techniques.

Continuing to harness these possibilities will be important if we are to go on informing and engaging audiences as COVID fatigue kicks in and potentially shapes both our media habits and everyday behaviours in a detrimental manner.

This report offers many examples of challenges, opportunities and great journalism, all of which we hope can help to inform some of these efforts to move forward.

We look forward to continuing to be part of that conversation. And the solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS: SEVEN PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP NEWSROOMS TODAY

For many people, the global impact of COVID-19 – and the uncertainty it has unleashed – makes it perhaps the most significant life-changing event in living memory.

That context underpins this research report and is the reason why hearing directly from journalists about their experiences – as we do throughout this report – is so valuable.

In this final section we summarise the key recommendations provided by 25 TRF alumni in the emerging economies and the Global South, specifically related to strengthening journalism and supporting journalists during the pandemic.

These suggestions are primarily pragmatic and focused on the practicalities of producing journalism during a pandemic.

Wider strategic issues related to erosions of media freedom, trust in journalism, concerns about surveillance and support (or lack thereof) from legal systems, and issues of harassment and support from their own newsrooms, emerged in broader discussions with TRF alumni and are featured throughout this report, in the journalists' own words.

However, addressing these issues was not the top priority when we asked for suggestions of the changes journalists wanted to see. For the purposes of this report, therefore, we will solely share topics TRF alumni explicitly identified as those areas they wished to see a focus on.

Seven overarching themes emerged from their responses:



REUTERS/Ahmad Masood

1. PANDEMIC-RELATED REPORTING SKILLS

Given the novel nature of the coronavirus and the global nature of this public health crisis, many journalists did not have previous experience of covering this type of situation.

However, with further waves of the virus **expected** and more pandemics **anticipated**, it's likely that this type of reporting will only become more commonplace.⁴ **According** to Dr Peter Daszak, President of EcoHealth Alliance: "We're going to see more outbreaks, it's inevitable. They might not look like this one, but there will be more."

Given this, as one reporter in Uganda reminded us: "*Journalists should be equipped with skills on how they can cover and report about the pandemic.*"

Moreover, these efforts need to go outside capital cities and urban conurbations, to reach a broad cross-section of communities. A wide geographic distribution matters given the pervasiveness of a potential pandemic. As a different journalist in Uganda suggested:

“

Skills in writing and reporting about such pandemics should be given to journalists, especially those upcountry because they rarely have such courses.

NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI

And although the next pandemic may look very different from this one, it is nonetheless incumbent on news outlets, journalists and funders to learn from past (and present) experiences. As one senior Sri Lankan journalist reflected, the industry would benefit from:

“

Better training on how to respond instead of react. Many of us learned how to report on a pandemic after we were knee deep in it.

⁴ There are multiple examples of pre-COVID predictions of an impending pandemic, such as: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/more-pandemics-are-inevitable-and-we-have-to-prepare-for-them/2016/01/21/0a77d3f8-bb0f-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d_story.html and <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/03/health/gallery/seven-reasons-global-pandemic-risk-virus-bacteria/index.html> as well as numerous academic papers.

Within this, there's a recognition that journalists need to do more than just cover a public health crisis. They also need to understand how to cover it safely.

“

Journalists were also among COVID-19 positive patients all around the world. How did we get there? The people who have been advocating for the citizenry to follow health guidelines are now part of the statistics. Where did we go wrong?

NEWSPAPER EDITOR,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Edgard Garrido

2. ADVOCACY AND FUNDING FOR PPE

To cover a pandemic safely, the requirements for journalists go beyond just training. Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) is also [fundamental](#).

“Let us fight the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) together,” Sadiq Ibrahim, President of the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), [said](#) in April. “But as journalists do their part, media employers must also do their part and discharge their responsibility for duty of care and provide PPE to journalists and other media workers in the field.”

Unfortunately, that has often [not been the case](#).

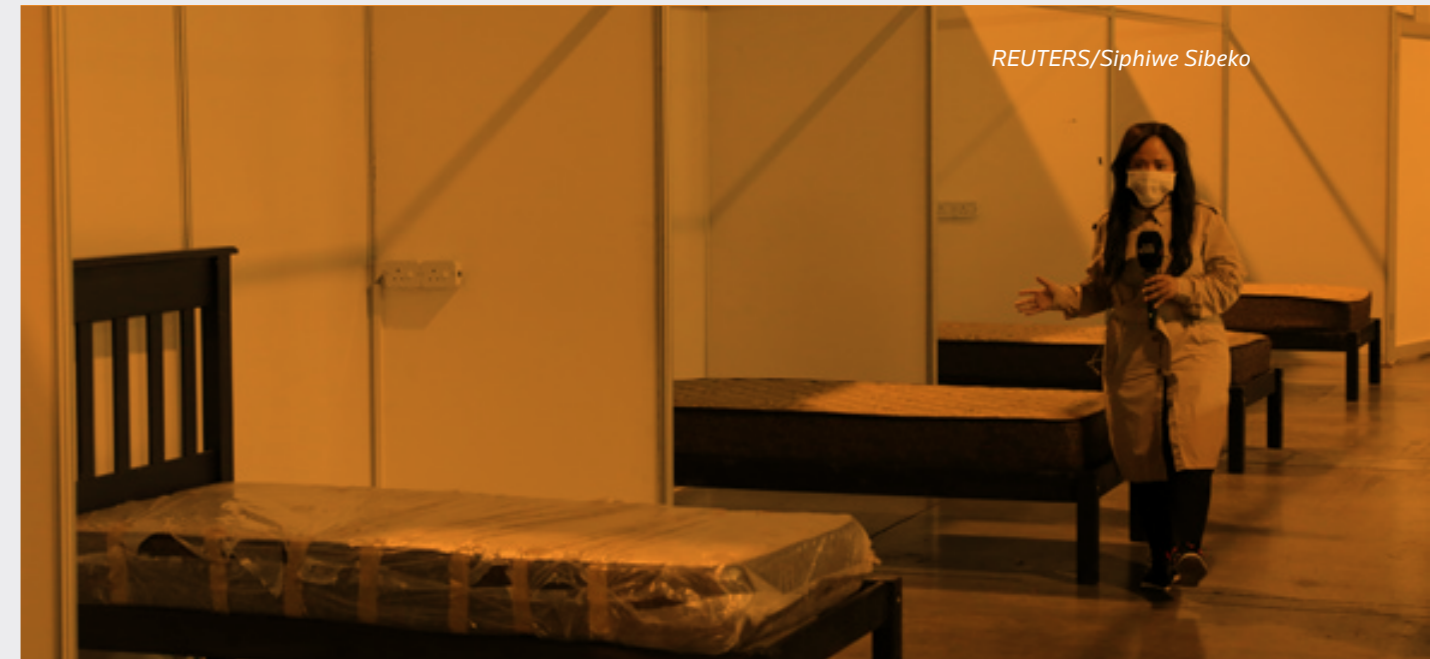
In response, TRF alumni spoke of the necessity for “holding organisations accountable for the physical safety of journalists during the pandemic”, as well as ensuring the provision of PPE.

The latter was a recurrent theme among multiple respondents, with some suggesting that where employers fail, others may need to step in.

“

I think a fund or something like that which can offer journalists a chance of being safe while working, for example by paying for testing, offering them PPE, guidance and counselling etc., would make a difference.

RADIO JOURNALIST,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

3. GREATER SUPPORT FOR FREELANCERS

One group potentially most vulnerable to lack of PPE is freelancers. Across our cohort there was also a wider recognition that freelancers have perhaps been impacted more by the financial fallout of COVID-19 than other journalists.

training possibilities, emergency funds for those facing economic hardship, as well as greater opportunities to produce content for larger, international, publications – given the higher rates these outlets may pay compared to domestic media in the regions we focused on.

“

Freelance journalists who are used by big organisations have further suffered from financial instability brought by the pandemic; they must be supported.

INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI

Recommendations to support freelancers proffered by our respondents included more



REUTERS/Thomas Suen



“

Due to COVID-19 some mainstream media organisations closed down and cut staff journalists' salaries. If some international organisations can support/empower journalists in developing countries (especially freelancers) to write pitches and stories for global publications, that would be a great support.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI

“

I'd like to see more training opportunities for freelancers like me. It would be nice to have the same or a fair number of training opportunities for freelancers – regardless if they contribute to smaller publications – as others who are employed at, or contributing to, a known media outlet.

I don't know if this is possible, but it would also help if there's an organisation/foundation per region that could assist freelancers get through their financial crisis during a pandemic, such as extending cash aids or at least connecting freelancers to available projects and clients that could bring in additional income at times like this.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST,
PHILIPPINES, TRF ALUMNI

4. IMPROVING ACCESS TO EQUIPMENT

Outside of COVID-specific apparatus, multiple journalists also identified the challenge of access to professional equipment.

One Kenyan journalist encouraged TRF and other media development organisations to consider how they can “support alumni journalists with necessary media equipment such as cameras, recorders, laptops... depending on needs”.

Meanwhile, several TRF alumni in Nigeria recommended journalists be provided with equipment (perhaps by entities other than their employers, although this was not explicitly stated).

Another alumnus, interestingly also based in Nigeria, echoed these themes and also

addressed the hidden costs journalists can incur, especially when working from home.

“

Journalism is an online profession so support should be in the area of provision of the latest gadgets and tools for journalists. Also, giving them [an] allowance for data to support their work.

EDITOR, NEWS AGENCY,
NIGERIA, TRF ALUMNI



5. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

TRF alumni offered recommendations on a broad range of further areas where they felt more training and development was needed.

This ranged from “how to identify fake news and dealing with the infodemic” through to “having the tools and weapons to fight the rising dictatorship consolidating its powers over the media” and “online training programmes that can achieve globally-recognised certifications”.

Aside from access to equipment, several journalists also noted the importance of enabling journalists to unlock the potential this affords.

“

It is important for journalists and the media organisation to stay updated with the developing technologies and also give training to their employees on the same.

**SENIOR NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT,
INDIA, TRF ALUMNI**

There was a recognition of the benefits of remote training, a method which has grown in popularity and take-up during the pandemic, as well as calls for more grants and training related to areas such as “solution stories”, “digital skills” and “mobile reporting”.

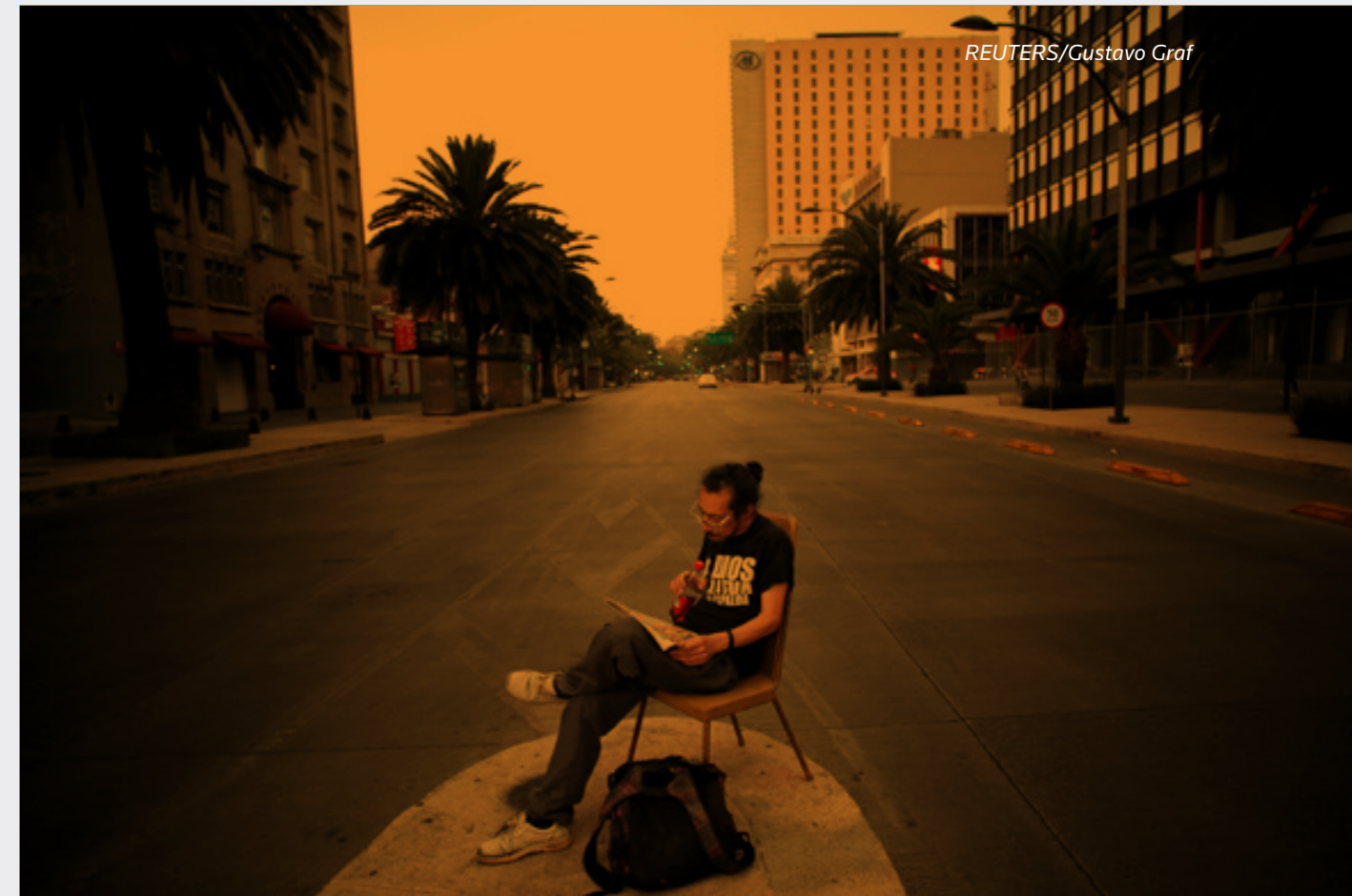
Besides these suggestions, a couple of alumni also indicated the need for support that can help to diversify the business model. As one

Indian journalist stressed: “We have to find ways to sustain free and fair journalism without being beholden to government or corporate houses.”

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As a journalist working in the written press, it would be essential to put in place measures which would allow the press to be viable, the newspapers to sell themselves. This can go through various supports, through capacity-building in order to move more towards digital.

**BUSINESS JOURNALIST,
CAMEROON, TRF ALUMNI**



6. EMPHASIS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Our respondents shared their views on the imperative of ensuring “more humane rosters and a robust medical insurance in place for journalists”, as well as “psychological and financial support”, where appropriate.

As we note in this report, one welcome byproduct of the pandemic is a greater willingness in some quarters to talk about mental health and journalism.

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How do we make sure that journalists are supported so that they emerge out of this experience unscathed? Focus on mental health. The importance of mental health and wellbeing cannot be stressed enough. I know over four journalists in my close circle who had to seek the help of a professional to get through this.

**NEWS EDITOR,
SRI LANKA, TRF ALUMNI**

7. FINANCIAL PROTECTION FOR JOURNALISM

Lastly, we also saw a brief discussion about the role of funding and support for journalism in a pandemic. Efforts to offer some potential stability to the sector could not only help address mental health challenges, but also tackle wider information needs.

If the public purse is being used to support key industries during an economic downturn, should journalism also be included in this mix?

“

Media houses and owners should facilitate journalists in periods of pandemic. Governments should recognise the importance of media especially in fighting COVID-19 through sensitising the masses, and aid media and journalists in doing their work... Finally, as the government considers stimulus to other sectors for economic recovery, the media should be part of beneficiaries.

NEWSPAPER REPORTER,
UGANDA, TRF ALUMNI



REUTERS/Akhtar Soomro



REUTERS/Kham

Building on many of the wider topics explored in this report, these seven thematic areas showcase ideas and suggestions that come straight from the newsroom.

Solutions to some of these issues exist. In other cases, they do not. All of them, if we are to listen to the needs expressed by our sample of journalists working at the coalface of the pandemic, merit further consideration and possible expansion.

As a result, we hope that these ideas – like this wider report – offer food for thought to media

development agencies, funders and advocates for journalism around the world, as we work together to support journalism in the age of COVID-19 and beyond.



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