

# Reconstruction and Adaptation in Times of a Contagious Crisis: A Case of African Newsrooms' Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

This is a cross-national comparative study of how media in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa reconstructed their operations in response to Covid-19 global pandemic. The study is grounded in a qualitative research design that uses semi-structured interviews with journalists from Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa. The study investigated how news operations, newsroom cultures, news gathering, and news dissemination practices were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Informed by the sociology of news production theoretical lens, the study noted that journalists and editors were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic which ensured they change some journalistic practices. The findings of this study reveal that journalists suffered traumatic experiences such as job losses, covid-19 related illness and fatalities. At a regulatory level, findings confirm the perennial challenges with media freedoms in the region with South Africa remaining a lone outlier. Lastly, interviews with journalists further demonstrate that newsrooms have had to maximise digital affordances for news gathering and dissemination as old revenue streams dried up. As a result, print media scaled back in its operations as a response to containing the spread of the virus.

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**Introduction and Context of the Study**

In December 2019, pneumonia like cases emerged from China, later identified as the coronavirus named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (also known as the disease name COVID-19 (Laguna et al., 2020). COVID-19 is primarily transmitted from symptomatic people through respiratory droplets, by direct contact with infected persons, or by contact with contaminated objects and surfaces. With the Covid-19 pandemic affecting the global community, the media has played a central role in keeping citizens informed around effects and ways through which this 'new' disease is spread. Casero-Ripollés (2020) lends credence to the role of news media stating that during a societal crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, news media, particularly on the local level, provides information and data that can contribute directly to citizens' potential for self-protection and safety as demonstrated previously during the Hurricane Katrina crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various social domains such as education (Matsilele, 2021), sports (Macnaughtan, 2020), entertainment (Nhamo et al., 2020) and the media. In March and April 2020, as COVID-19 was rapidly spreading, many news publishers in Scandinavia for example, reported immediate cancellations of between one fifth and half of their expected advertising revenues, and similar patterns were witnessed around the world (Oslen et al., 2020, p.674). The crisis in the Scandinavia region was a microcosm of what was happening globally. The crisis in the journalism industry has been in jeopardy for at least the last two decades as advertising relocated to giant online platforms (Pullicino, 2020). As a response to changing political economy necessitated by the pandemic, news publishers are suspending the printing and delivery of newspapers, cutting salaries and laying off journalists, as well as filing for bankruptcy. With COVID-19 wiping out some local newspaper businesses, it may well expand what previous research has identified as "news deserts" (Abernathy, 2018). In South Africa, a study by Daniels (2020) revealed that about 50 percent of journalists formally employed lost their jobs between March 2020 and December 2020 as a result of the pandemic induced crisis in the media.

Other than affecting news media ecosystem, COVID-19 has had direct impact on both short- and long-term individual career experiences, opportunities and trajectories. As Akkermans et al. (2020, p.1) observes, "healthcare and other frontline workers are working around the clock to provide relevant and dedicated support services, whereas other workers have been forced to work from home, requiring adaptation to on-line and virtual work arrangements." It is this crucial concession that invites scholarship from the Global South that to date has not received much attention. In this study, we focus on news operations, newsroom cultures, news gathering and news dissemination

practices that have been reconstructed during this era of the pandemic. This study takes a life from Tuchman (1973) work that investigated how newsmen routinise the handling of a variety of unexpected events in order to process and to present accounts and explanations of them. Covid-19 was one such event. Covid-19, unlike other emergencies brought with it stress and pressure to journalists as it exposed them to health dangers when they executed professional demands which saw some of the media workers succumbing to the virus.

## Media Systems and Contextual Background of Newsrooms Under Study

The study uses news media from Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa to investigate the impact Covid-19 had on the practice of journalism. We use two news media from each of the countries under study: bringing the cumulative total of newsrooms to six. For Zimbabwe, we use the privately owned Alpha Media Holdings stable (with *NewsDay*) and Zimpapers stable (with *Chronicle* as our preferred cases) which are privately owned and government-controlled newspaper entities respectively. The two stables operate in polarised media system as the former practice ‘patriotic journalism’ that supports the state and government, and critiques government critics (Ranger, 2004). Patriotic journalism is a reflection of political discourses valorising the *Third Chimurenga* (war of Zimbabwean independence) (Tendi, 2010) which later morphed into “factional” journalism (Chuma et al., 2020) at the height of factional infighting in Zanu-PF to succeed former president, Robert Mugabe. On the other hand, privately owned media has continuously churned out ‘oppositional journalism’ or “vendetta journalism” (Mabweazara, 2010; Kasoma, 1996) that exposes the Zanu-PF government for its failure. In turn, journalists that expose the state from privately owned media are constantly harassed, tortured and intimidated (Mutsvairo & Muneri, 2020). *The Chronicle* has five desks, namely: news, sports, business, entertainment, features, digital media and politics. These desks have the following number of reporters, news (8); sports (3); politics (1); business (2), features (2); entertainment (3) while the digital media desk has two (2) reporters. The 2020 Zimbabwe All Media Survey (ZAMPS) report shows that the newspaper is the third most read newspaper in the country at 28% and its online readers stands at 25%. *NewsDay* has several desks but their desks have more reporters. These desks are news (5); Sports (3), legal and parliamentary (1); business (2); entertainment (2). The ZAMPS further indicates that *NewsDay*’s offline readership is at 13% while their online readership is at 25% in comparison to other daily newspapers.

For Botswana, we selected the state controlled *Daily News* and a privately controlled weekly newspaper, *The Sunday Standard*. The media in Botswana enjoy relative freedom of expression (Balule, 2015) in comparison to the previous regime of Ian Khama. The media landscape is dominated by private press and journalists are monitored and subject to surveillance (Jortia, 2018). The State controlled media are all

housed under the Ministry of Presidential Affairs (Jortia, 2018; Fombard, 2002). The government thus, has a bearing regarding the content published on state controlled media and want to "...be portrayed in a positive way and to think of state media reporting on issues of nepotism, corruption or bribery as unthinkable" (Jortia, 2018, 265). The *Daily News* has the following desks and number of reporters: Politics (4), Crime (4), Business (4), Arts and Culture (3) and Sports (4). For *Sunday Standard*, entertainment has (4), Business (7), News (12), Sports (9).

In South Africa we employed Independent Media and Arena Holdings. Independent Media is owned by Iqbal Surve who has ties to some section of the governing party, the African National Congress (Cameron, 2019). Among others, Independent Media publishes *The Star*, *Pretoria News*, *Cape Argus*, *Sunday Independent* and several community newspapers. The Arena Holdings is a privately owned media entity, formerly known as Tiso Black Star. Arena Holdings publishes the *Business Day*, *Sunday Times* and *Times Live* among others. Under the Arena Holdings, we focused on *TimesLive* with Cape Argus for Independent Media. We selected the two titles in South Africa because of access to the newsrooms. Cape Argus has the following desks: News, Politics, Crime, Education, Tech, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Motoring, Travel, Personal Finance, Business, Arts and Culture and Sports. Cape Argus has eight (8) journalists who are fully employed and operate as all-round reporters reporting to an editor and deputy editor. This news media operates through news content hubs which feed into the content needs of each unit. Cape Argus also relies on the group's news agency, the African News Agency. For Arena Holdings' *Times Live*, there is an entertainment, Business, News, Sports, TshisaLive, Lifestyle, Motoring, Multimedia and Coronavirus desks. *TimesLive* considers information on journalists' allocation per desk classified hence could not supply details.

## Journalism Practice During a Pandemic: A Literature Review

In this study we consider a pandemic as the spread of an epidemic globally (Grennan, 2019). Pandemics have devastating social, economic and psychological effects (Veil et al., 2008). The media are crucial in informing audiences about pandemics and health risks (Denecke & Nejd, 2009). Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a need for a proper and fact-checked reporting. The need for proper fact checking and reporting has been further heightened by social media networks that have added elements of misinformation or fake news circulating about the pandemic (Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020). During the pandemic, the media have been a conduit for communication from public officials and experts to the broader public (Perreault & Perreault, 2021), in turn playing a facilitative role (Christians et al., 2010). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and regulations pronounced by the World Health Organisation (WHO); news brands have ensured that the practice of the journalism profession produces accurate information for public consumption. Given this, journalists had to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic, try out new norms and practices. Some of

these, where not of course new, but resulted from the need to report accurately, pursue the truth and as a result maintain journalistic ethics.

By mining and scanning through available literature, pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, Cholera, Ebola, SARS and influenza have had an impact on how journalism is practiced (Fatima, 2020; Kilgo, et al., 2019; Zhang & Matingwina, 2016; Lin et al., 2016; Reynolds & Quinn Crouse, 2008; Wu, 2006). Research on pandemics and journalism for instance has explored news coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis. This research has shown the differences between newspaper coverage and news shared on the social news platform Reddit (Kilgo et al., 2019). Closely related to this study, is Zhang and Matingwina's (2016) study that explored how constructive journalism employed by *China Daily* and the BBC contributed to effective health communication of the Ebola disease. Thus, such studies show how vital and important communication is during a pandemic (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). This effective communication guides the public, healthcare providers, and other groups in responding appropriately to outbreak situations and complying with public health recommendations (Reynold & Quinn, 2008, p.14). This form of communication resonates with crisis and emergency communication, that, ensures the importance of communicating risks and even benefits of a pandemic during a crisis (Reynolds et al., 2002; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Similarly, Lin et al. (2016) have examined how crisis communication dialogue online would encourage the public to continuously follow emergency agencies online, making social media feeds primary risk and crisis information sources (p.2). Amidst all these studies, framing of news stories has also been an important aspect. Studies on framing have shown how the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been framed by Xinhua News Agency of China and the Associated Press of the United States (Wu, 2006). Thus, the study finds that there was generally an anti-government frame as evident in AP's report whereas Xinhua's coverage articulated a pro-government frame. Emerging research located within Covid-19 has shown that pandemics such as the Covid-19 have influenced the construction of news frames by the *New York Times* (Fatima, 2020). This study is a sharp departure from the conventional research that has tended to focus on frames as it explores newsroom practices. We consider the news gathering, news operations, newsroom cultures and news dissemination practices and how these were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. We also explore a secondary question that builds from Tuchman's (1973) seminal work where the scholar notes that "for, without some routine method of coping with unexpected events, news organizations, as rational enterprises, would flounder and fail", (p.111). This study looks at how news media reconstructed their practices in light of the pandemic.

## COVID-19 and Sociology of News in the Global South

Sociology of news is still important in journalism and communication studies because of its vital emphasis on the internal and external forces that affect journalism practices (Schudson, 1989; McNair, 1998). Informed by the sociology of news, the study notes that journalists and editors have been affected by the pandemic which has ensured that

they change some journalistic practices. Given that journalists are influenced by both internal and external factors of the Covid-19 pandemic, we agree in this study how this has had an impact on the practice of journalism. In a pioneering study on data analytics in African newsrooms, Moyo et al. (2019) indicate that within the digital era, technological advancements, and the forces that come with it are an external force that influence journalistic practices.

Scholarly inquiry on sociology of news has shown that journalists do not operate in a vacuum, instead, they are influenced by socio-economic, cultural and political issues (Schudson, 1989; McNair, 1998). Taking a leaf from the sociology of news, news media practices are affected by internal and external factors. Internal factors are those journalists have control over. External factors are forces that journalists do not have direct control over. In the context of this study, we relate this to the outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent impact on the practice of journalism. Owing to the need to adhere to social distancing and hard lock downs, journalists had to devise means to gather and share information. Therefore, the sociology of news production framework helps us to understand the way journalists and their editors' practices are affected by the changes in the social space (see Schudson, 1989; McNair, 1998). In this case, Covid-19 reconstructed the way news media function as journalists were forced to rethink or reconstruct their news packing practices and distribution. Adopting the sociology for journalism prism is important in understanding larger societal implications that have an impact on the operations of journalism. In the next section, we discuss the methodology used for the study.

### A Note on Methodology

This qualitative study used semi structured interviews with journalists from Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa. Interviews for this study were conducted via the WhatsApp calling platforms and semi structured questionnaires that were emailed to journalists. We interviewed a total of 12 journalists and four from each of the case studies: Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. For the Botswana case, we interviewed two journalists from *Botswana Daily* and two journalists from *Sunday Standard*. In Zimbabwe we interviewed two journalists from *Newsday* and the other two from *The Chronicle*, while in South Africa we interviewed two journalists from *Arena Holdings* and the other two from the *Independent Newspapers*. The journalists we interviewed were asked the following questions;

- How was your media house affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What aspects of your day today routine was changed due to Covid-19 pandemic?
- To what extent did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the quality of news from your organisation?
- What new practices were introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What new practices do you feel you want to retain which were introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?

To analyse the interview corpus produced by the journalists, we utilised thematic analysis to assess or examine key issues. Thematic analysis is a process of identifying and analysing various themes within given data. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that themes are captured aspects about data in relation to the research questions and/ objectives and represent a certain level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. In doing thematic analysis, we followed the six stages as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, we familiarised ourselves in the data which Braun and Clarke call immersion into the data. We then developed codes or labels on the hardcopy transcriptions of the data. The third stage was to examine the codes in order to identify the broader patterns of meaning. The fourth stage was reviewing the themes. The generated themes were checked against the coded data and the research questions. Themes were refined by checking which ones answer the research questions. We were looking for themes like: “Newsroom practices during Covid-19 pandemic”, “Newsrooms and the use of digital technologies in the era of Covid-19”, “Survival strategies during Covid” and others. The fifth stage then involved naming and defining themes. The last stage was writing up and selecting extracts from the interviews to answer the research questions. The paper answered the following questions:

RQ1: How were news operations, newsroom cultures, news gathering, and news dissemination practices impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What are the survival strategies that newsrooms adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic?

### *Data Presentation and Analysis*

The next section is a discussion of the study’s findings, that are anchored around the following themes:

- Newsroom practices during Covid-19 pandemic.
- Covid-19 related fatalities, stress and pressures in the journalism sector
- Media freedom threats
- News rooms and the use of digital technologies in the era of Covid-19
- Survival strategies during Covid-19

### *Newsroom Practices During Covid-19 Pandemic*

As explained in the introductory section of this paper, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way newsrooms functioned. Traditional roles or ways of practicing journalism had to change and in the process quality and ethical issues were affected. Diary meetings, where journalists present their stories to the editor were scrapped due to the pandemic. A senior reporter at the *Chronicle* indicated that the establishment reduced the number of journalists physically working from the newsroom. The reporter indicated that the

sports, entertainment and features desk were instructed to work from home while news reporters were rotating on duty. The reporter explains:

Physical diary meetings were scrapped; instead, we are conducting them via WhatsApp. Secondly, people rarely go out now because we are not certain what he/she will bring there. The virus changed the course of doing journalism.

A senior reporter at Zimbabwe's *NewsDay* shared similar sentiments as the newsroom forced some reporters to work from home but this led to "too much for the skeletal staff that remained in the newsroom as most journalists were working from home so as to prevent chances of spreading the Covid-19." Perspectives from these reporters suggest that Zimbabwean newsrooms adopted similar strategies to deal with the effects of the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic as an 'external factor' (McNair, 1998) reconstructed newsroom practices which led to devising new means of operating which involved the scrapping of diary meetings to avoid the spread of the virus. The change in the journalism practise confirms views on sociology of news where journalists do not conduct their duties in a vacuum, but, instead, are influenced by socio-economic, cultural and political issues (Schudson, 1989; McNair, 1998).

In Botswana, journalists interviewed from *The Daily News* and *Sunday Standard* news media, confirmed how the Covid-19 pandemic reduced editorial and diary meetings. Journalists confirmed they preferred working from home, instead of going out in the public to look for stories. This, they said affected the quality of stories published. These changes affected journalism practise both internally and externally. The above views show that external factors 'force' journalists to rethink their roles. However, the challenge is that the quality of journalism had been affected. This is, perhaps, one of the tenants of sociology of news (Schudson, 1989). Therefore, the above journalists' views capture scholarly criticism of sociology of news where the Schudsonian view has postulated news as 'stable' (Paul & Berkowitz, 2019; Ryfe, 2018). Instead, news as these findings have demonstrated, is fluid as different historical epochs and circumstances have a 'say' in the way journalists should write their news articles. Thus, Covid-19 pandemic as an external factor to the practise of journalism negatively affected the quality of journalism as journalists from Botswana further confirmed that they lost aspects such as networking and talking to sources because of Covid-19 related regulations that spelt out social distancing. One of the senior journalists from *The Daily Newspaper* said although their newsroom was impacted, it was not as negative as privately owned newspapers:

We did not suffer much because we are funded by the government. Hence, we had some sort of cushioning. However, the ability to produce news during the pandemic was difficult because events where we could source for news were reduced. The hardest hit was the sports desk as all sporting activities stopped. Since there were no diary meetings anymore, it impacted on the ability to develop news stories. Cub journalists were also affected since they were inexperienced to develop story ideas without the guidance of

the senior journalists or editors. This, however affected the quality of stories we had in the newspaper.

The same trend was observed in South Africa's mainstream media. The *Independent Newspapers* group reduced staff contact during the Covid-19 era. The deputy editor of one of the newspapers under the stable explains:

In the first month of hard lockdown we started working from home and it was hard as most did not have resources such as uncapped internet connection and telephone resources which one requires to contact sources. In the second month it was possible to move back to the office, especially for those without facilities after putting in place protocols to ensure there was no spread of the virus in our premises, some staff especially at senior level managed to continue working from home during this period.

Arena Holdings which publishes *Business Day*, *Sowetan*, *Sunday Times* and *Times Live* had to introduce a new way of doing journalism during the Covid-19 period. One of the editors interviewed had this to say:

Working from home is probably the biggest "new practice" that resulted from the lockdown. This brought with it a period of adjustment for staff to settle into a pattern of virtual meetings and videoconferences, and to get used to teamwork at a distance. More practically, our reporters, videographers and photographers in the field have of course had to adapt to always keep health and safety matters top of mind, using personal protective equipment and following all the guidance on hygiene to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus.

Journalism relies on sourcing and this enables journalists to incorporate their sources' emotions and expressions in the story. However, due to the pandemic that spelt out social distancing protocols, journalists confirmed a growing trend in the practice of "armchair journalism". This type of journalism, they said lacks depth owing to journalists working from home and relying on what their sources have said without having an assessment of the environment and other key issues that are crucial in story writing. Adding on this note, journalists from Zimbabwe indicated that "attending public gatherings was no longer the norm as they sought to prevent chances of contracting the disease" while others argued that the quality of journalism was compromised, as "there are more of official sources instead of ordinary voices." For example, it's no longer easy to get a comment in Kezi<sup>1</sup> due to lockdown restrictions and rules on need to practise social distancing."

However, a senior NewsDay reporter argued that a news story is a combination of many factors that include the reporter's observation. Due to the limited chance for the reporters to attend scenes of the news occurrences for an eyewitness account the development "limited the discourse that the journalists use to present the news because it would be based on hearsay." Therefore, journalists advocated for use of traditional

methods which produce rich data, as other ways of gathering news like face to face interviews “can’t be replaced by technology.” Another journalist from the *Chronicle* rhetorically asked a question while advocating for the return to traditional methods of gathering data “How do you capture people’s emotions for feature stories? Even for news stories, how do you gauge that your source is lying?” The Journalists’ view in this instance is in line with the sociology of news where sources are seen as key in news stories (Manning, 2001), because they bring out diversity and increase the flow, pace and depth of the news story (Reich, 2011). Most importantly, legitimacy in news stories is granted through quoting news sources and the incorporation of source’s emotions in the story further illuminate news stories (Manning, 2001).

While journalism is a profession that serves the public interest and puts emphasis on giving people more voice than the official sources, journalists indicated that the pandemic ensured they serve at the “mercy of the government officials” who were now determining most of the information. On Covid-19, Zimbabwean government centralised the information with local hospitals or local officials barred from offering any form of communication.

### *Covid-19 Related Fatalities, Stress and Pressures in the Journalism Sector*

Globally, more than 600 journalists have died worldwide due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a new report from released by the Swiss Organisation Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), which calls for priority vaccination of media workers. In Zimbabwe, a journalist—Zororo Makamba—was among the first victims of the pandemic. The other prominent journalist and presidential reporter—Judith Makhwanya succumbed to the pandemic later while many others are survivors’ who went on to give their testimonies<sup>2</sup>. A senior journalist at the *Chronicle* indicated he “suffered a bit of stress” after tasked to come up with pandemic related stories, as his fear was that he might die. A reporter from *NewsDay* indicated that she was “traumatized” because there were journalists who were infected, and some had died of the virus yet the employers took time to give them PPEs for use when going out to gather news. South African journalists, just like the rest of the citizens saw several journalists succumb to the coronavirus pandemic. At the time of revision of this paper, the national union of journalists, SANEF, reported that three journalists had succumbed to the virus within the same week (SANEF, 2021b). These three were: the SABC journalist, Moabi Lithoko, eNCA’s former output editor, Celeste Phillips, and Primedia’s technical manager, Dan Maswanganye. These fatalities follow the death of prominent journalist in March of 2021, Karima Brown, which followed four other deaths earlier in the year: Sunday Independent news editor and investigative journalist Solly Maphumulo; Former Cape Argus photographer Enver Essop; resource coordinator in the SABC newsroom in KZN, Ismail Jinnah, and senior political journalist Knowledge Simelane of Ilanga Newspaper in KwaZulu-Natal. There were no fatalities reported for Botswana journalists.

Studies conducted following the Covid-19 pandemic have largely observed stress and pressures in the media sector and journalists' lives (Finneman & Thomas, 2021). For this study we observe that the pandemic amplified the pre-existing conditions existing prior which made the situation even worse. For example, in South Africa, there has been a gradual job losses and skeletal newsrooms due to the declining advertisement revenue (Finlay, 2020). The country, in early 2020, was experiencing a recessionary environment with unemployment breaching the 30 percent mark which got worse with the covid-19 pandemic (Statistics SA, 2020). As Daniels' (2020) study found, 50 percent of journalists who were formally employed in South Africa lost their jobs which forced the industry to call for government intervention to provide Covid relief funds to journalists who lost their jobs or were forced to take massive pay cuts. The organisation of journalists organised sessions with psychologists to help scribes deal with trauma experienced as a result of the pandemic. Commenting on the pressures, the national body of journalists, SANEF, in its statement noted that:

Journalists, as designated frontline workers have risked their lives every day for the past 16 months, working throughout the pandemic as part of their responsibility to the public. Even during the different peaks of the pandemic, they have not had the option to suspend work or work from home because of the nature of their work and the critical service they provide. They have traversed the country, going to hospitals, clinics, vaccination sites, mass rallies, press conferences to reflect on the pandemic, in service to the country to ensure that the public is adequately informed (SANEF, 2021a).

Beyond the health pressures, journalists have had to deal with economic stress which came as a result of reduced earnings, job losses, juniorisation and skeletal staff. To help alleviate the economic crisis journalists have had to deal with, SANEF in conjunction with the Social Justice Initiative (SJI), received over 700 applications and approved over 249 journalists for payments. Each successful applicant was awarded R5000 to help them buy essentials and data.

### *Media Freedom Threats*

The reporting environment in some countries was hostile especially under the lock down restrictions. We firstly draw on incidents in Zimbabwe, where there was abuse of journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the major highlights of harassment of journalists and undermining of their role of carrying out duties where arrests linked to operating without 2020 accreditation cards that are issued by the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) that regulates journalistic operations and issues accreditation. These accreditation cards enable journalists, both local and international to perform their duties legally. However, the ZMC had not issued accreditation cards for the year 2020, despite journalists being harassed by the police and state security forces (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Such events invoked the right to media freedom that are clearly stipulated in Section 62 of the Freedom of Information Act. Other

incidents of journalists' harassments are that of Frank Chikowore and 263Chat news website reporter Samuel Takawira who were arrested for "violating" lockdown regulations of social distancing and a ban on hospital visits. Their charge was gazetted under the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) that stipulates various measures that are related to social distancing and rules governing the lockdown. The two journalists had attempted to interview the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) activists consisting of Netsai Marova, Cecilia Chimbi and Harare West MP Joana Mamombe who had been allegedly abducted by state security officials (Ndebele, 2020). However, the two journalists were denied from covering the story on grounds of violating the lockdown regulations and arrested for four days and released after paying a fine (Mavhunga, 2020). In part, using such regulations and intimidation by the state where a way of preventing the two journalists from investigating a potential human rights abuse story. Therefore, covid-19 related policies, regulations and broader political scenarios takes precedence when journalists are gathering news as opposed to the norms and values of the profession (Gans, 1979)

In Botswana laws impacted on how journalists conducted their duties. This mostly affected journalists working in the private media. One of the journalists from the *Sunday Standard* outlined how the parliament passed an Emergency Powers Act that gave the President powers to rule by decree for a six-month period. The Emergency Powers Act further prohibited journalists from using sources other than the Botswana Director of Health Services or the World Health Organisation when reporting on Covid-19 issues. One of the journalists interviewed from *Sunday Standard* further outlined how the act was justified by the President to cover up for the Public Health Act that was "too weak to enforce a lockdown". He further stated some of the effects of the Emergency Powers Act on the operation of the media in Botswana:

There was a state of emergency act that was passed by Parliament and it gave the President the power to make directives. This law stifled on Media freedom as the president had the decree to use cyber bullying laws such as the Cyber Crime Act. However, there were arrests of individuals such as Justice Mutlabani under this Act. Furthermore, directives where made secret. In essence, such laws were passed to curtail the operations of the media that was viewed as a threat.

Such proclamations by the journalist show how laws impacted on the practice of journalism.

While Zimbabwe and Botswana, as demonstrated above, experienced as infringement on press freedom, South Africa remained the benchmark of democracy in the region through promoting press freedom. For example, South Africa categorised journalists as essential workers which gave them similar privileges given to other essential workers such as travelling during curfew designated hours and being in contact with the public which was not allowed to ordinary citizens during the hard lockdown. To operate during the lockdown period, journalists were given special permits by the

government which exempted them from harassment by state apparatus. However, in the early phases of hard lockdown, the national body of journalists, SANEF, reported that its members had been attacked by security forces. In its statement, SANEF noted that it had received several reports from journalists of having their equipment confiscated and harassment by law enforcement officers – the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and the South African Police Services (SAPS).

Some of the cases reported include a News24 journalist who was shot at in Yeoville, Johannesburg, a Weekend Argus photographer had her cellphone confiscated in Capricorn Park, Cape Town. In the next section we access the use of digital technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### *Newsrooms and the use of Digital Technologies in the era of Covid-19*

The pandemic ensured that people reduce face to face interactions as a way to combat the spread of the disease. As a result, the use of digital tools became prevalent or the only viable option. In their pioneering study on data analytics in African newsrooms, Moyo et al. (2019) indicate that within the digital era, technological advancements, and the forces that come with it are an external force that influence journalistic practices. Journalists indicated that online reporting became ideal because many were using platforms like WhatsApp for communication, news gathering, processing and sharing stories. A senior reporter at the *Chronicle* explained:

This is the time to ensure that we concentrate on online journalism. People are also online and doing everything is helpful. Most of my stories I got, for example, water problems in the city were from WhatsApp groups am in. I think that way we can still have the community voices which are also key in journalism.

In South Africa, Independent Newspaper said due to the Covid-19 pandemic, like many news organisations the structure that informs news production was lost. The deputy editor explains:

Due to covid-19 we also lost the newsroom structure as before we used to have three meetings a day now we only have one meeting. We have the culture of how we do meetings even though we use zoom and google meetings.

Arena Holdings reported the same trend as newsroom operations were forced to change in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The editor explained:

So far, we have been fortunate not to have lost any jobs, so our day-to-day news operations continue as before. The biggest change in this regard has been staff working from home, so the group had to make some arrangements to help people with connectivity and equipment at home – but we quickly settled into this new way of doing things.

Interviewed journalists confirmed that they had to adopt new ways of conducting journalism by using softwares such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp for reporting and interviewing purposes. For Botswana, journalists interviewed from all newsrooms expressed difficulty in adopting to an online system. For them, Covid-19 was a “wake-up” call as they had previously lacked a robust online media system. This provided them an opportunity to re-think journalism practice and work towards adopting online oriented way of journalism for the future. One of the journalists from *Sunday Standard* had this to say:

There is need to think about how we practice journalism in Botswana. We need to catch up with the fourth industrial revolution. I must say we were used of practicing the traditional way of journalism and we never invested much on the digital infrastructure. It is important because this has made us realise that the world depends on social media and everywhere, the world is going digital too. There is need to invest in a robust online strategy. We also had a problem of combating fake news because of the lack of robust online media system.

The discussion above demonstrates that Covid-19 had an impact on technological changes and the manner in which journalism is being practised in Africa. Therefore, as technology keeps changing, there are shifts in journalism and its organisational routines with journalists, as the findings have shown, have to negotiate the new practices that are available in the digital age (Ryfe, 2018). As such, while journalists might have been reluctant to adopt and adapt to the changing digital environment, Paul and Berkowitz (2019, p.71) note that the classical understanding sociology of news production has shown that technology possess a “. . . a new challenge to our understanding of classic journalism.”

### *Survival Strategies During Covid-19*

While many companies were reported to have suffered economic losses owing to lockdowns which stalled production, media companies which heavily rely on advertising for their survival had to catch a cold as companies sneezed. The impact was expressed by journalists who indicated that the pandemic forced media houses to reduce operations. One reporter based in South Africa explained: “Initially, when lockdown was declared, our print publication was suspended, and only online platforms were available (website and Facebook online).” In Zimbabwe, the journalists added that “Covid-19 really affected us badly as an organisation. For instance, some of us were forced to work from home. Salaries were cut by 50 percent.”

South African newspapers, just like in Zimbabwe, were not spurred by the effects of the pandemic. For example, some newspapers due to lost revenue went on to close down especially those that entirely on print model of the business. Responding to this aspect, the Independent Newspapers deputy had this to say:

Most newsrooms are facing challenges; we are battling due to dwindling circulation even though this has been happening for a while. Consider that even the biggest Sunday paper, The Sunday Times will soon close down what more of smaller papers in comparison to the Sunday Times.

Arena Holdings confirmed the effects of the pandemic on the financial viability of the business going forward. For Arena Holdings, the effects were felt immediately with the drop in advertising revenue.

The biggest effect on Arena Holdings as a publisher has been the sharp drop in advertising revenue that kicked in quickly at the start of the national lockdown at the end of March. Even a huge surge in digital subscriptions to our websites during this time was not enough to cancel out the effects of the revenue slump, which of course was an industry-wide trend. Since then, revenue has recovered somewhat, but not to pre-lockdown levels. Arena Holdings staff are still earning 30% less on their salaries, but so far the group has held onto jobs and not announced retrenchments or the closure of titles as several of its competitors have done. All departments have also embarked on wide-ranging cost-cutting measures.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reconstructed the news media industry with the possibility of some practices and cultures having been lost with no prospects of returning. This change has led some scholars to argue that journalism as we know it will never be the same. One editor from Arena Holdings confirmed this possibility stating that:

I believe it is likely that Arena Holdings, like so many other large organisations, will emerge from the pandemic with a new perspective on remote working and how a central office is structured and operates. Exactly how our post-Covid-19 newsroom will work is not clear yet, but this crisis has shown we can still deliver quality news to South Africa even when everyone is not sitting together.

Other newspapers that faced the downsizing during the pandemic will unlikely see the news media rebuilding its lost workforce. The loss in workforce will also affect aspects of newsroom culture such as apprenticeship that has been instrumental in moulding young journalists which will likely affect the future quality of journalism. The *Independent Newspapers* outlet's deputy editor had this to say:

The days of big newsrooms are coming to an end. This will however be a loss to junior journalists who need mentorship, but remote working will certainly assist newsrooms in terms of cost cutting

Botswana newsrooms were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, although they developed survival strategies. Reporters from *Sunday Standard* interviewed said the newspaper stopped printing the newspaper, and instead adopted Portable Document

Format (PDF) for newspapers that they would distribute via email and WhatsApp. However, there was resistance on this as readers complained about that they were not reader friendly. Journalists from both media houses in Botswana stated that there was need to monetise online content, as newsrooms mostly adopted traditional formats of running a newsroom.

## Concluding Discussion

The study sought to examine the reconstruction and adaptation of journalism practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bearing in mind that the pandemic restructured many if not all the spheres of people's lives, journalism which is influenced by the change in the external world adapts and adopts various means to keep up with changes. Writing on the Kennedy assassination, Zelizer (1990, p.368) argues that the face of journalism changed as "new journalism" and the alternative press sprouted" in response to the need of the profession to claim its authoritative voice in information dissemination. In this study, journalists in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana reported some changes to their work. Newsrooms managed to do away with the classical way of practicing journalism and further developed new survival strategies as the pandemic eroded many traditional streams of revenue. As such, while the theoretical premise of sociology of news shows that newsroom routines changed owing to external factors, the important aspect of agency, which the theory does not highlight, was key in journalists' practice (see Schudson, 1989; McNair, 1998). Zelizer (1990, p.371) reminds us that journalists' narrative is bolstered and cemented through personalisation of events. Journalists' experience with crises and handling of Covid-19 related stories helped them to play the role of informing and educating the masses, thus, earning public trust. Furthermore, while newsroom practices were reconstructed, there are practices which will never change. For example, journalist practices such as diary meetings and sourcing of information will remain key in profession. As such, during the pandemic, journalists had to resort to virtual news diary meetings.

Considering the study's findings where journalists resorted to participate in WhatsApp groups for news, Schudson's (2000) assertion that news production institutions give preference to elite sources, does not, in this circumstance, hold water. Our argument is based on the view that the pandemic let ordinary people have agency, be heard and seen. Such a move is coupled by the fact that journalists had to cover issue-based stories that were affecting people's lives amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. However, given that journalists were not entirely depending on elite sources for news production, as argued by the sociology of news scholars (Tuchman, 1973; Schudson, 2000) this could possibly mean that the practice has allowed them to reclaim their agency. The centralisation of information about the pandemic by governments such as Botswana for example confirms the sociology of news theorists' concern of control measures that the elites exert on the media. This then meant that information circulated by the media where what the government wanted people to hear and see, a departure from key journalistic tenets. Closely linked to this view is the further control

of the media by the few commercial entities. Because of the economic meltdown caused by lockdown restrictions; media houses had a few sources of revenue. This led to few companies consolidating their power in the media resulting in a lack of journalists' agency due to a continuation of "strong corporate influence [and source influence] in news production and public opinion" (Erjavec, 2005, p.346).

This study made a further contribution on the physical component of the newsroom set up. Most of the theorists on journalism practices have overlooked the physical setup of the newsroom which has a bearing on how journalists execute their duties (see Manning, 2001). Before the pandemic, news media opened up their newsroom spaces with journalists working in open plan model. The outbreak of the virus, as demonstrated in the findings, had to ensure that few journalists were working from the newsroom while others were working from home to avoid spreading the virus. However, the biggest negative impact faced by journalists, especially, in Zimbabwe and Botswana has been the harassment of journalists owing to the new laws and policies enacted to combat the spread of the virus.

The findings of this study show an uptake of digital technologies, media freedom threats and stress that is related to the Covid-19 pandemic. This contributes to the reconstruction of journalism that is ignored by other previous studies in Africa that are related to journalism practise and pandemics. Instead, these studies have assessed conventional practices of journalism such as framing of news stories, discourses concerning the coronavirus pandemic; newspaper and social media coverage of health pandemics such as Ebola (Perreault & Perreault, 2021; Fatima, 2020; Kilgo, et al., 2019; Zhang & Matingwina, 2016; Lin et al., 2016).

This study focused on micro samples that are not representatives of media markets in the countries discussed. This therefore means the findings in this study cannot be generalised to reflect how media entities were reconstructed during the pandemic. This study relied on virtually mediated interviews as interviews were conducted during higher levels of lockdown restrictions. These restrictions mean reflections on this essay do not have researchers' personal observations in news media cultures. Ethnography is crucial when studying a seminal phenomenon as it assists in bringing nuances that are lost when conducting a study that largely relies on virtually mediated interviews.

For further research, we recommend an ethnographic study that examines newsroom practices in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. An ethnographic study of inquiry requires the researcher to be in constant personal contact with their research participants over a period of time immersing themselves into the various aspects of the participants' lives (Coplan, 2018; Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). Immersing themselves, which is participant observation will allow the researcher to understand journalistic practices during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## Notes

1. Kezi is a village in Matobo district in Zimbabwe.
2. One of the reporters Robin Muchetu at *The Sunday News* went on to narrate her ordeal of living with the virus. See <https://www.pressreader.com/zimbabwe/sunday-news-zimbabwe/20210124/281685437824425>.

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