



Media and COVID-19 in West Africa

Sierra Leone



in partnership with



Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone has affected all sectors of the economy, including media institutions. The index case of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone was announced by President Maada Bio on the 31 March 2020. Since the announcement of that first case, the government has put in place a number of measures to mitigate the spread of the virus in the country. Some of the measures introduced have affected economic activities and by extension the work of media institutions. Some of the effects on the media are self-evident, others are insidious, some are short-term, and others are far-reaching.

This report documents the state and fate of the media in Sierra Leone under COVID-19. It is hoped that, the report will provide empirical information and insights to inform and guide stakeholders who may initiate media sector support interventions at national or regional levels.

The report focuses on five factors that could ultimately impinge on the survival and sustainability of media institutions, journalism professional practice, and freedom of expression in the region. These are: (1) Availability & Accessibility of COVID-19 Information, (2) Legal and Policy Context, (3) Safety of Journalists, (4) Economic Sustainability and (5) Media support.

The report is produced in collaboration with the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), the national partner organisation of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in Sierra Leone. It covers the period from the index case to June 30, 2020.

Covid-19 Information Availability & Accessibility

SYMPTOMS



HEADACHE



COUGH



FEVER

Prior to the first case of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, the Government disseminated information about the symptoms of COVID-19 and urged all citizens to report themselves, loved ones, or community members who would exhibit flu-like symptoms, including fever, dry cough and difficulty in breathing. The government ***“committed some financial resources to preparedness and public health education.”***

The Government also appointed a COVID-19 National Response Team and activated the Emergency Operations Centre. District Coordinators were appointed for the COVID-19 Response. The President,

Julius Maada Bio, also in his maiden national address on March 18, 2020, urged all public and private radio stations to continually broadcast and reinforce public health education and information on Coronavirus prevention, including hand hygiene, cough etiquette, and social distancing.”

Generally, there has been open and available information about COVID-19 incident rates. There have not been any political or other administrative constraints to accessing COVID-19 information. The only policy issue that has come up is that of the non-disclosure of personal details of COVID-19 patients owing to issues of privacy and confidentiality which was viewed by some journalists as a way of limiting access to information particularly when few people/patient left quarantine homes or isolation centres. Aside that, “There is generally access to information and the government has shown commitment to working with journalists and the Association,” noted the President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ahmed Sahid Nasralla.

Information about the disease can be accessed offline and online through some government ministries. Specifically, the Directorate of Information, Ministry of Information and Communications, publishes Status Updates for COVID-19. From the beginning, there were two such updates daily: 11a.m.

and 6p.m. Later, it was reduced to the publication of one update per day. The updates are also published on the websites of the Ministry of Information and Communications (www.mic.gov.sl) and the Directorate of Health Security and Emergencies, Ministry of Health and Sanitation (www.dhse.gov.sl/) and their respective Facebook pages: (<https://www.facebook.com/mic.gov.sl/> and <https://www.facebook.com/MOHSSL/>). However, Murtala Mohamed Kamara, an online journalist and head of 'Jamboree Consultant' indicated that "the websites and the social media platforms are sometimes not regularly updated."

Other Ministries, Departments and Agencies also announced some COVID-19 measures, a situation that created some confusion among the public. In some few instances, there were mixed messages from government officials. To address the challenge, the COVID-19 National Response – Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), which was later change to National COVID-19 Emergency Response Center (NaCOVERC) took over the publication of the Status Updates. The NaCOVERC) organises daily press conferences where the 'Status Update for COVID-19' is presented. The Deputy Minister of Information and Communications, Madam Mamadi Gobeh Kamara, served as the spokesperson for the EOC. However, on the 21st of April 2020, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation was appointed **"as the official Spokesperson for COVID-19 related issues."**

Some journalists have complained that there are bureaucratic and administrative constraints in accessing certain relevant COVID-19 information from some medical doctors and other medical staff. **"When I wanted to interview a Community Health Officer, I was told that I had to contact the Chief Medical Officer at the Ministry of Health and Sanitation before I can do so. Without his approval, I cannot be granted an interview on COVID-19 issues,"** said Samuel Bangura, a videographer who works for the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).

Some journalists have also complained about conflicting data on some COVID-19 daily updates. The NaCOVERC have, however, encouraged all to use the official websites – www.mic.gov.sl and www.dhse.gov.sl – to access official information about the pandemic.

Other journalists also complained of not having access to some Coronavirus information and also, access to treatment centres to get information. **"The activities of journalists are limited in the sense that there is not much information to cover. Almost everything has now been related to Corona. And the lack of access to some of the requisite information, including visiting treating centres, has made the profession even more difficult,"** noted Abu Bakarr Thaimu Sesay, Editor of the Voice Newspaper.

To complement and support the Government of Sierra Leone's COVID-19 national response programme, the SLAJ set up the Corona Response Committee (SLAJ-CRC). The committee interfaces with the Ministry of Information and Communications and the NaCOVERC. From its weekly 'Corona Tok' [Talk] simulcast programme to the 'Leh Wi Dreb Corona' [Let's Drive Corona Away] daily programme, SLAJ continues to play a leading role in the area of public information in the national response program against COVID-19.

Sierra Leone's media institutions have always had serious technological challenges. Media institutions and practitioners often do not have requisite technological devices such as digital recorders and electronic newsgathering equipment to do their work. Newsgathering and production equipment are mostly analogue. **"Such difficulties were visibly manifested during the outbreak of COVID-19 when media institutions, particularly radio and television stations, were advised to conduct online instead of studio-based interviews,"** said Ransford Wright, National Coordinator of the Independent Radio Network (IRN). The President of the Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Lamrana Bah, also made the point that **"Journalists and reporters continue to face serious challenges due to lack of modern digital recorders and professional microphones and cameras to cover**

and report on COVID-19 stories.” The conduct of online interview remains a challenge and internet and satellite connectivity challenges affect radio and television stations that link programmes simulcast across the country.

Legal and Policy Context



Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the country, the media have reported news stories about the outbreak without any interference. No policy or law has been introduced to hinder the work of the media either. A State of Public Emergency was declared in Sierra Leone from 24th March 2020 for a period of 12 months to address the **“threat that the Coronavirus disease poses to the lives of the people and the economy of Sierra Leone....”** There were some concerns that with the declaration of a State of Emergency by the President pursuant to Section 29 (1) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone, Act.

No. 6 of 1991, there may be restrictions on some rights of citizens, including freedom of expression and of the press. No such restrictions have been reported so far even though some are of the view that the State of Emergency was enough to instill some fear. **“The existence of a State of Emergency is enough to instill some degree of fear in the minds of colleagues when doing their job,”** said Isha Kamara, a journalist working for 'Gbla TV Online.' This has, however, not cowed some media institutions from publishing and broadcasting contents that are critical of the national response to COVID-19.

Part V of the Public Order Act of 1965 which has the offences of defamatory (criminal) libel, seditious libel and false publication have so far not been applied against anyone for any COVID-19-related issue. However, due to a rise in fake news and misinformation about the disease, the Minister of Information and Communication, Mohamed Rahman Swaray, indicated that government was contemplating passing a law to crackdown on fake news. **“Fake news is definitely undermining the fight against COVID-19....,”** he explained. To help manage the issue, the media regulatory body, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), engaged media institutions about the danger of publishing and broadcasting fake news. The intervention by the IMC focused more on sensitisation and education rather than taking punitive actions.

In addition to the 12-month State of Public Emergency, other COVID-19 interventions such as the national lockdowns of April 5-7, 2020; the inter-district partial lockdown together with a curfew from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. which was due to lapse April 25, 2020, but extended until further notice; and the three-day nationwide lockdown covering the period, May 3-5, 2020, were also introduced to curb further spread of the virus. The curfew and inter-district lockdown restricted the work of journalists to some extent.

Many journalists did not have a 'pass' (authorisation) to move from one district to another. As a result, access to information was challenging. Sidique Fofana, who works for Radio Mount Aureol, the University of Sierra Leone radio station, noted, **“The curfew and inter-district lockdown continued to restrict the work of journalists. Many journalists still complained that they did not have a 'pass' to move across districts during the inter-district or national lockdowns to cover stories. Therefore, access to information during the curfew or in other district locations was challenging.”** Also, for some radio stations that used to broadcast top programmes before or at 6 a.m., they were left with no option but to shift their programmes to commence at 7a.m. or thereafter.

Journalists' restriction in terms of movement across the country was addressed when the President announced adjustments that would ease restrictions while not compromising the fight against the

Coronavirus. ***“Effective immediately, the curfew is adjusted to the period 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. I announce a lifting of the ban on Inter-District travel starting on Wednesday, 24 June 2020.”***

With the exception of the challenges posed by the inter-district lockdown and curfew, there were generally no restrictions. Many journalists also indicated that they have neither been censored nor censored, neither have they been practising self-censorship on coverage related to COVID-19. “We are doing our work freely without any censorship on coverage related to COVID-19. We decide what to publish and not to publish. We are willing to support the fight against COVID-19 because it is in the national interest,” said Augustine James, Deputy Editor of the Newswatch Newspaper.

Safety of Journalists

“This is an unfortunate incident as it comes in the wake of the Coronavirus crisis when the role of journalists is pivotal to the national response effort. No matter the facts of the incident, I believe the military has no right to mob an unarmed journalist whose only crime may be over-zealousness in doing his work.”

–Ahmed Sahid Nasralla,
SLAJ President.

The release continued that after the alleged assault incident, Fayia was taken to the Kenema Police Station where journalists in the township trooped in and demanded their colleague be taken to hospital as he was in a very bad shape. He was subsequently admitted at the Kenema Government Hospital in handcuff where he was instantly put on a wheelchair as a result of the injuries he sustained. ***“On Saturday, 4th April, 2020, Fayia was whisked off to the Kenema Police Station on the pretext of only to obtain statement from him, but was held in custody afterwards. He spent the entire three-day national Coronavirus Pandemic response lockdown under detention, despite his deteriorating health condition,”*** the SLAJ Press release stated.

The SLAJ press release also stated that on 8th April, 2020, the Police charged Fayia with ‘disorderly behaviour and obstruction of security services’ and that on 9th April, 2020, Fayia appeared at the Kenema Magistrate Court No. 1, where he reportedly collapsed. SLAJ stated that Fayia was subsequently granted bail in the sum of Thirty Million Leones (Le30,000,000.00), equivalent to about US\$3,000 plus two sureties. The case was subsequently adjourned to 15th April, 2020.

Fayia Amara Fayia later informed the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) that ***“On 8th April 2020, a five-count charge was filed against me, three of which were assaults on different persons, disorderly behaviour, and obstruction of security operations.”*** *I have appeared in Court, but the Chief Justice, Desmond Babatunde Edwards, on 27th April, 2020, suspended court sittings as part of preventive measures to curtail the spread of COVID19 in the country.”*

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The Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU) backed by the SLAJ has published some guidelines on the safety and security of journalists in reporting during emergencies, including COVID-19. The two groups continue to sensitise the media about the guidelines.

Aside the Fayia incident, there are general complains about how security officers and others treat journalists. Some journalists reported that there is some kind of misunderstandings between journalists, police and sometimes military officers and local authorities across the country. Some managers of community radio stations also raised similar concerns. ***“Some journalists are sometimes***

harassed in different forms and people and authorities sometimes attempt to dictate to them about what to do,” said Kevin Lamin Lamdo, General Manager of Justice FM. *“Some guests are hostile during radio programmes when questioned about issues relating to accountability of resources relating to COVID-19,”* he added.

Economic Sustainability

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the operations of media institutions across the country. Some radio stations have adjusted their broadcasting hours, while some newspapers have reduced their frequency of publication due to inadequate revenue mobilisation. Head of News at the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), Hawa Barrie, for instance noted, *“There has been a drastic drop in advertisements.”*

Other media workers in the broadcast industry across the country shared similar sentiments concerning how the COVID-19 outbreak has negatively impacted media work generally and revenue inflows in particular. Lahai Jackson who works for Radio Mount Aureol/Cotton Tree News, the University of Sierra Leone radio station, said, *“The disease has affected the media industry in the sense that it has halted activities, events and programmes, which would have otherwise necessitated advertising revenue for media institutions.”*

“For the past two months, Corona has created serious financial difficulties for our radio. We have gone without adverts as most businesses are closed and people are not even doing funeral announcement because of restrictions on the number of people to attend burial ceremonies to avoid overcrowding and to maintain social distancing,” said Musa T. Kamara of Imperri Radio FM 93.1 in Rutile, Southern Sierra Leone.

From the North-West Region of Sierra Leone, Kambia District specifically, Abdul Coolson Kamara, Station Manager of Scarcies Radio (90.1) shared a similar experience: *“Most of the commercials, like advertisements and jingles have stopped. Our radio station’s operations have mostly collapsed because of the closure of the ‘Luma’ la business place for traders/buyers from Guinea and Sierra Leone where the radio is located, because of the COVID-19 restrictions. The ‘Luma’ is the only economic activity in the township.”*

The COVID-19 situation has also led to downsizing and non-payment of salaries of staff in some media houses. This has become necessary because some of the stations are not able to raise the needed revenue to maintain all staff. Mamoud Marah, Station Manager of Shalom Radio Kabala in the Koinadugu district, noted,

“There has been redundancy and no payment of staff. That is because the radio stations depend on the daily revenues collected for its operations. The outbreak of the COVID-19 has stopped all major partners from continuing their operations leaving the radio handicapped.”
“The COVID 19 has increased the running cost of the radio. Sending reporters out for interviews and outreach programmes need huge financial support to meet that need. Transportation has become expensive to move staff from one location to another,” he added.

The Station Manager of Radio Bintumani in Northern Sierra Leone, Steven B. Mansaray, corroborated Marah’s statement: *“The business environment has been slow and because of the low level of income, the size of the staff has been reduced.”*

Some radio station officials have also highlighted the impact of the situation on the sustainability of radio stations. The Station Manager of Radio Gbonkolenken in the Tonkolili district, Saidu Bah, said:

“We are unable to raise the necessary resources to manage the radio station. We are basically feeding on ‘handouts’ from few institution.” If the COVID-19 continues and economic hardship persists, the radio station will go out of business,” he added.

Dauda Chernor Jalloh of Galaxy FM, Lungi, Port Loko district, corroborated, ***“Revenue generation is a major challenge for most if not all media institutions.”*** He added, ***“The current trend is not encouraging. It has the tendency to wreck the operations of media houses.”***

Newspapers have not been spared in the economic impact of the COVID-19 on the mediascape in Sierra Leone. The Chairman of the Guild of Newspaper Editors, Donald Theo Harding, noted as follows: ***“There is less employment in media and sales have also dropped. Revenue have reduced and the situation is challenging.”*** ***“Newspaper owners and proprietors are feeling the brunt of COVID-19,”*** he added.

The Managing Editor of Freetown-based News 24 newspaper, Lansana Fofanah, shared the specific example of his newspaper:

“The outbreak of Coronavirus has greatly affected News 24. Firstly, business like adverts have not been forth coming and even when they do, clients normally delay payment due to slow turnout. Secondly, News 24 was unable to run key adverts that were slated to be printed due to previous lockdowns and even when we reproduced them, they were not honored because we didn’t publish based on work order. The imposition of curfew has greatly affected our production staff as they find it hard to meet the distribution deadline to vendors.”

Stanley Bangura, Proprietor and Managing Editor of the Provincial Times Newspapers in Bombali district, Northern Sierra Leone, one of the few newspapers, published outside the capital Freetown, had this to say about the situation, ***“The national and inter-district lockdowns greatly affected our publications ... Vehicles are not coming to our district and we are unable to print the newspaper. That is affecting the circulation of the newspaper since there is a halt in the production of the newspaper,”*** he added.

For a newspaper that started operations in January 2020, Freetown based Modern Series newspaper, the impact of COVID-19 on their operations has been massive, resulting in redundancy and non-payment of salaries. Ibrahim Tarawallie, the Editor of the newspaper recounted how the situation has impacted the running of the newspaper which they started publishing about three months to start of COVID-19 in the country. ***“We depend mainly on adverts to survive. We’ve not been able to get enough adverts to publish on a daily basis or even pay salaries.”*** He added,

“We are currently managing to publish twice a week from the little we are receiving from Mercury International [a sports betting company] and Africell [a telecommunications service provider] ... We were forced to ask reporters to stay home because we cannot pay them.” He also pointed out that: ***“... printing materials have also gone up because those selling claim that they cannot get new stock because of flight restriction and they want to ensure that they survived.”***

In the case of the Education Microscope Newspaper, they have had to re-strategise by changing the content to meet the needs of prospective readers. The Editor of the newspaper, Abdul Malik Bangura, said ,

“My Newspaper is produced for pupils who go to school. We have a regular circulation to most secondary schools and also get student views in poetry and essays published in our editions. We no longer publish students’ views, past WAEC questions and circulate to schools. Because of the indefinite closure of schools due to COVID-19 pandemic, we have changed our normal contents from publishing students’ views to going now on hard news stories.”

The economic impact of the pandemic on the media in Sierra Leone was summed up by the SLAJ President, Sahid Ahmed Nasralla, in his 2020 World Press Freedom Day statement, "Another downside is the economy of the media or rather media poverty which has been made even worse by COVID-19. Businesses have closed down and advertisement is not forthcoming. Prices of printing materials for newspapers, for example, have not only gone up but they are in short supply because of the COVID-19 restrictions locally and internationally ... Consequently, many newspapers have closed down. Radio stations are struggling and scaling down broadcast time. The publishers and Station Managers are crying. Vendors are crying. The reporters are crying. The support staff are crying."

Media Support

There were few public institutions/agencies supporting the media to better carry out their work. SLAJ has been engaging institutions to provide production and airtime support for programmes on COVID-19. ***"The SLAJ Corona Response Committee has written and submitted project proposals for capacity building and support for airtime on radio and television stations and some newspapers. We are hopeful that donors will support them,"*** said Sahid Ahmed Nasralla, President of SLAJ.

The Association has also been organising training programmes for journalists. So far, two journalists from the Sierra Leonean Broadcasting Corporation have received training on risk communication and COVID-19 from the Sierra Leone Red Cross and the BBC Media Action.

On the part of the Independent Media Commission (IMC), they have been engaging with the media on the need to ensure professional and ethical reporting on COVID-19 with specific reference to avoiding the spread of fake news. Some journalists, however, want to see more being done by the IMC. Ahmed Juana, a reporter in the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone, while commending the IMC for the public education also said, ***"We need capacity building on how to report on COVID-19. This is a new virus and we lack knowledge on how to report on it."***

As a result of SLAJ's engagements, the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC) has committed itself to providing some airtime support to radio and television stations broadcasting the Coronavirus programmes and few newspapers publishing public education programmes on COVID-19. It will also support training of journalists, presenters and disc jockeys on COVID-19. Chairman of the SLAJ-Corona Response Committee, Ransford Wright, indicated.



In June 2020, the media in Sierra Leone received support for journalists' trainings on COVID-19, reporting during emergencies, and countering fake news around COVID-19.



The NaCOVERC and SLAJ organised 'Orientation of Journalists of COVID-19' in Bo, Kenema and Makeni for journalists across the country. Also, the UNDP through the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) organised training for 180 journalists to improve their understanding to identify, check and debunk fake news on COVID-19. The training was also intended to equip them with guidelines for reporting during emergencies. Umu H. Bakarr one of the participants said:

"The training came at the right time. The cases of COVID-19 are increasing and we as journalists need to provide the public with the correct messages ... But we cannot provide the correct messaging if we are not properly informed." "The training has prepared us to effectively do our work on educating the public about COVID-19," she added.

The European Union and the SLAJ signed an agreement for support to nationwide radio and television programmes specifically aimed at addressing fake news and misinformation around COVID-19 circulating on social media and messaging platforms. The support is also intended to increase social media literacy and responsible communication amongst the public.

The BBC Media Action has also been supporting broadcast media institutions on programming on COVID-19. The organisation has over the years been supporting media development in the country.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through the dissemination of information across various platforms. The media have generally been supportive in providing the public with information and education about COVID-19. However, media owners and managers continue to raise concerns about difficulties in running their institutions amidst COVID-19. Some media institutions have started rotational work schedules to cope with the lack of resources to pay staff. The situation has left media institutions worried about their sustainability during the outbreak of COVID-19 and beyond.

SLAJ was able to secure some support for training of journalists and some financial support for radio and television stations and newspapers for broadcasting and publishing contents on COVID-19. This is, however, not enough given the enormity of the economic impact on the media industry.

It is, therefore, recommended that the government of Sierra Leone put in place financial relief packages to support the media in the country in these trying times.