

Media and COVID-19 in West Africa

Ghana

March – June

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease) pandemic has affected all aspects of life across the world, and the media is no exception. The daunting financial, logistical and operational challenges notwithstanding, the media in Ghana and across West Africa generally, have demonstrated remarkable capacity to adapt and continue to play their vital role of informing, educating and sensitising the populace in these critical times.

This report has been produced as part of efforts by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) to provide empirical information and insights about the corona virus and its impact on the media across the West African region. The report, which is also being produced in the various countries in the region in collaboration with MFWA's national partner organisations, seeks to provide relevant information based on the local contexts of each of the countries. This is intended to help inform and guide interventions by stakeholders at national and regional levels to support the media in these critical times and beyond. This report focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on the media landscape in Ghana. It covers the period since the first incident was recorded in March to June 2020.

Ghana recorded its first confirmed case of coronavirus infection on March 12, 2020. Consequently, the government proceeded to put in place a series of measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. These included the closure of all air, sea and land borders, the closure of places of worship, and a lockdown in the Greater Accra region as well as Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area – the second largest city and its adjoining towns. These restrictions, coupled with other social and economic fallouts of the outbreak of the COVID-19, have seriously impacted the media sector in Ghana as in other countries in the sub-region and the world.

The report examines the situation of the media in Ghana in response to COVID-19 and the attendant effect on the survival and viability of the media, professional journalism practice, press freedom and freedom of expression. It revolves focuses on five sub-themes – the availability and accessibility of information, legal and political context, safety of journalists, economic viability and media support.

Availability and Accessibility to Information

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Ghana adopted an information dissemination strategy aimed at spreading calm and providing regular updates on incidents rate of COVID-19 cases in the country. The Ministry of Information, together with the Ministry of Health, which is leading the country's fight against the outbreak, regularly holds press briefings that are carried on national broadcast channels, several private media channels and on social media.

Further information on the pandemic is also made available on dedicated online portals – website: www.ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/ which is managed by the Ministry of Health, and social media pages such as Facebook: Ministry of Health, Ghana and the Ministry of Information – Ghana ; and Twitter: @moigovgh (ministry of information) and @mohgovgh (Ministry of Health). In addition to these information sources, the President of the Republic, Nana Addo-Dankwa Akufo-Addo, addresses the nation periodically on developments regarding the pandemic, including measures being taken to contain its spread. About 13 of such addresses, which were broadcast across the nation, had been organised at the time this report was being put together.

Perceptions and reactions about the government's communication strategy/ information flow among journalists have been mixed. ***“The President coming out with his address almost every week is something that has made it possible for the public to know what the virus is all about. Similarly,***

the Ministries of Health and of Information coming out with press conferences almost every week is something that is important,” remarked Joshua Asaah, a reporter at A1 Radio.

However, Albert Sore, correspondent for the Multimedia Group in the Upper East Region, does not share Asaah's enthusiasm. According to him, the process is a little bureaucratic and delays information flow.

“The protocol, as they put it in my region, is such that the health directorate will get the information, put it in a form of statement, present it to the regional minister to look at it, before sharing the information with the citizens. This process has contributed to delaying information disclosures,” Sore complained.

Richard Kwadwo Nyarko is also a reporter for the Multimedia Group in the Central Region, *“The bureaucracies are too much especially when you want to access information. Even for health workers working and supposed to be given update on daily basis, sometimes the updates do not come. You have to spend like three days working on a simple news story,”* Nyarko observed.

Emmanuel Dogbevi, Manager of The Ghana Business News, feels that information on the Coronavirus is not only delayed, but also compromised by political consideration. *“The slogan of the Ghanaian government was to spread calm and not fear. And so, in order not to cause panic, they were not releasing timely information and to an extent they were not releasing truthful information... they were trying to control more politically the health information rather than giving people accurate information.”*

“The President coming out with his address almost every week is something that has made it possible for the public to know what the virus is all about. Similarly, the Ministries of Health and of Information coming out with press conferences almost every week is something that is important,”

Joshua Asaah, A1 Radio

Apart from issues relating to the timely access to information, some media professionals see a lack of transparency in information disclosure from the government, and have challenges in having access to sources of information beyond press releases and press briefings. Journalists have had, in some instances, to pressurise officials to provide some information. In other instances, they have had to rely on health workers, who generally stay anonymous, to get some information.

According to Richard Kwadwo Nyarko,

“It's been very difficult to access information in my region. We are not able to adequately have access to the experts in the region. Sometimes when we call, they say they are in a meeting and that they will call back but never do so. As of now, we are unable to put a finger on how many health workers have tested positive in the region.”

Kevin Chris Asima, a journalist with Gateway Radio in the Oti Region, also underlines that

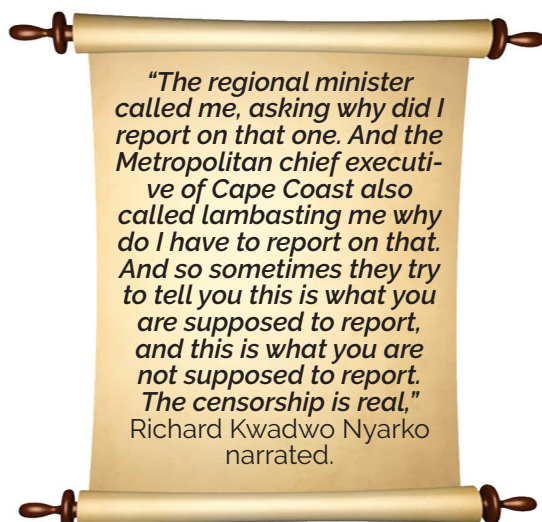
“there is a psychological barrier between you and the people from whom you are seeking the information. It appears that one needs to get it right politically in giving information about the COVID-19. Officials of government agencies and departments are often hesitant to provide information, for fear of being reprimanded by their superiors, who themselves may be queried by their bosses.”

As part of measures adopted to mitigate the spread of the virus and protect staff, several media houses recommended to their staff to work from home. Working from home, for a number of journalists, came with some challenges, including limited know-how about the use of some online tools to gather news. This affected the overall outputs of some of the journalists. Others also complained about data cost.

Joshua Asaah, from A1 radio; ***“Some do not even know zoom, or other apps that can be used to communicate with other people so it is a challenge.”*** Asaah also has concerns about the quality and cost of internet service.

“We are living in a country where we don't have reliable internet service. And the cost of working with internet service is a problem too. It is our responsibility to still serve the public and to let the public know what this virus is all about; we don't have an excuse to tell the public that we can't afford internet service. And daily I spend GHc20 on MTN bundle which is about USD4.”

Legal & Policy Context



“The regional minister called me, asking why did I report on that one. And the Metropolitan chief executive of Cape Coast also called lambasting me why do I have to report on that. And so sometimes they try to tell you this is what you are supposed to report, and this is what you are not supposed to report. The censorship is real,”
Richard Kwadwo Nyarko narrated.

Ghana has one of the freest media environments in West Africa. Chapter 12 of its 1992 Constitution guarantees freedom and independence of the media and prohibits censorship. Also, criminal libel has been abolished since July 7, 2001. In addition, in 2019, the public was given the legal basis to demand public information through the passage of the Right to Information Law, which came into effect in 2020.

After the country recorded its first cases of COVID-19, the government introduced a raft of legal interventions to contain the virus in response to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declaration of the outbreak as a pandemic and a public health emergency. As a result, the Imposition of Restrictions Act was passed by Ghana's Parliament. Using this law, the President issued several Executive Instruments (EI) detailing measures for containing the virus. None of the EIs introduced has so far brought about censorship and/or prevented the media from doing their constitutionally mandated duty. However, some journalists are convinced about the existence of censorship in practice due to some experiences. For instance, two government officials called Richard Kwadwo Nyarko and reprimanded him on a COVID-19-related report he had done about a demonstration in one community in the Central Region against the siting of COVID-19 isolation centres in schools in their neighbourhoods.

“The regional minister called me, asking why did I report on that one. And the Metropolitan chief executive of Cape Coast also called lambasting me why do I have to report on that. And so sometimes they try to tell you this is what you are supposed to report, and this is what you are not supposed to report. The censorship is real,” Richard Kwadwo Nyarko narrated.

Also, some red flags have been raised about possible privacy breaches in Executive Instrument (EI 64) 2020, which is derived from section 100 of the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775). The EI grants the President the power to make written requests and issue orders to operators or providers of electronic communications networks or services requiring them to intercept communications, provide any user information or otherwise in aid of law enforcement or national security. Some legal practitioners in the media field have argued that the provision in the EI could be abused.

“This is clearly intended to get all the government could not in normal times get from telcos...All your mobile money data, transaction and wallet details, merchant code, bank details – practically your every private transaction details the telcos are being compelled to disclose to the government,” observed Samson Lardy Anyenini, legal practitioner and broadcaster on his News File radio/TV programme aired on Accra-based Joy FM and Joy News TV.

Also, following the rise in disinformation and fake news, there were circulars going round to remind the general public and the media that fake news is punishable under Ghanaian law, specifically Section 76 of the Electronic Communication Act, 2008 (Act 775). The Media Foundation for West Africa, as its contribution to fighting misinformation and fake news about the disease has been using its fact-checking project to produce fact-check reports about myths, misinformation and suspected fake news to help provide the public with accurate information.

Safety of Journalists

Whereas Richard Kwadwo Nyarko got away with a reprimand for a COVID-19-related story he did, three other journalists were not so lucky. One received threats and two others were assaulted. Emmanuel Ohene Gyan, a reporter of Empire FM in Western Region, received threats from relatives of the Metropolitan Chief Executive (MCE) of Sekondi-Takoradi in the Western Region following his online publication on the COVID-19-related death of the late MCE on June 12, 2020. ***“Many of the calls were anonymous, but I identified one of the callers as Jonathan Sam, a son of the former MCE. He asked me to take down the story within 24 hours or face his wrath,”*** the journalist told the MFWA.

On April 5, 2020, the General Manager of Kumasi-based Zuria FM, Abdul Ganiyu, was attacked by a soldier over his station's critical reports on military brutalities during the lockdown. In an interview with the MFWA, the journalist said that his assailant, Second Lieutenant Betrot Ampoma, had called anonymously two days earlier to threaten him.

On April 10, a military officer enforcing the COVID-19 lockdown brutalised Samuel Adobah of Accra-based TV Africa at Olebu in Accra while Adobah was covering a fire outbreak. The incident happened when the soldier who was part of a COVID-19 lockdown enforcement team assaulted the journalist while dispersing a crowd that had gathered as a result of the fire outbreak. Following the attacks by the military, the MFWA on May 3, 2020, petitioned the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Ghana Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Obed Boamah Akwa, to investigate the incidents. In a letter dated May 13, 2020, the Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Issah Adams Yakubu, on behalf of the CDS, assured that ***“any soldier found culpable will be dealt with in accordance with our disciplinary code.”***

With regard to protection from the Coronavirus, several media professionals report being inadequately equipped when going on to the field to report on COVID-19-related issues. Their personal protective equipment (PPE) supply is limited to nose masks and hand washing soaps and hand sanitizers. For some, even face masks are under-supplied.

“We received from the GJA six nose masks and a few bottles of sanitisers for the staff. That was our share of the PPE donation to the media by the Ministry of Health. This is clearly inadequate,” complained Kevin Chris Asima of Gateway Radio in the Oti Region.

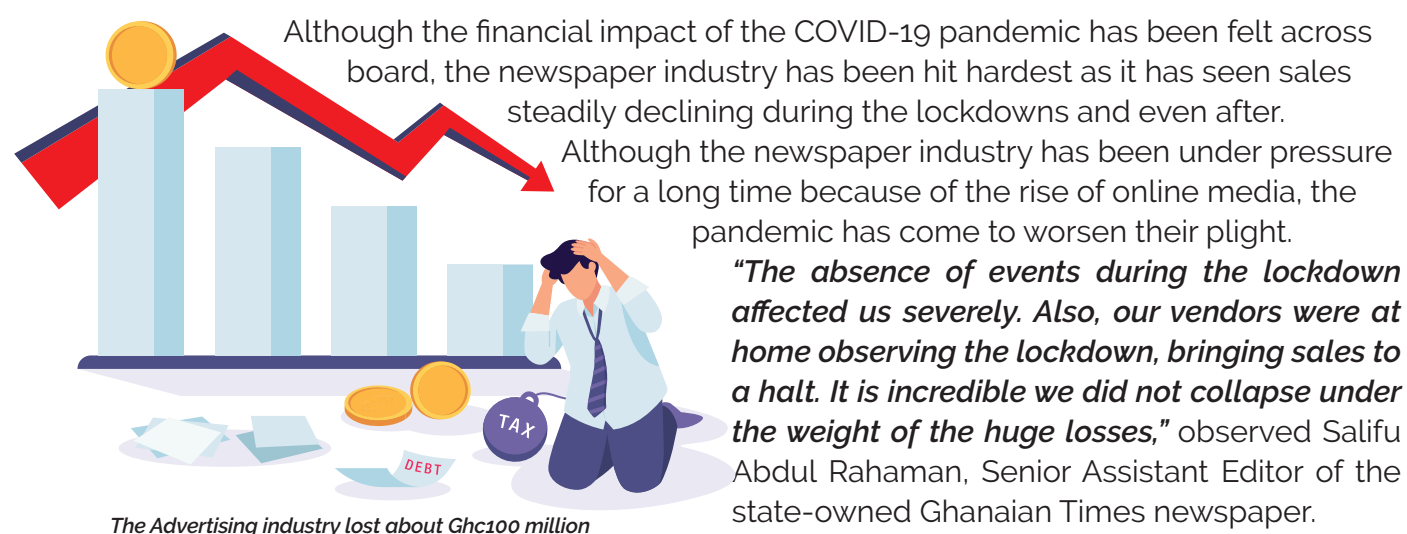
To practice social distancing, some media organisations adopted a work-from-home policy for some category of staff. Others did so across board, but on rotational basis. The down side of this arrangement was high internet bills.

Despite these measures undertaken by some media houses to limit risks of contracting the virus, over the month of June, the management of the Multimedia Group Limited announced that 5 of their staff tested positive to the Coronavirus.

Economic Sustainability

The COVID-19 crisis is having far-reaching impact on people's lives and livelihoods. Global poverty is expected to increase for the first time since the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, and Ghana's economy has not been immune. With its fortunes directly linked with the size and performance of businesses, the media has been hit hard by economic crisis arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the imposition of partial lockdowns and the temporary closure of non-essential businesses to contain the pandemic, events such as conferences, workshops, or funerals which constitute a major source of income and news, were suspended. Consequently, advertising and announcement revenues reduced considerably. The advertising industry in Ghana, of which the media is a critical part, has reported that since the beginning of the COVID-19, it has lost about Ghc100million (USD 17,331,022).



Generally, newspapers are sold on stands in Ghana on the main highways. Newspaper readers generally buy papers on the streets. However, during the partial lockdown and some days after, the newspaper vendors at the stands were not working, and people were not moving about in the city. The newspapers were printing with very few people to buy.

In a documentary titled ***"The Media: A Virus and Survival"*** aired on Joy News on June 8, 2020, Ben Ephson, Managing Editor of the Daily Dispatch said, ***"the Daily Dispatch has been around for over 22 years and it is during COVID-19 that for the first time, for one month, the paper was off the stands."***

In an interview with the MFWA, Emmanuel Akli, Editor-in-Chief of The Chronicle newspaper said that the COVID-19 pandemic could have a heavy toll on the sustainability of the newspaper industry. ***"If this pandemic should continue for a longer period of time, the newspaper industry will be devastated. We are recording drops in sales as customers are even afraid to touch the paper for fear of it being infected,"*** Akli said.

In the midst of the gloom, some legacy media organisations have turned to the online space to improve their fortunes. The COVID-19 has highlighted the growing viability of digital media platforms in the country. However, due to the absence of online subscription systems to monetise publications on the internet, newspapers have not been able to optimise the benefit from the digital space. Another challenge being experienced in the industry is the fact that some media organisations find themselves having to recruit other staff with the requisite technical skills for online publishing despite their already precarious finances.

The audio-visual media have not been spared the negative economic impact of the pandemic either. According to Joshua Asaah from A1 Radio in the Upper East Region, ***“advertisers are folding up. And some have decided to cut down cost. Some partners who are still with us called to inform us that they wouldn’t be able to pay the amount they used to pay for advertisements.”***

The General Manager of Citi FM and Citi TV, Bernard Avle, also lamented that his media organisation has been hit hard by the pandemic. He disclosed that ***“A third of the revenues have not been coming in.”*** He made this known in the Joy News documentary on ***“The Media: A virus and Survival.”***

Media Support

In spite of the risks and financial challenges media professionals and media organisations in Ghana are facing, they are yet to receive any substantial support from the government, the private sector, or NGOs. The General Secretary of the Ghana Journalists' Association (GJA), Kofi Yeboah, said, ***“the only support the media has received from the government so far is a donation of PPEs.”***

The Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA) together with the Ghana Journalists' Association (GJA) and the National Media Commission (NMC) made a formal request for the media industry to be included in a stimulus package arrangement for businesses put in place by government to cushion businesses. Two months after the request, Gloria Hiadzi, Executive Secretary of GIBA, says there has been no response yet. She told the MFWA that her outfit and its allies are going to follow-up on the request, insisting that the media industry deserves to be bailed out. “Our members have been hard hit by the economic impact of the COVID-19, and given the media's crucial role in the economic and social development of the country, we should not be overlooked within the scheme of the stimulus package intervention.”

Conclusion

The media in Ghana have had relatively free space to operate even amidst the COVID-19 restrictions. The traditional legal texts and the new emergency laws adopted by the government to fight the pandemic have not been used to violate press freedom. The media have, therefore, discharged with distinction their duty of informing and educating the populace on the COVID-19. However, media professionals face a number of challenges in accessing sources of information and in getting timely access to information. Furthermore, there were few instances of abuse which need urgent redress to prevent impunity from setting in.

The financial standing of media enterprises has been weakened by the general fall in economic and social activities arising out of the outbreak of the pandemic. Unfortunately, government has provided practically little support, making the media potentially vulnerable to capture by vested interests, especially as Ghana heads towards elections in December 2020.

In view of the above, we call on the government of Ghana to:

- Adopt policies urging officials at all levels to proactively disclose information to the media
- Call on law enforcement officers to exercise restraints towards the media in their line of duty
- Consider media professionals as frontline workers and provide them with adequate PPEs regularly
- Put in place financial relief packages including tax breaks for the media

We also call on the Media to:

- Avoid the scoop culture in order to prevent disseminating false or inaccurate information and ensure that they provide fact-checked reports and information
- Provide training on safety measure for reporters and take measures to ensure adequate protection of media staff
- Leverage on the opportunities offered by technology

Finally, we urge media development organisations to:

- Convene a national stakeholder discussion on the current state and post-COVID survival of the media
- Provide technical assistance and know-how on media financial sustainability, as well as strategies that could help media organisations leverage their internal capacity to mobilise resources.