



# Media and COVID-19 in West Africa Nigeria



in partnership with



## Introduction

Across the world, media houses have suffered as the economic consequences caused by COVID-19 have ravaged budgets and revenues. Unfortunately, government-enforced mitigation efforts are sometimes linked to press freedom violations. Nigeria's media has suffered dramatically, though its role in providing the news, information and resources the public needs to know has remained as critical as ever, especially during these COVID-19 times.

The short and long term impact of the disease on the mediascape across West Africa needs critical examination to help ensure there is a sustainable future for the fourth estate. The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) is collaborating with its national partner organisations in the respective countries in the region to produce reports that highlight the effects of the pandemic and other key emerging issues on media operations and viability. These reports focus on five major factors that could ultimately impinge on the survival and sustainability of media institutions, professional journalism practice, and freedom of expression in the region. These factors are (1) availability and accessibility of information; (2) legal and policy context; (3) safety of journalists; (4) economic sustainability; and (5) media support. 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 the situation in Nigeria. Nigeria recorded its first case of COVID-19 on February 28, a month after the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a public health emergency of international concern. To control and combat the spread of COVID-19, Nigeria closed its borders early on, enforced lockdowns and introduced new legislation aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19. These measures significantly impacted the media. This brief examines Nigeria's situation from March to June 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 International Press Centre (IPC), the national partner organisation of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA).

## Availability & Accessibility of Information



In Nigeria, COVID-19 information such as incidents rates, government policies, actions, resources and constraints about the disease is available on various public and private institutions' platforms and websites. The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (Twitter: @DigiCommsNG) coordinates and oversees Nigeria's multi-sectoral inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The website, <https://statehouse.gov.ng/COVID19/>, provides a wide range of information on COVID-19. Other local and central government websites and social media handles also offer updated information. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) shows confirmed cases, active cases, discharged cases, deaths and samples tested by states and highlights on its website, <https://COVID19.ncdc.gov.ng/>. Information is also available via live broadcasts and addresses by the President and other state officials, including Health Commissioners. Information from the live broadcasts is also disseminated via social media.

Legacy media throughout the country is also very instrumental in sharing COVID-19-related information. This is often done through news stations' websites, TV stations and radio stations such as Channels TV, TVC, LTV, AIT, Raypower and Metro FM, among others.

While briefings are crucial throughout the pandemic, journalists struggle with delays in accessing official data. This is partly attributable to the fact that public officials do not respond in time for interviews and clarifications, which make it challenging to meet production deadlines or report beyond what the government says. There have been concerns about the hoarding of information by some officials, as well as limited access to attending press briefings. For instance, Yakubu Salisu of Metro Daily in Kano State notes, *"It is very difficult to reach the head of the team [the taskforce], as he hardly answers calls or replies [to] text messages."*

Closely linked to the above is the issue of journalists not being able to do critical, fact-checked reports beyond the information provided by officialdom at press briefings. The Editor of *ThisDay* newspaper, Bolaji Adebisi, contends that the media have been cautious and discreet in its reporting by relying on official data in order not to create fear and panic amongst the populace. *"I would like to see more individual investigations. The media have been more cautious, sticking to information provided by the relevant agencies of government,"* Adebisi said.

Publisher of Premium Times, Dapo Olorunoye, also notes that the media is curtailed from embarking on rigorous reporting by having to rely on *"official narratives of the COVID-19 progression."* Blessing Oladunjoye from BoNews interpretes the inability of journalists to get information beyond what is shared at the press briefings as a restriction in accessing information about COVID-19. Oladunjoye contends that what the government wants the public to know is all that is broadcast during the press briefing on a daily basis at national and sub-national levels.

*"At a time, I wanted to do a fact-checking story on a false report that people died in Lagos after taking COVID-19 vaccine. I couldn't get any resource person after various attempts, but was told that whatever the Commissioner for health in Lagos State said should be sufficient for the story. The story was later produced without the input of any resource person from NCDC or Ministry of Health, I depended on data, published reports and statements that have been issued before."*

Some journalists are of the view that there are incidents of self-censorship. They attribute this to the need to adhere to the social responsibility of preventing panic among citizens, as well as the fear of government crackdown. For journalist Susan Serekara-Nwikhana of The Tide Newspaper, this is a continuation of the status quo, where journalists are compelled to report favourably of the government, or risk dismal. *"Government journalists are being censored always, as we are made to report only what is favourable to the government. Any act contrary leads to dismissal and a case study was that of my General Manager who was sacked for acting timely and not waiting for Government's approval."*

Another journalist, Blessing Oladunjoye of BoNews, recounts her experience as follows:

*"Following my experience with the inability to get a resource person while I was doing a fact-checking report on the pandemic, I became more careful on what to write or not. I was at a training organised by NHVMAS [New HIV Vaccine and Microbicide Advocacy Society (formerly Nigeria HIV Vaccine and Microbicides Advocacy Group)] where a staff of NCDC, not the DG, as would have been expected, engaged the journalists. After the story was published and shared with the organisers, they had to ask the NCDC for approval before sharing it. I'm certain if NCDC had said no, I would have been asked to pull that down. The specific information I got was that – 'the NCDC corporate comms has approved the story.'"*

Moving around to report stories also proved difficult for journalists especially in March, during the lockdown. Journalists were told they would need to carry a valid identity card to move around in the two southwestern states of Lagos and Ogun, as well as in the capital Abuja. Authorities suspended 92 journalists' access to the presidential villa on March 24 as part of public health restrictions on

assembly, according to a memo. Sixteen journalists retained access. This raised concerns on how reporters could report on the government's response to the coronavirus, as government briefings were often held there.

Another issue of concern that hinders journalists' movement to get access to news stories beyond the press briefings is the challenge of getting the requisite protective kits in order to go on their respective assignments. The Editor of Daily Trust, Hamza Idris, notes, *"... there's no adequate protection and support for the pressmen to have first-hand information. Many journalists are as vulnerable as other Nigerians. They don't have specialised knowledge on covering pandemics such as the COVID-19."*

The General Manager of Raypower (106.5) FM in Lagos, Yetunde Iwuoha, also acknowledges that for the media to go beyond depending on NCDC statistics and updates from the Presidential Task Force, then journalists need to be provided with protection kits to further aid their assignments.

*"I would love to see media operatives properly kitted donning protective gears against the daily risk posed by the fast-spreading virus. I got a report that some journalists were exposed to the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of University College Hospital (UCH) in an interview, who later turned out to be positive. Lack of protective kits remains an impediment for the media to thoroughly come up with news behind the scene."*

Violations against the media have also proven to be a barrier to accessing COVID-19 information. The International Press Centre has, for instance, documented not less than 27 press freedom violations prohibiting access to relevant COVID-19 information during the lockdown period. These violations, directly and indirectly, created a barrier to accessing relevant COVID-19 information.

Power supply issues, access to equipment, data and poor networks continue to create additional challenges for reporters covering the pandemic. Some journalists say they have had to use their own devices and pay for their own data and calling credits in order to get work done. Some media houses were not set up to allow for working from home during lockdowns. For those who could work from home, poor internet and power supply challenges made it more difficult to file stories and follow online meetings. Some journalists also face challenges in conducting in-person interviews and keeping social distance due to the fact that they lack the right equipment. As Raheem Akigbolu, correspondent of ThisDay, says *"Technology is not cheap and Nigerian media practitioners are not well remunerated. Nigeria journalists still rely on obsolete devices. In a country where only a few senior editors can afford new phones, one can imagine the quality of their work. Every day, technology trends change, consumers, including journalists, are also expected to change."*

## Legal & Policy Context

Following the first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the Federal Government put in place a number of measures to contain the spread of the virus. On 29 March 2020, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, ordered the halt of all movements in Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) for an initial period of 14 days. On April 13, 2020, the lockdown was extended by two weeks.



Some of the specific measures announced by the government included

1. Cessation of all movements in Lagos, FCT Abuja and Ogun state which took effect from Monday 30th of March 2020 with everyone instructed to stay indoors.
2. Closure of all business and offices in the said states with the exception of businesses involved in essential needs such as hospitals or related medical establishments, food processing, distribution and retail companies, petroleum distribution and retail entities, power distribution companies.
3. Suspension of passenger aircraft, both commercial and private jets.

The movement restrictions largely affected the work of media institutions and their reporters. The curfews and lockdowns made it difficult for journalists to go and report from anywhere at any time. According to a journalist with The Tide Newspaper, Susan Serekara-Nwikhana, *"The new COVID-19 laws are not media-friendly as they do not have any reservations for journalists or media work, so they hinder media work to a great extent."* Chinedu Echianu of Vision FM, 92.1, also noted that at the peak of the lockdown, journalists were restricted from carrying out their responsibilities and this *"had to do with law enforcement agencies who were not properly informed that journalists were a part of essential services and, therefore, exempted from the lockdown restrictions."*

Unfortunately, a number of assaults against journalists and other media workers were recorded as a result of state security officers **denying them access** to some communities and assaulting others for **taking pictures, making enquiries** or **covering** lockdown and social distancing observance, **among others**. One journalist was reportedly sentenced by a mobile court in Abuja for filming a violent operation by the COVID-19 Joint Task Force. Some institutional properties, such as a vehicle and camera, got damaged by security officers in the process. Thus, the curfew and lockdown restrictions have impacted news coverage about COVID-19 and the general operations of media organisations.



Also, as part of the measures, the Presidency reduced the number of journalists accredited to cover press conferences. As a result, many journalists are unable to get access to ask critical questions and get answers at the press briefings.

Some states have also used the COVID-19 outbreak to pass laws which criminalise giving false information. With the Kano State Public Health Infectious Diseases Regulations 2020, for example, "the Governor is empowered to sanction and prosecute any individual or organisation perceived to be spreading fake news about the pandemic in the State," notes Nasiru Yusuf Ibrahim of Abubakar Rimi Television (ARTV).

There are also fears that, pending Bills such as the National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill, the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and other Related Offences Bill, the Infectious Diseases Bill 2020 and the Nigerian Emergency Health Bill, 2020, if passed within the COVID-19 outbreak period could be abused to limit the work of the media around coverage of the pandemic and other issues and even force some media workers to practice self-censorship. This is because a breach of any of these Bills when passed into law could result in fines, imprisonment of up to three years or even life imprisonment and death penalty in the case of the 'Hate Speech' Bill. Meanwhile, Mohammed Sani Musa, a senator from Niger State who was sponsoring the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, has said that false information related to the Coronavirus was an example of the need for the legislation.

## Safety of Journalists

From March until June 2020, several press freedom violations have been reported in Nigeria in the form of arrests, attacks, dismissals and intimidation for coverage of COVID-19 related issues. While some journalists noted that their States were relatively safer for the media to operate, overall, there were a number of concerning incidents. Some reported problems with security agencies during the lockdown period due to restrictions of movement, though their work was essential.

According to the IPC, at least 27 press freedom violations prohibiting access to relevant COVID-19 information were recorded during the lockdown period alone. Some of the assaults resulted in the destruction of equipment by state security agents. These violations, directly and indirectly, created a barrier to accessing relevant COVID-19 information.

Early on in the pandemic, General Manager of The Tide Newspaper, Vincent Ake, was reportedly dismissed from his role. His crime was that one of his papers reported on the first case of COVID-19 recorded in Rivers State without getting approval from the government before publishing the news.

Reacting to the incidents of violations, the Publisher of Premium Times, Dapo Olorunyomi, says, the *"typical lack of discretion and general over-reach in mission objective that bothers on abusing the freedom of journalists has been unhelpful to the media, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak."*

The assaults against journalists and other media workers continued even after the lockdown restrictions were lifted. In the month of May, for instance, a reporter was [kidnapped](#) by unknown gunmen, though she was later released. Another reporter was [suspended](#) indefinitely following her post on Facebook appealing to a Governor's media aide to make a case to the Governor on behalf of the workers in the government-owned radio and television stations who were yet to be paid their February, March, and April salaries. In another incident, two journalists were also [arrested](#) along with other essential workers for allegedly breaking curfew rules.

In June, the IPC documented two press freedom violations. The first was the detention of Saint Meinpamo Onitsha of Naija Live TV by Nigeria's Department of State Services in relation to his report on the alleged collapse of a COVID-19 isolation centre in Kogi State. In the other incident, a reporter with Eastern Lead Express Newspaper, Ike Jacobs-Nwosu, was attacked after being accused of misquoting a legislator in his publication.

Aside from these violations, another issue that impacted and continues to impact the work of journalists and other media workers is the health risks they face when reporting about COVID-19, especially from infected areas with limited protective measures. *"Lack of protective kits remains an impediment for the media to thoroughly come up with news behind the scene,"* General Manager of Raypower 106.5FM, Lagos, Yetunde Iwuoha noted. *For many journalists and media workers, their media organisations only provide facilities for handwashing and hand sanitising protocols. A number of them do not have access to Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs) to safely report. In some instances, some journalists provide their own gear or rely on benefactors."*

## Economic Sustainability

COVID-19 continues to ravage economies and businesses across the globe, with thousands of jobs losses across the media sector. Nigerian media houses are heavily impacted. At the initial phase of the pandemic, because of the novel nature of the crisis, almost all media houses were not prepared for it and its resultant effects. It was, therefore, difficult to tell or measure the impact on the viability

of media institutions and the job security of journalists at the onset of the crisis.

However, a month or two after the outbreak in the country, the media have been seriously hit economically, to the point of threatening the survival of some media houses. The situation has forced some media organisations to take drastic measures in order to remain in business. Most of the measures adopted are, however, detrimental to the survival and wellbeing of media workers. Staff have been laid off, some have had their salaries cut or been put on leave without pay. The situation is creating apprehension for staff in the media industry as dismissals are on-going to try to save organisations and cut costs. According to [MediacareerNG](#), some media organisations such as ***"The Punch Newspaper, Television Continental (TVC), AIM Group (owners of Nigeria Info, Cool FM, Wazobia and Arewa radio), and The Nation Newspapers have communicated their decisions and plans to their staff"*** most of which include the aforementioned measures.

According to [Nairametrics](#), The Nation newspaper, for instance, has laid off over 100 out of about 500 workers (across Nigeria). The newspaper has also slashed salaries of everyone earning over N60,000 (US\$155) by 50 per cent. Other newspapers have reduced the pages of their newspaper from over 40 and 60+ to 32 pages due to a rapid drop in readership as a result of the lockdown. For The Tide Newspaper, for instance, Susan Serekara-Nwikhana who is with the newspaper indicates that ***"due to low patronage from customers in terms of advertorials, [The Tide Newspaper] could no longer publish its hard copy, except for the online publication."*** Jude Aguguo Owuamanam from Daily Trust, Owerri, also says ***"You can imagine the revenue loss. No advert, No copy sales."***

Indeed, many journalists admit the pandemic has greatly affected the revenue of most media houses both print and broadcast. A journalist with Edo Broadcasting Service, Benin City, Flora Basse, explains the challenging situation in these words, ***"The media depends on other sectors, and when the sectors are closed down, they do not need adverts, and that is where the income of the media is. A lot of journalists have certainly lost their jobs [in] this period. The time to consider a different option for funding of the media is ideal now"***.

However, some journalists see the challenges posed by the pandemic as an opportunity to better digitise and grow audiences. According to Yakubu Salisu of Metro Daily, ***"The media is moving towards an increasingly digital, mobile, and social media environment. The media is giving more focus to its digital audience. More and more people get news via digital media, they increasingly access news via mobile devices (especially smartphones), and rely on social media and other intermediaries in terms of how they access and find news."*** He, however, notes, ***"This new trend poses a challenge of downsizing of staff strength."*** The other challenge it comes with is the fact that, as noted by Susan Serekara-Nwikhana from The Tide Newspaper, some media workers have issues using computers to work having relied on writing out their copy by hand for several years.

The looming recession has created a different kind of torture for the media industry - not like the imprisonment, exile, torture and other violations suffered at the hands of governments and political office holders - but the Coronavirus pandemic. Although the industry had been battling with several hurdles before the advent of Coronavirus, the pandemic is threatening its survival amid other uncertainties including the pandemic itself, depleted funds due to the lockdown across major cities, loss of revenue due to lower ad sales, job losses, and salaries slashes, among others.

Looking at the economic difficulties confronting the media across the country, some have called for some relief package from the government. The Chief Executive Officer of Women FM, Lagos, Toun Sonaiya, laments that media houses in Nigeria have not received any government support to cope with the economic impact of COVID-19. "The media industry in the western world, though affected,

were provided a lifeline by their various governments through intervention measures, but the media industry in Nigeria, on the other hand, was left in the mud with most private-owned media vulnerable and badly hit."

## Media Support

Early on in the pandemic, Nigeria's Information and Culture Minister, Lai Mohammed, said journalists reporting events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic were at risk of contracting the virus as much as health workers. Mohammed also said discussions would be raised at the Task Force meeting for compensation of journalists by their employers. The Kano State Government said it would initiate palliative measures for media practitioners to enable them to discharge their duties in the event of a lockdown.

The media in the country benefited from a number of workshops and webinars which were organised to support journalists reporting on the pandemic. Specifically, there was a workshop by the WHO on countering the spread of misinformation, and ActionAid Nigeria also organised training for journalists on humanitarian crisis reporting. Reporters in Kano also had a workshop on ethical journalism and best practices.



On World Press Freedom Day, some senior media practitioners shared their views during a twitter chat about the economic impact of COVID-19 on the media industry, advocating for self-innovation and more sustainable revenue models. The Chief Executive Officer of Women FM, Lagos, Toun Sonaiya, for instance, encouraged media houses in Nigeria to consider boosting income by providing subscription-based services while charging amounts that their audiences could afford. ***"Financing good journalism will have to rely on memberships, subscriptions and donations. Post COVID-19 media business will not be business as usual. You either adapt or die. I believe this time calls for global solidarity for media collaboration,"*** she said.

The Executive Director of International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), Dayo Aiyetan wanted to see the media become more financially independent from the government, warning that government funding of the media has the danger of making the media beholden to the government. He, therefore, encouraged the media to explore opportunities available even in the midst of the pandemic, ***"Media houses must see new opportunities in the new reporting that the pandemic has thrown up. Misinformation is huge. Data is a big thing now. There are creative things media houses can do to produce unique content that would stand them out."***

## Conclusion

Generally, the relevant authorities in Nigeria have, to a large extent, been proactive with press briefings and national addresses since the outbreak of the pandemic. However, reporters have realised that they are often unable to access information beyond what is said in the briefings. Officials sometimes delay in responding to, or are totally unresponsive to information requests. This situation affects the media's ability to do critical and fact-checked reporting to provide information beyond what is presented at the press briefings. Other issues that affect the media's access to information on COVID-19 included the lockdown restrictions announced to contain the spread of the virus; self-censorship by some journalists; the lack of appropriate PPEs for coverage of isolation centres or infected areas; and press violations.

The economic impact of the pandemic on media houses threatens the future of the industry, which has been and will be crucial to continuing to educate and inform the public on this pandemic and hold authorities accountable over their role in halting the spread and other issues. Below is a summary of the key challenges the media in Nigeria have faced in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1) Delayed information or lack of access to an official for interviews
- 2) Attacks on the media, including destruction of equipment and other properties
- 3) Lack of PPEs to report safely
- 4) Job losses and salary cuts

While some outlets have found new ways to work and reach audiences, with the pandemic forcing them to digitise, there is a need to support 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.

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

- 1) Adopt policies urging officials at all levels to proactively disclose information to the media
- 2) Call on law enforcement officers to exercise restraints towards the media in their line of duty
- 3) Provide media professionals with adequate PPEs
- 4) Put in place financial relief packages for the media.

We also encourage the media to leverage the opportunities offered by technology to improve their sustainability prospects during the COVID-19 period and beyond.