

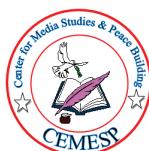
# **Media and COVID-19 in West Africa**

## **Liberia**

**April 2020**



**in partnership with**



## Introduction

The central role of the media during a pandemic has been made starkly evident by the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease as journalists and media houses continue to brave the odds to provide news, information and education that the public needs. In addition to exposing themselves to the virus in order to serve the public with news and information about the pandemic, the outbreak of the disease has seriously disrupted media systems and significantly destabilised news routines across 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. This report focuses on Liberia.

The first case of COVID-19 in Liberia was officially confirmed on March 16, 2020. Subsequently, the country has implemented varied forms of restrictive measure 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 report looks at the situation in Liberia 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 Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CE-MESP), the national partner organisation of the MFWA in Liberia.

## Availability & Accessibility of Information

Information and updates on incidence and prevalence rates of COVID-19 are generally available through the National Public Health Institute of Liberia's (NPHIL) online portals – Website: [www.nationalphil.org](http://www.nationalphil.org), Twitter: @nphil6; Facebook: National Public-Health Institute of Liberia-NPHIL. Data published by NPHIL are made available by the Liberia COVID-19 Incidence Management System. There is also an Incident Management Team (IMT) which works in close cooperation with the NPHIL to conduct palaver-hut-style community outreach activities to educate members of the public, allay their doubts, and provide clarification on conspiracy

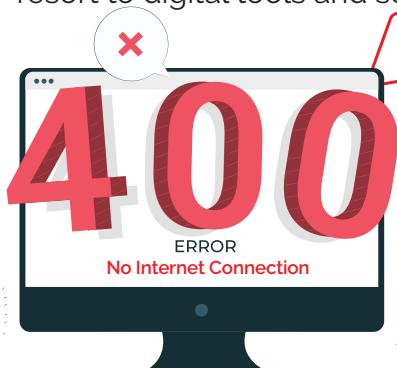
theories and misinformation. The Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism (MICAT), which is the statutory authority responsible for disseminating government information, coordinates the public information functions of both the NPHIL and IMT; together with which it holds live daily press briefings to inform and update the public on incidences and issues related to the pandemic. Although the Ministry of Health is a part of the incident management system, its role is limited to technical support to the NPHIL and the IMT. The Ministry, however, also provides information on the COVID-19 crisis on its website: [www.moh.gov.lr](http://www.moh.gov.lr).



Notwithstanding these provisions, there are notable gaps in the transparency and timeliness of COVID-19 information from government institutions and individuals within government. Before the first case in the country was officially confirmed on March 16, 2020, the information was already in the public domain. In similar cases, journalists and talk show hosts have been first to announce that a certain top government official had been confirmed positive for COVID-19. When the Ministers of Justice and Information, Cllr. Musa Dean and Lenn Eugene Nagbe, tested positive, the government tarried in confirming the fact, even though radio talk show host, Henry Costa, and the local radio station, Kool FM, had carried the story. The challenge with the scoops and speculations that feed on the lapse in proactive engagement from public officials is that some of the rumour-driven news has turned out to be inaccurate.

On March 23, the government, through the Bureau of Press and Public Affairs at the Information Ministry, issued an administrative directive shortlisting nine media institutions – ***the Liberia News Agency; the Executive Mansion Live, which is a government-backed online news outlet; KMTV Liberia; Spoon TV; Sam TV; Ministry of Information Press Team; FrontPage Africa, WAP TV; SAM TV*** – as the only media organisations authorised to cover the daily COVID-19 press conferences. This was roundly repudiated, particularly by the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), which accused the government of seeking to gag the critical press.

Beyond the spectre of verbal threats from government actors, however, the lack of regular internet access and reliable electricity supply in the country have severely constrained the work of journalists following the imposition of restrictions on physical engagements. For instance, a live Facebook by KMTV-Liberia podcast (Ministry of Information COVID-19 Update) that has attracted increased audience due to the increased resort to digital tools and social media platforms suffered disruptions in connectivity.



This was attributed to the inability of the local service provider, Orange Liberia, to cope with the pressure on limited bandwidth. Orange Liberia and Lonestar Cell MTN have in time past attributed disruption in internet connectivity to pressure on their networks.

The effects are more starkly severe on rural community radio stations and reporters as they are unable to maintain stable programme schedules, or access real time news.

During a talk programme on the local Okay FM radio station, a number of reporters working with community stations in counties like Nimba Gbapolu, Rivergee, and Grand Kru lamented the lack of access to the internet and, in some cases, bad phone connectivity. On Tuesday April 21, Franklin Doloqui, Okay FM Nimba County reporter, told radio talk show host, Clarence Jackosn: "**We are having problems with sending stories to Monrovia because the internet is very bad.**" He explained that: "**It takes too long to attach one file or to even send a voice report.**" The majority of journalists in Liberia use basic recorders and mobile phones to cover COVID-19 stories. Courage Kanger, a reporter with Radio Gbehzon in Buchanan, said, "**As for equipment, I use my notepad, recorders and camera to cover stories. Sometimes, I even use my phone. Like the whole of last month, I was using my phone to work.**"



## Legal & Policy Context

While in principle most of the laws that inhibited the right of access to information have been repealed, there are occasions of bureaucratic barriers to the exercise of this right under COVID-19 conditions. There have been, for instance, delays in the issuance of press passes for reporting during curfew times. The development has been forcefully resisted within media circles, leading to a stalemate that remains unresolved, with some journalists defiantly overlooking the accreditation requirement.

The government's initial policy response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the country imposed undue restrictions on a large segment of journalists and the media in Liberia. President George Weah announced a three-week state of emergency on April 10, based on which he indicated that only a few media outlets and selected journalists would be given accreditations to be exempted from lockdown and curfew restrictions. The Ministry of Information proceeded to issue a limited number of press passes to specific media institutions/journalist. Only the named media were allowed to attend briefings or participate in dialogues held by the NPHIL, relevant line Ministries and Agencies, and related public corporations; thus, denying the majority of journalists the requisite accreditation and access.

This decision was roundly repudiated by the PUL and other advocacy groups like the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) as amounting to censorship. Individual journalists also expressed various forms of protest; such as reporter of privately-owned Prime FM radio, Benetta Teta Bowah, who recounted as follows: "I had no pass from the working place. Even going out to fetch news was difficult as I had no access pass." She also lamented her "inability to confront those police officers" since, according to her, the pronouncement by the President to allow few journalists access passes to work was "unfair and undermined the rights of journalists to work freely." Charles Yates, publisher of the Integrity Watch newspaper, refused to take the pass and insisted on using his PUL and institutional ID cards. Yates said it amounted to putting a gag order on media practice.

## Safety of Journalists

There were no cases of physical attacks, direct threats of attacks, or punitive suits against the media. However, there have been a number of notable incidences of threats and intimidations of journalists in their line of work under COVID-19 conditions. At a live



government news conference on April 7, in the conference room of the Ministry of Information in Monrovia, Deputy Minister of Information, Eugene Fahgon, threatened that any journalist who failed to obtain and carry the government-sanctioned press pass "must have himself to blame." He added that the government had instructed state security agents to enforce the order by denying access to defaulting journalists at designated checkpoints after the 3:00pm curfew time.

Publisher Charles Yates of Integrity Watch newspaper was on Monday, March 23, invited by the Liberia National Security Agency (NSA) for questioning over an alleged social media post linking the Liberian government to corruption related to the COVID-19 fight. Yates said he was subsequently removed from the NPHIL "media chatroom" set up to promote information between the institution and journalists. "There was no reason given for my removal.... They provided no further explanation," Yates recounted. The investigation of Yates by the NSA had still not been formally concluded by the end of April.

The PUL together with the country office of the World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a health protocols training exercise for journalists on COVID-19 reporting. Beyond this training, however, journalists have not received any support or logistics in the form of personal protective equipment (PPE). As a result, journalists have tended to rely on secondary accounts and data supplied by NPHIL. Their analysis of the numbers also reflects a lack of requisite training on epidemiological data. Journalist Varney Dukuly of Okay FM also complained of the health risks in covering COVID-19 stories: "I am extremely insecure because the virus is deadly. And these police people are not friendly. They are very unfriendly." He continued: "You can't be fighting a virus and fighting police and security officers at the same time. This is very complicated."

## Economic Sustainability

The media have long been beset by the general economic malaise in the country. The situation has been further imperilled by the retrenchment of sales and advertising revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily newspapers – including The Frontpage Africa, Inquirer, The News, The Heritage, Analyst, News Public Trust, The New Dawn – have abridged the frequency of their publications to three times a week. Radio stations have reduced their staff strengths. For example, journalist James Karimu of Prime FM radio complained that he had not been paid since March because the station said it was facing financial challenges. "The Station didn't issue me any press pass and I am the reporter for the Lower House of the Legislature. So I can't go anywhere. I have been home and the station has not been able to pay me," Karimu narrated. He also noted that life had become difficult for him, his wife and two children due to the COVID-19 crisis: "I have children and it is painful to sit home doing nothing in the middle of such a pandemic." Prime FM has not been able to pay its employees for over two months due to the economic challenges occasioned by the pandemic. This picture is reflected across other media, similarly afflicted by the constricted advertising space and a tanking of the economy and the scaling down of official government business.

The risks and restrictions associated with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Liberia have not permitted much physical outreach and engagement. But it has also offered opportunities. Many news houses have, for instance, leveraged digital and online technologies for their publications and broadcasts. Live talk show hosts are no longer hosting guests in person. Instead, they are conducting telephone conversations on radio and TV. Notably, radio stations like Okay FM, Prime FM and Truth FM are routinely conducting interviews via telephone. Broadcast journalist, Varflay Kamara, at the State-owned Liberia Broadcasting System, in late April, announced he would "no more interview guests in person." These steps should, in the long term, assure the renewal of the Liberian media in response to the changing media habits of younger generations of audiences.

The resort to digital and online formats and platforms is in spite of the fact, as observed earlier, that there have been major challenges with the quality of mobile phone connectivity and internet service delivery by local network providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity for vendors of digital technologies and internet service providers to attract and expand their client bases. It also offers the possibility for integrating new media technologies and platforms into the content production and consumption habits of journalists and audiences. However, the technology infrastructure bottlenecks must be resolved in order to unlock these potentials.

## **Media Support**

There has been no noteworthy support to journalists and the media by public institutions. There has also not been any local private organisation supporting the resource needs of the media for combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The only significant support to the media has been by way of the collaboration of the WHO with the PUL to train journalists on risk management in reporting on COVID-19. This training involved 20 local and community radio station reporters as well as county coordinators of the PUL. Some NGOs, including CEMESP and the Liberia Media Center (LMC), were concluding grant agreements from OSIWA and Internews, respectively, to embark on COVID-19 prevention and control messaging in local dialects using community radio stations.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of gains made for media freedoms and institutional sustainability in Liberia. While the relevant public health institutions – such as the NPHIL – and ad hoc bodies – like the IMT – have played complementary roles in providing information on COVID-19 to the public, the duality of the Ministry of Information – which should facilitate access to information by the media – in seeing to impose restrictions on some independent media is a grave cause for concern. The recession in general business activities and consequent cut backs in advertising and sponsorship budgets have also resulted in severe financial strains on the media and threaten their viability. Other specific challenges that the media in Liberia face in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic are:

- 1. The use of restrictions under the state of emergency as pretext for verbal intimidations and threats of arrest of journalists and media practitioners;**
- 2. The discriminatory issuance of press passes to media for reporting under curfew restrictions.**
- 3. The poor internet and ICT infrastructure which, together with the lack of reliable electric power supply, have disrupted programming routines and limited the possibilities of access to and use of online resources; especially by rural community radio stations and other less endowed media;**
- 4. The non-payment of salaries and retrenchment of staff at some media houses due to loss of revenues and threats to survival of media institutions;**
- 5. The lack of training on safety protocols and inadequate personal protective equipment for journalists reporting from high-risk sites;**
- 6. The lack of support to media to improve their capacity to contribute to the fight against COVID-19; neither from government nor non-governmental organisations.**

These challenges must be mitigated through relevant interventions in the forms of advocacy, capacity-building programmes and the non-discriminatory provision of adequate resources to journalists and the media in Liberia.