

Media and COVID-19 in West Africa

The Gambia

April 2020



in partnership with



Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease has brought into sharp focus the imperative of the media in society generally; but especially its role in providing the news, information and education that the public need during a pandemic. At the same time, the outbreak has seriously disrupted, and significantly destabilised media systems and news routines in the countries of West Africa; as is also the case globally. Some of the effects on the media are self-evident, others are insidious; some are short-term, some far-reaching. But, like the virus itself, all require some examination to establish the evidence empirically; all require collaboration to ensure that response and recovery actions are contingent, effective and sustainable.

To assess the impact of the pandemic on the media landscape in West Africa, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) is collaborating with its national partner organisations in the respective countries, to produce monthly reports highlighting key emerging issues. The reports focus on five factors of concern that could ultimately impinge on the survival and sustainability of media institutions, journalism professional practice, and freedom of expression in the region. These concerns are: (1) availability and accessibility of information; (2) legal and policy context; (3) safety of journalists; (4) economic sustainability; and (5) media support.

The monthly reports seek to share experiences and learn lessons by tracking and documenting the state and fate of the media under COVID-19 in West Africa. It is hoped that the reports will provide empirical information and insights to inform and guide stakeholders who may initiate media sector support interventions at national or regional levels.

The Gambia recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 17. Since then, authorities in the country have implemented varied forms of restrictive measure including a lockdown, state of emergency, and closure of borders, to help contain the spread of the pandemic. As in other jurisdictions, the imposition of these measures has implications for the general media environment and the operations of media organisations.

This brief looks at the situation of The Gambia for the month of April, in relation to the five areas indicated above – availability and accessibility of information; legal and policy context; safety of journalists; economic sustainability; and media support. The report is produced in collaboration with the Gambia Press Union (GPU), which is the national partner organisation of the MFWA.

Availability and Accessibility of Information

There is timely access to information on COVID-19 incidence rates in the country. The country's Ministry of Health holds daily press briefings to give situational updates. In addition, the Ministry has set up a Facebook account (COVID-19 Response Ministry of Health The Gambia) and a Twitter page (@MoHCovid19GMB) that enable dissemination of information and give journalists easy access to senior frontline health experts – to clarify issues and answer questions. There is also a WhatsApp group to bring journalists and health experts onto a common platform. ***"It is useful, very useful. It makes access to the updates very easy particularly given the fact that movement is limited and not even safe"***

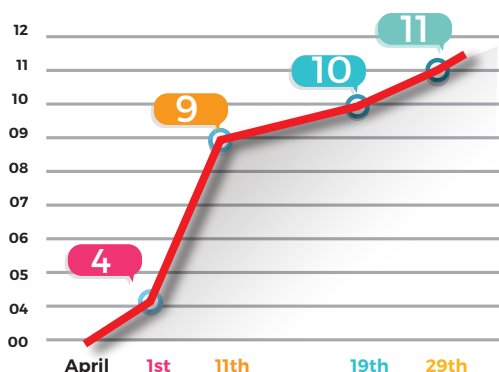
Kebba Jeffang, a senior reporter of the The Chronicle Newspaper said of the social media platforms used for information sharing .

“ *It is useful, very useful. It makes access to the updates very easy particularly given the fact that movement is limited and not even safe”*

Kebba Jeffang

Journalists are also given access to quarantine centres to conduct reports. ***“I have access to the centre without any difficulty. I went there and explained to the security personnel on the group my mission and I was given access,”*** Mustapha K Darboe of Malagen.com, said.

The Medical Research Council (MRC), which has oversight of the only laboratory for testing and confirming COVID-19 cases, is very active on social media (on Twitter: @mr-cunitgambia), giving information and updates on cases as they occur.



By 1st April, Gambia had four confirmed cases of Covid-19; two of the patients had recovered and one died.

On 11th April, the number of cases increased to nine.

On 19th April, an additional one case was registered. By 29th April, another single case was registered

Although there is access to information on incidence rates, there is a dearth of information on COVID-19 funding – disbursement and expenditure. Mustapha K. Darboe, a journalist with the online investigative journalism news hub, Malagen.gm, recounts that he sent a letter to the Ministry of Finance mid-April, asking for certain information regarding expenditure on COVID-19; but no response had yet been received. ***“This is frustrating. I don’t know what they are hiding or what’s not transparent about the funding process; but my only conclusion is that there is something they are hiding, particularly on the expenditure,”*** said Mustapha. President Adama Barrow had announced a 500 million dalasi (\$10 million) to respond to the pandemic in the country.

A major challenge to journalists' access to information is a lack of strong internet connectivity. While this challenge has been an enduring one, it has been exacerbated by the increased volume of internet-related work occasioned by the pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 came with the increased need for working remotely – conducting interviews and attending meetings on Zoom or similar platforms – and that requires strong internet connectivity. Generally, the limited bandwidth and high cost of internet data in the country has constrained most media houses and journalists in their work of reporting under current conditions.

A broadband internet for one month at the national telecoms company, Gamtel, cost D6,000 (equivalent to about 120 dollars). As regards phone internet, at Africell, the most widely used GSM company in the country, a 4G internet bundle of 1mbps 60gb cost D1,850 (equivalent to about 37 dollars), and this can barely last 10 days even with infrequent use of YouTube or video calls

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As a coping mechanism, many journalists have turned to the GPU secretariat, where they go to use the internet.

Legal and Policy Context

There is no specially promulgated law or regulation in The Gambia that hinders access to COVID-19 information. However, there is the Official Secrets Act (2008) which precludes the unauthorised disclosure of official documents and information. There are other laws that criminalise false news and information which are targeted at journalists.

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak in The Gambia, President Adama Barrow has invoked provisions under the Emergency Powers Act (CAP. 17:04 Vol. 4 Laws of The Gambia 2009) to sign a series of enabling regulations; but these have not adversely affected the operations of media houses or journalists. Media houses and journalists are allowed access to restricted places once they are able to positively identify themselves to security officers as journalists; even under lockdown restrictions.



No incidence of direct or indirect censorship has been reported during the month of April in relation to coverage of COVID-19 by any media house or journalist in the country. There is also no evidence of self-censorship among journalists.



Safety of journalists

No incidences of threats to, or attacks on, journalists or media houses has been registered or reported over the period or in the context of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak in the country. There have also been no physical attacks, direct threats of attacks or closure of media houses. The closest incident in the nature of a threat was at one of the regular press briefings of the Ministry of Health, when a member of the National COVID-19 Response Team warned journalists that they would not hesitate to invoke the law on false publications if journalists published or broadcast information about COVID-19 that are not correct or are misleading.

There have, however, been no comprehensive training programmes for journalists or other media workers on protocols, precautions or professional reportage of COVID-19 issues. This leaves journalists still vulnerable to possible infection or being subject to potential threats.

The Media Academy for Journalism and Communication, the training arm of the GPU, has stepped up to the challenge by piloting an online training for journalists on coverage of COVID-19. The GPU has also produced an information sheet on safety tips for journalists covering COVID-19 or other events under pandemic conditions.

The GPU had a meeting with the Minister of Health in April to raise concerns about the safety of journalists covering the pandemic. They appealed for the Ministry to consider including journalists in their support to frontline workers with PPEs. Two follow-up letters were sent to the Ministry on the subject, but the request has yet to be granted.

There have been no major changes to newsroom routines. Journalists still go to the newsroom; they only need to observe the general protocols on social distancing, hand hygiene, and the use of masks according to availability.

Economic Sustainability

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the financial challenges of media houses. Newspaper sales have drop significantly and the same is true for advertisements across all media platforms. For instance, because of the revenue shortfalls, one private radio station, Star FM, retrenched some of its staff. A private television station, Paradise TV, was nearly dragged to court by one of its female staff for non-payment salary arrears. It took the intervention of the GPU to avoid that outcome; although the staff in question subsequently resigned. At least three other staff have decided to stop work, at least temporarily, until the station is able to pay them. The Point newspaper, one of the biggest newspapers in the country, has complained of non-payment for advertisements by the government. The excuse of the government is that all funds are being directed towards fighting COVID-19. It is worth noting that the government is the biggest advertiser in the country.

Media Support

Despite the challenges of economic sustainability, there has not been support to the media sector by any public institution. All the public institutions are directing their funds to the central government in the quest to join forces to tackle COVID-19. There has also been no support from the private sector, locally or internationally. The media sector in the country is also yet to receive any support from international agencies, NGOs/CSOs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in The Gambia.



Conclusion

The current legal and policy contexts of The Gambia have not unduly constrained the media in their access to information related to COVID-19 incidence or prevalence rates. On the contrary, the relevant public health agencies and professional bodies have been both proactive and responsive in supporting the information needs of the media. However, there remain important threats to the institutional viability and professional output of media and journalists in the country. Notable among these challenges are:

1. Poor internet connection and high cost of what is available limit the access to information among journalists;
2. The government has not been sufficiently transparent in accounting for the utilisation of COVID-19 response funds;
3. Journalists require safety training to reduce vulnerability and improve their professional response to pandemic and related crises reporting;
4. There is a need for more government support to media personnel to minimise their exposure and the general risks involved in reporting;
5. There is the need for support to the media to help improve their sustainability and viability.

The media are important actors in efforts to combat COVID-19 through their provision of accurate news and timely information to the public. To be able to discharge this public interest function effectively, however, they must receive the necessary policy, logistics and capacity development support that they lack.