



Media and COVID-19 in West Africa

Liberia



in partnership with



Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease has impacted every facet of life, and the media industry has not been left out. The pandemic has also highlighted the important role the media plays during such situations, particularly in informing and educating the public through news stories, documentaries and features, among others. Unfortunately, the onerous role the media have been playing in serving the public with news and information about the COVID-19 pandemic has not insulated media organisations, systems and news routines across West Africa and around the world from being disrupted by the pandemic. While the impact of the outbreak on the media is self-evident in some cases, it is insidious in other cases with short- to long-term ramifications.

Since the outbreak of the disease in the region, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been working with its national partner organisations to assess the impact of the pandemic on the media landscape in West Africa. The assessments focus on five factors that could ultimately affect the survival and sustainability of media institutions, journalism professional practice, and freedom of expression in the region. The five factors are: (1) availability and accessibility of information; (2) legal and policy context; (3) safety of journalists; (4) economic sustainability; and (5) media support.

The reports produced from the assessments are intended to track and document the state and fate of the media under COVID-19 in West Africa. It is hoped that the reports will provide empirical evidence and insights to inform and guide stakeholders who may initiate media sector support interventions at national or regional levels. This report focuses on Liberia.

Since the first case of COVID-19 was officially confirmed in Liberia on March 16, 2020, a number of measures have been implemented to help contain the spread of the pandemic. As in other jurisdictions, the imposition of these measures has had implications for the general media environment and the operations of media organisations. This report briefly looks at the situation in Liberia in May and June 2020 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 (CEMESP), the national partner organisation of the MFWA in Liberia.

Availability & Accessibility of Information

Information about COVID-19 is generally available in Liberia. The National Public Health Institute (NPHIL) provides updates to the public on the number of new cases, deaths and recoveries across the country. Also, the NPHIL, supported by the Ministry of Health, has been using its website (www.nationalphil.org) and social media pages – Facebook (National Public-Health Institute of Liberia) and Twitter (@nphil6) – to publish updates on the COVID-19 situation in the country.

Even though the Ministry of Health is not directly involved in the provision of public information, as part of the Incident Management System (IMS), it provides technical support to NPHIL and the IMS, and makes some publications on the COVID-19 crisis in Liberia on its website: www.moh.gov.lr.

In the month of May, the Ministry of Information significantly reduced the regularity of information and frequency of updates on COVID-19 through its Facebook page. Also, the Ministry, without any publicly stated reason, discontinued its regular weekly press briefings which were a major news source for the media and the general public as they provided information about measures being taken to contain the further spread of the virus. The NPHIL, however, continued its regular publications

on both its website and Facebook pages. For instance, the NPHIL published more than 20 leaflets in May and about 15 in June containing regular daily updates on the Coronavirus situation in the country. The leaflets were mainly published on their Facebook and Twitter pages. Journalists used the information to write different stories and news articles.

In June, the Ministry of Information resumed the press conferences by holding two press conferences to update the public on the status of the COVID-19 fight. The first was held on June 5, 2020, and the second on June 25.

The IMS also set up a risk communication department to help communicate relevant information to the media and the public at large. The co-chairman for the risk communication, Hassan Kiawue, said that they "will endeavour to fight the virus through clear, concise and adequate information dissemination."



A major challenge that journalists faced was the demand to have new press passes. On May 1, 2020, the government, through the Deputy Minister Eugene Fahgon, who is the head of the Ministry of Information's Bureau for Press and Public Affairs, issued a directive ordering all media institutions and individual journalists to obtain new press passes. The Deputy Minister also indicated that no journalist will be permitted to work after the 3pm restriction if they did not obtain the new passes issued under his authority. The COVID-19 press passes were provided by government to exempt journalists from the 3pm stay-home order declared by President George Weah under the State of Emergency restrictions announced in April – an action taken to curtail the spread of the coronavirus across Liberia.



The Deputy Minister explained that the new press passes were necessary because the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) is "issuing passes at will," even to non-journalists. He accused the leadership of the PUL of massively duplicating Covid-19 press passes intended for selected journalists and accredited media institutions in the country. In his words, ***"The PUL mass-produced the passes that are circulating today to disrespect the office of the President. In the President's address, we were instructed to have passes in order to do the job. We did not issue a policy; we don't have a new policy. We are only implementing statutorily what we're charged with the responsibility to do."***

The position of the Deputy Minister was corroborated by Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, Nathaniel McGill, when he appeared on local radio Prime FM on May 7, 2020. He ordered journalists to "go and get their new pass" and warned journalists that they would be "embarrassed" at security checkpoints for not complying with Fahgon's new press pass requirements. The PUL rejected the position of the government, describing it as an attempt to undermine the role of media people in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 8, the PUL announced that its members and all journalists will use their official union ID Cards or their media institution identification cards: "The Press Union of Liberia, at a mass meeting today, May 8, has resolved that its members will continue the use of their appropriate institutional and the Union's identity cards at all times to carry out their duties."

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***- Eugene Fahgon,
Deputy Minister of
Information Liberia***

In addition to having to deal with the issue of the new press passes, journalists are also confronted with the challenge of poor phone call quality and weak

internet connectivity. This is affecting the work of online broadcasters, as well as many media outlets that are increasingly shifting to live social media broadcast. Facebook live podcast by KMTV Liberia, Spoon TV and others often come to abrupt end due to internet disruptions. James Goodday Flomo who works for SPOON TV complained about the internet challenges in these words: ***“Sometimes you are streaming live from the Senate Chambers and before you look, the internet starts to misbehave. You lose all your audience and will have to try by all cost to get back online and start a new video all over; I mean just for that same event.”*** He added, ***“It is very embarrassing for some of us who do live broadcasts.”*** Emmanuel Davis, who works for KMTV Liberia also complained of the continued internet disruption during live broadcasts: “Nothing is embarrassing more than getting to know your internet is off when you are streaming live. It is very embarrassing.” He added that in June, ***“it was very messy and we were off and on at many times.”***

Beyond the live internet disruptions, a number of media houses also lack internet access or are unable to pay for subscription. Several newsrooms in Monrovia and across the country are unable to provide internet and basic digital recorders for their staff. For example, a popular private radio station, Truth FM, has been out of internet service since February this year. One reporter who asked not to be named said, “Since February there has been no internet here. The company has not recharged our internet yet.” In most cases, journalists/reporters have had to acquire their own recorders, computers, cameras and internet data.

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*- Emmanuel Davis,
KMTV, Liberia*

Legal and Policy Context

On June 22, 2020, President Weah announced a renewal of the State of Emergency for a period of 30 days. The President also adjusted the stay home time from 3pm to 6pm daily. The renewal of the State of Emergency meant that journalists were required to carry press passes if they were to work after 6pm.

Even before the renewal of the State of Emergency, Deputy Minister Eugene Fahgon had announced a mandatory issuance of new passes for journalists. This move greatly hindered the work of journalists all over the country. Several journalists were stopped at checkpoints in Monrovia by security forces in line with the Deputy Minister's directive. On May 4, 2020, a reporter with the privately owned Sky FM/TV, Rita Jlogbe, was stopped by police when she made attempts to reach central Monrovia for work. According to the official complaint she made to the PUL, she couldn't return to work after the officer with Liberia's Executive Protection Service stopped her for having an “expired pass.”

On May 5, police in Monrovia also prevented Akoi Baysah Jr., Assistant Secretary General of the PUL from moving without the new press pass. Then on May 9, a journalist with Prime FM, Prince Mulbah, after covering a Covid-19 initiative in Central Monrovia, was harassed and detained by police officers on 20th Street in Sinkor, Monrovia for not bearing the new issued pass. He narrated his experience as follows: ***“I was detained there for more than 45 minutes. They demanded that I present the pass issued by Fahgon or else I will not leave. They also told me in my face that they had received orders from Deputy Minister Fahgon to stop those of us who didn't have the pass issued by his authority.”***

Indeed, Mr. Fahgon himself joined state security at ELWA Junction on May 20, 2020 to enforce the new press pass order. The demand for the new press passes brought a lot of frustrations to media workers. The manager of privately owned Spoon FM and Spoon TV, Tete Kanneh, told the PUL that she was ordering her newsroom closed due to constant harassment by police, adding that she was

“deeply worried about [her] staffs’ safety.” She also indicated that the press pass issues were impacting the delivery of information about the spread and prevention of the Coronavirus to the public. A reporter with Monrovia-based Truth FM, Augustine Tamba, also lamented the frustrations journalists go through in their line of duty as a result of the new press passes: **“we are prevented from movement, and we can’t pass any police stations freely. They are harassing us all day and this has got to stop.”**

On a positive note, a report from a May 11, 2020 meeting of the Senate Committee on Information, Broadcasting, Culture & Tourism with the leadership of the PUL and Deputy Minister Eugene Fahgon concluded that:

“The media is very important in the fight against COVID-19, and so, restricting media coverage or media practitioners will not be called for. The media is the watchdog of society; we must encourage its involvement in the fight against this virus (COVID-19). Journalists should be allowed to use their intuitional identification cards or the PUL’s official identification cards in the discharge of their reportorial duties consistent with international media protocols in the fight against COVID-19.”

The Senate Committee followed up with a recommendation that **“The media/journalists be left alone to use their institutional identification cards or the PUL’s identification cards. The change of passes now will undermine the fight against the coronavirus; The President relaxes his recommendation of selected journalists covering the State of Emergency (SoE). This can also be seen as censorship of the media.”**

With the exception of the renewal of the State of Emergency and the introduction of the new press passes by government through the Bureau of Press and Public Affairs, there were no incidents “where laws or administrative instruments prohibited access to information concerning the coronavirus,” said Akoi Baysah Jr., Assistant Secretary General of the PUL.

Safety of journalists

Some cases of abuse against journalists were recorded during the period. Some of the abuses resulted from the attempt by state security to implement the new press pass order given by Deputy Minister Eugene Fahgon. A reporter with the privately owned Sky FM/TV, Rita Jlogbe; Assistant Secretary General of the PUL, Akoi Baysah Jr. and Prince Mulbah of Prime FM, were all prevented from moving from one end to another by police in their line of duty because they did not have the new press passes. At some point, Mr. Fahgon himself joined state security at ELWA Junction to enforce the new press pass order which resulted in the harassment of some journalists.

The attempt to enforce the new press pass order brought a lot of frustrations to media workers. The manager of privately owned Spoon FM and Spoon TV, Tetee Kanneh, for instance hinted of her intention to close her newsroom due to constant harassment by police. Augustine Tamba of Truth FM, also raised concerns about the continuous harassment faced by journalists as a result of the new press pass requirement: **“We are prevented from movement, and we can’t pass any police stations freely. They are harassing us all day and this has got to stop”**

The PUL, later in a statement on May 8, warned that **“the government of Liberia will be held responsible for any harm and intimidation suffered by journalists and media workers during the discharge of their duties in the face of the current threats through the Deputy Minister of Information, Eugene Fahgon.”**

In another development, Journalist Elton Tieh and his Ablejay TV Crew were forcefully ordered to stop a live broadcast of a lockdown restriction in the city of Buchanan, Grand Bassa County, on May 20, 2020. According to police officers, they had “no authority to broadcast” while others were home. Journalist Tieh and crew were positioned in the middle of Tubman Street in Buchanan with their live broadcast equipment when they were stopped.

As a way of preventing the contraction and spread of the Coronavirus disease, government entities, media associations and media houses have established protocols for reporters. Mask wearing in all public places is mandatory. Reporters covering news events are asked to wear masks, wash hands and practice social distancing at all times. Media institutions have also limited the number of staff reporting to work daily to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. There are hand-washing buckets and sanitisers at nearly all public institutions, as well as radio, newspapers and TV stations. Journalists largely observe these protocols. Those who cover press conferences and even those who host guests in studios wear masks and observe social distancing



Hand washing buckets placed at public institutions

Despite these arrangements, the President of the PUL, Charles Coffey, cautioned media workers to be extra careful especially as key newsmakers were being confirmed positive of COVID-19, a situation he considered was a cause of concern for the safety of reporters who covered news makers and events. In an interview with KMTV, Coffey warned journalist to avoid the Ministry of Information COVID-19 Press Briefings and called on media managers to withdraw reporters providing coverage for the regular COVID-19 updates at the Ministry of Health in Congo Town over fears of being infected. “There is no news worth dying for, as such, it is key for media people to remain safe while carrying out their reportorial duties,” the PUL President said.

Economic sustainability

Many media managers continue to complain about the slow pace of business, particularly about drops in advertising. Some of them have had to send reporters home or drastically reduced staff. Many radio stations and newspapers have not been able to pay staff for two months running. According to the general manager of Prime FM, Kelvin Demey, most of those sponsoring programmes on the local FM have either decided to discontinue their sponsorship or reduce payments. He said some have even decided to **“totally stop, complaining that the spread of the virus and its attending consequences have reduced their finances.”** **“Because of this”,** he continued, **“salaries of the staff have not become regular and sometimes delayed.”** He said Covid-19 has affected **“our economic” activities greatly.**

Corroborating Demey’s point, some journalists who asked not to be named said their offices have complained of little or no income due to the Coronavirus outbreak. One said, **“It’s very difficult and frustrating to be working in this difficult time with no pay.”** Another journalist who is assigned to the Legislature said it was unfair to keep journalists working everyday with their institutions refusing to pay them. **“I have never seen such a difficulty before, this is really tough. Our managers need to find a solution as quick as possible because we have families to feed too,”** she lamented.

For many local dailies such as The Analyst, News Public Trust, The News Dawn, and others, they have either lowered their number of print publications or are not coming up at all even though they continue to share news contents on their websites and Facebook pages. Some have also reduced their staff strength due to the low revenue levels. The Desk editor at Front Page Africa Newspaper, Lenart Dodoo, said, **“financially, it has crippled many institutions. We have to drop some fully emplo-**

yed staff to the level of freelancing and pay them per story because our revenue base couldn't support our payroll." He noted further that Front Page Africa had to balance its financial strength with outputs of reporters. *"This entire June we went without advertisement, we run a generator to power the office, buy ink to print our papers and you make nothing"* Doodoo added.

In June, a few journalists and talk show hosts opted to bring guests live in studio. However, many news organs in Monrovia like Spoon FM & TV continued to broadcast online. There has been an increase in radio conversation by telephone and even some, via zoom. Live talk show hosts have continued hosting guests via phone instead of in-person. Okay FM Liberia and Prime FM have been joined by Joy FM Liberia and Truth FM to conduct interviews via phone calls. State radio, ELBC, continued same.

This move is, however, challenged by bad cellular connectivity and internet service provision. Thus, even though the COVID-19 pandemic presents a reasonable opportunity by which local networks can cultivate a mastery of internet/digital broadcast, and the news media can use social media as a platform to reach more audiences, the connectivity issues remain a major hurdle. The Secretary General of the PUL, Musa Kanneh, admits the current COVID 19 situation presents a unique opportunity to advance digital journalism in Liberia. *"... as you can see, most of our media houses are now taking guests live online, we are getting there."* But the editor of Prime News, Trokon Wrepue, underscores the connectivity challenge: *"lack of internet is a major challenge to our effort to transition and introduce new ways of news presentation."* *He, however, stressed that this cannot be achieved in the absence of adequate "internet, provision of modern broadcast equipment that can enable us to work effectively and make use of social distancing."*

Media support

In May and June 2020, the media in Liberia received a number of donations which were intended to support them in their work, particularly about Coronavirus reportage:

- **The Liberia national commission on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), donated 50 Coronavirus buckets, one carton of chloral and one carton of soap to the PUL.**
- **The Association of Liberian Journalist in the Americas donated 150 bags of rice, 54 gallons of cooking oil and 1,000 nose masks to the PUL.**
- **The Rotary Club of Sinkor also made a donation of 250 pieces of nose masks to the PUL for use by Liberian journalists.**
- **The Bridge Radio Africa donated 50 pieces of nose masks to the PUL as part of its contribution to the fight against the disease.**

In presenting the items, the various groups acknowledged the role of Liberian journalists in the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic and called on other stakeholders to support the PUL in the fight against the disease. The PUL President, Charles Coffey Jr. thanked the groups for the donations on behalf of Liberian journalists and assured that the materials will be provided to media institutions. He also admonished journalists not to relent on keeping the public abreast of happenings in the country.

The US Embassy in Monrovia also held a special online Coronavirus training for about 60 Liberian journalists on COVID-19 reporting on June 23, 2020. The training was done by Sarah J. Wachter, an experienced journalist for the written press, television, newswires and websites with in-depth expe-

rience in covering health matters and the Ebola virus epidemic.

Also in the month of June, the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) started running a weekly radio program named **“COVID-19 Media Content Monitoring & Awareness Project”** with funding support from the Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA). The radio programme, which airs on Prime FM every Friday morning, seeks to identify fake news in the COVID-19 fight, and get experts and relevant duty bearers to speak to specific issues.

Conclusion

With the exception of the introduction of new press passes for the journalists by the Deputy Minister of Information and the harassment that followed its implementation, the media landscape in Liberia in May and June has been open and free. Even though the Ministry of Information reduced the frequency of updates on social media and stopped the regular press briefings especially in May, information about COVID-19 incidents and prevalence was generally available through the NPHIL website and social media pages. The information from the NPHIL helped the media greatly in producing news stories and articles.

However, the recession in business and the continued drop in advertising and sponsorship significantly impacted media operations and viability. Due to the financial constraints, some journalists have been laid off, while some fulltime employees have been made freelancers. The situation has also made it difficult to honour salary obligations in some media houses.

Recommendations

- 1 The government should accept and implement the recommendations of the Senate Committee so that journalists can use the identity cards of the PUL or their respective institutions instead of the new press passes selectively granted by the Bureau of Press and Public Affairs. This will ensure that journalists can move about freely to perform their duties.
- 2 The government should work with local telephone and internet service providers to expand the ICT infrastructure in the country to facilitate online broadcasting by the media as they continue to inform and educate the public about COVID-19.
- 3 The government and media support organisations should provide financial support to cushion the media in these critical times.