

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Digitalization of the Namibian Media



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Abstract It took a pandemic to fast-track the reorganization of productive forces in the Namibian media industry and to expose their vulnerability in digital capitalism. Predominant to this vulnerability has been the realization among media workers that they are “not conditions of production” but only their labour is. A combination of digitalization and the onset of the novel Coronavirus ‘unsettled’ the small but relatively “stable” media industry operating in a neoliberal political and economic environment since the birth of independent Namibia in 1990. This chapter examines how COVID-19 fast-tracked the restructuring process of the Namibian media. It starts by evaluating the impact of neoliberal media restructuring (digitalization) of the Namibian media before scrutinizing how the pandemic has fast-tracked this process. While much of the emerging work on COVID-19 tends to prioritize media discourses, largely confined to COVID-19-related media messages by dominant political and societal sources, this study probes the practical restructuring of the industry itself as the result of the pandemic. The study is grounded in critical perspectives drawing from works of contemporary critical media and communication theorists.

Keywords Pandemic · COVID-19 · Digitalization · Media restructuring · Marxism · Namibia · Digital capitalism

Introduction

The novel Coronavirus landed a devastating blow to pillars on which neoliberalism is constructed and thereby immensely reversed their “gains” made over the past four decades (Saad-Filho 2020). The pandemic, the first in the “information age”, inflicted heavy setbacks on social and economic lives and wrecked operations of countless social institutions, including the media. Its blow on the media finds this

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institution under severe pressure from the restructuring processes triggered by the transformations in global capitalism.

While Namibian media, like many others in the developing world, had been under structural changes during the past few years resulting from digitalization, it needed a huge jolt from the novel COVID-19 to fast-track this restructuring process. Thus, a combination of digitalization and the impact of the pandemic “unsettled” the small but relatively “stable” media operating in a neoliberal setting since the “decolonization” of Namibia in 1990.

Being a critical institution, the media apart from profit making like other business undertakings, are also “special businesses effected with public interest” to borrow a phrase from Melody (1997, p. 11). This dichotomous character is manifested by having both economical and political (ideological) dimensions, or as Manfred Knoche (2019, p. 289) notes having both “physical and intangible specificity, which fulfils a fundamental role in the economy and political ideology”. Put differently, while media make profit, they do also provide a public interest function, in that they “manufacture” and disseminate information the citizens rely on to make informed decisions about their lives in societies (Murdock and Golding 1979; Fuchs 2018, pp. 277–278; Mosco 2009). This is a fundamental role performed by the media.

However, the onset of COVID-19 in the media sought to obliterate both these dimensions on which the role of the media is molded. For instance, the pandemic inadvertently contributed to the “destruction” of the media’s core and long-standing advertising and circulation-based business model (Fray 2020). This “destruction” resulted initially from the broader global restructuring process of the neoliberal capitalist order which impacted on the media as well, in the first place. At the same time, the pandemic significantly weakened or diminished the public interest role of the media, to which Sir Alex S. Jones (2009) refers to as the “iron core” of journalism (or the media).

Drawing from what has just been denoted, both the pandemic and the process of digitalization impacted on the functioning of the media in both their composition and their roles in various ways. This is reflected in terms of the reduction of income derived from advertisement and circulation, which in most cases led to staff lay-offs, salary cuts and the scaling down of operations. This in turn negatively affected the core responsibility of the media (Benton 2020). The “iron core” covers a broad area that comprises high-quality public interest journalism (including investigative work) critical to the functioning of democracy (ibid.). It encompasses issues that impact on democracy and on which the electorates need to be informed.

The chapter starts with an assessment of the impact of neoliberal media restructuring (digitalization) set off by the transformation in global capitalism of the media. It then scrutinizes how the pandemic fast-tracked this process. More particularly, this assessment centres on the reorganization of the capitalist mode of production.

The work is grounded in theoretical perspectives drawing from contemporary Marxist media and communication scholars. It traces the media restructuring processes within the broader transformation of the capitalist mode of production,

resulting from the endemic crises associated with capitalism. Hence, context was set with the objective of deepening the understanding as to what led to the restructuring of the media in the first place.

In addition, very few emerging studies in Africa that seek to examine this pandemic are grounded in critical perspectives. Moreover, there is hardly significant work being done to investigate the impact of the pandemic on digitalization of the African media. The present chapter seeks to fill this gap, while encouraging critical media research in digital capitalism in Africa in general.

Much of the data used in the chapter is derived from the analysis of the documents (studies and reports), but more particularly newspaper reports/articles. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many societies to a standstill, evidenced by lockdowns and closure of many economic and social activities. But, despite this negative impact, the media remained the main source of information for many about what was taking place. Newspapers have remained an important resource of research not only in the arts, social sciences and humanities, but across various other subject areas. They had provided accurate, reliable and timely information on a variety of subjects (Suciu 2018), including public health issues (see Meyer 2018; Shih et al. 2011). Those who have conducted studies during the COVID-19 can attest to this reality. Below we provide a birds' view of the impact of COVID-19 on society and its institutions in the course of 2020.

Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Brief Overview

The pandemic unleashed a devastating effect on nations and their institutions. It triggered the deepest and sharpest economic contraction in the history of capitalism, which reversed the gains of globalization and thereby shuttered the foundation of neoliberalism to its core (Saad-Filho 2020). At the same time, it temporarily reversed some of the most neoliberal fiscal austerity measures. During the course of 2020, it was not surprising to hear calls from staunch neoliberals demanding state interventions with relief measures, including the bailing out of public sector and major private industries, including the air transport industry (Fuchs 2020; Hague 2020).

With regard to the media, the pandemic affected their business model, notably advertising. This was due to the reduction of advertisement spending (Gabbatt 2020). Many traditional media outlets are reliant on advertisements but they suffered major losses as circulation dwindled due to lockdowns and curfews. In addition, the consolidation of online platform giants like Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft, the infamous GAFAM (De Rosnay and Musiani 2020, p. 622) led to a reduction in advertisement revenue of traditional media, because businesses diverted their advertising revenue online platforms during the pandemic.

Globally, the world witnessed the lay-off (furloughed) of thousands of media workers and reduction in salaries of media personnel. Some journalists were forced to work from home, while others became freelancers. There had been shutdowns of news media outlets, while many migrated to online platforms, resulting in more job

losses (through retrenchments) (Ntibinyane 2020; Mason 2020; Gabbatt 2020; French 2020).

Against this background, we need to understand that in general the dominant neoliberal economic policies had depleted many nations' capacities to produce basic necessities. Many nations, but more in Africa were unable to provide the necessary life-saving measures needed to fight the pandemic, in its early days. Linked to this had been the general lack of provision of satisfactory public service to all the citizens, mostly in developing nations. Alfredo Saad-Filho (2020) argues that "neoliberalism has hollowed-out, fragmented and part-privatized the health system". He goes on to say that it created a precarious and impoverished working class who are highly vulnerable, as they lack not only savings, but also proper housing, nutrition, and other basic services.

Africa has been much affected as a good number of countries could not produce the much-needed PPEs during the pandemic, not to speak of the life-saving vaccines. In addition, many people on the continent were left with a dysfunctional public health system, while some advanced health systems on the continent, wherever they are available, can only be afforded by a small middle class (Ntibinyane 2020).

The Genesis of Ongoing Media Restructuring

Before outlining the dynamics of the Namibian media restructuring process that has come to be fast-tracked by the pandemic, it is important to first appreciate the context that explains media restructuring globally. The global capitalist restructuring process is the context, while the critical political economy serves as the guiding theoretical framework informing this discussion.

The mistake neoliberal enthusiasts make is to ascribe the current "transformations" in the media industry to "rapid economic, technological and political changes" (Remmert 2019), without explaining how these "changes" have come about. No effort is made to link these transformations to the broader global transformations in the capitalist economy.

To understand the advent of change and transformation of media in society, the starting point must be based on the argument that the capitalist mode of production has been the primary driving force behind the media companies' strategic actions and therefore the force behind their structural transformation. As the dominant mode of production, capitalism encompasses social formations that depict its characteristics. These include the forms of production, consumption and distribution as well as the entire mode of life pursuit by members of society. Therefore, capitalism influences the activities of the dominant agents and core institutions in society and thereby accounts for their entire "behaviour" (Remmert 2019, p. 288).

In addition, capitalism has been through incessant transformations as a result of imminent crises it is disposed to. But capitalism at the same time is resilient to these crises, as it has been overcoming them over the centuries. David Harvey (2020) argues that capitalism requires processes of expansion (acceleration, globalization,

and financialization) as strategies of temporal, spatial and spatio-temporal fixes that aim to temporarily overcome its inherent crisis tendency. It reaches “spatial and temporal limits”, which it needs to overcome in order to avoid crises related to accumulation. The “spatio-temporal fix” is a “metaphor for a particular kind of solution to capitalist crisis through temporal deferral and geographical expansion” (Harvey 2020, p. 115).

Manfred Knoche (2019, p. 290) tells us that the “crisis is an enduring and essential element of capitalist production, as crisis and change conditioned each other in a permanent process”. In fact, the continuation and thriving of capitalism are ascribed to or facilitated by overcoming crises. By overcoming the persistent and ongoing crises capitalism invents new ways of capital accumulation and value creation.

The development of new technologies (including digitalization) is embedded in the search for spatio-temporal fixes to capitalism’s immanent crisis tendencies. In fact, the solving of crises led to various ‘forms’ of capitalism. This can attest to the different ‘forms’ (or layers) of capitalism over the centuries, culminating in industrial capitalism. The latter gave way to information capitalism—information and technology. Digital capitalism was introduced to solve crises experienced with financial capitalism that reached its peak during the 2008 financial crisis. Digital capitalism is therefore the latest ‘form’ of capitalism.

Technology and the Process of Digitalization

To understand the process of digitalization, let us first examine the concept of technology to see how its role in capitalism has been conceptualized. The development of technology in society comes from the needs of society, or at least the needs of the dominant strata of society (Holzer 2017, p. 692). Thus, as Horst Holzer argues, technologies do not come into existence arbitrarily, but their development is stimulated by economic, political and ideological interests, strategies and agendas. Technological advances can lead to improved production and therefore improved quality of life. However, it can also lead to alienation since it can allow the appropriation of human work by capital, which leads to an increase in the prevailing relations of domination (De Rivera 2020, p. 730).

For instance, Karl Marx (1990/1867) acknowledges that technology is a “fixed capital” and is therefore a means of production, of which its ownership defines power relationships in capitalist society. This is the contradictory nature of technology, which he hints on when arguing that while technology advances “new potentials of co-operation and welfare for all”, it also creates domination and exploitation at the same time. He notes that “every development of new productive forces is at the same time a weapon against the workers” (see Fuchs 2018, p. 524). To Karl Marx capitalism is behind profit and therefore, treats workers and machines that substitute workers as a means to maximize profits.

Despite, this critique, Karl Marx acknowledges that “technology can be appropriated and transformed” (Fuchs 2018, p. 256). In *Grundrisse*, he acknowledges the critical roles knowledge and communication can play in increasing productivity in capitalism. He anticipated the emergence of informational capitalism or digital capitalism or cognitive capitalism. Boes and Kämpf (2012; Knoche 2019, p. 295) refer to digital capitalism as the “informatisation of the productive forces”. It is a restructuration process of production and labour based on the use of microelectronics and the Internet (Sauer 2006, p. 89 cited in Knoche 2019, 295).

The concept of digital capitalism became popular in the 1990s when it came to accentuate the role of digital technologies in the success of economic globalization (De Rivera 2020, p. 725). It also represents a new epoch in which cyberspace has come to shape the political economy (Schiller 2000; De Rivera 2020, p. 725). Digital capitalism must be understood beyond the production of digital products (commodities) crucial infrastructure provided major technology companies (Fuchs 2020, p. 71). These infrastructure are provided by major technology oligopolies such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM) (De Rivera 2020).

GAFAM positioned themselves as “natural monopolies” or “public utilities” that provide “informational infrastructure”. The infrastructure has enabled GAFAM new regimes of accumulation and social control. Google, for instance, provides storage systems used by the public and private systems (De Rivera 2020, p. 727).

Namibia Media Structure: An Overview

Namibia has a fairly pluralistic media but, they lack in diversity. In the media policy parlance (discourse), plurality refers to many media outlets while diversity means different. For instance, a country may have many radio stations and restrict them to the commercial in orientation. Diversity on the other hand refers to a media policy objective that seeks to ensure and promote various media interests: commercial, community, religion, students and workers (see Freedman 2008). South Africa, for instance, has a media diversity legislation and a media diversity fund run by a Media Development and Diversity Agency that promotes media diversity in the country (Republic of South Africa 2002).

Ownership in the sector is informed by the “mixed economy” policy of the government. The media system comprises public and private (community and commercial) media sub-structures in line with the “mixed economy” policy. The guiding philosophical outlook of the media is overwhelmingly “liberal” (McQuail 2005; Nordenstreng, 2007), while an element of the social responsibility perspective is discernible as well, more particularly among the public and the “independent” press.

Since 1990, the Namibian government sought to promote a developmental media agenda through its first information policy of the early 1990s, where it sought to persuade the media into developmental objectives, in addition to democratization of society (Heuva 2010a). However, the private media had been reluctant to embrace

the developmental commitment and preferred the Western liberal stance. Despite this, some private media have undertaken development-oriented projects in society, but more specifically from the social responsibility perspective (investing in the community), and not from the media development agenda.

The state–media relations have generally remained cordial although antagonistic at times. The country’s constitution guarantees basic human rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression and media freedom. Interestingly, the state has taken close to 30 years to adopt access to information legislation, while it was quick to adopt a clause in its communication legislation that authorizes state surveillance (Heuva 2012, 2017). Nevertheless, Namibia is the birthplace of the “World Press Freedom Day” and the “Windhoek Declaration”, which marked its 30th anniversary in 2021 and its media was rated as the “freest” on the African continent for a number of years.

The most testing time for state–media conflict was the first 10–15 years after the independence of the country (Posluns 2002/2003). This is perhaps, because the two institutions weighed each other’s position viz-a-viz their roles in the new society. Noteworthy is that it was during this phase and only time that a journalist, Hannes Smith, was sent to prison for refusing to reveal his source of information. Shortly after, the State, for the first time, banned buying and advertising through the *Windhoek Observer*, for arguably “embarrassing” the State with remarks published by the editor about the visiting Zimbabwean head of State to Namibia. This was to be followed a few years later by a decade-long advertising boycott on the Namibian newspaper due to its “critical and unpatriotic” reporting on State matters (Blaauw and Letholo 2009, p. 358; Mwilima 2008).

For a country of about 2.4 million people, the media landscape is slightly overcrowded (Remmert 2019, p. 14). The neoliberal dispensation created a burgeoning private media entity that competes fairly with the established State media. In addition, there have been many emerging media entrepreneurs who have been competing for audience in this limited space. By 2019, Namibia had 30 radio stations, 10 state-owned, nine commercial and 11 community stations. Radio provides about 97.5%. During the same period, there were five dailies, seven weeklies and four online newspapers (FES 2018, pp. 24–25). The private and commercial media companies are run on business principles and they generate income and profit.

All the state-owned media entities had been under severe financial strains due to the government’s austerity measures. The national broadcaster, Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) had been experiencing perennial financial problems since its establishment in 1991 (Heuva 2000, 2010b). This can be ascribed to the failure by the state and the corporation to design a suitable funding model. While by law the NBC is a non-profit entity, government expects it to move into a financial direction to fund its own operations. Thus, in addition, the NBC has also been reliant on advertising and television license fees.

The public-owned newspaper, *New Era*, although established as a non-profit establishment, is overwhelmingly State-funded, and relies on advertising and circulation for income. The government-owned wire services, the Namibia Press Agency (Nampa) relies on subscriptions from clients, in addition to state funding. Presently

there are discussions of a merger between the New Era Publication Corporation (NEPC) and Nampa.

The neoliberal economy opened the media sector to competition with media products from outside, more especially from South Africa. The two economies are linked due to historical developments. Namibia has a small business and manufacturing sector, as most commodities come from South Africa. Many South African companies that operate in the country serve as a major source of advertisements for local media (Tyson, 2008). Namibia's own advertising market is small due to its small population and economy (see IPPR 2019). The largest local advertisers include the State and its State-owned enterprises (parastatals).

In this locally crammed environment, media operations are described as a "risky and challenging business" as many media houses are operating on a "shoestring budget" (Tileni Mongudhi; Remmert 2019, p. 13). The IPPR report on media sustainability in the country notes that the "Namibia media market is suffering from oversupply of media outlets without a corresponding supply of advertising revenue" (Remmert 2019, p. 14). Consequently, a combination of these factors has affected media economic sustainability before the onset of digitalization.

The Digitalization of the Namibian Media

The Namibian media industry is operating within the broader capitalist environment and has therefore been affected by the transformation in this mode of production. This is the starting point in understanding the impact of digitalization of the Namibian media. The crisis of accumulation affected the business model of the media and the latter had to adjust in the face of the emerging realities.

This reality dawned on the industry as early as 2016 when it resolved to embrace the digitalization process. Media managers maintained that they could not postpone the process (of digitalization), "since it has started taking its toll on those who are reluctant to embrace change" (Kahiurika and Ngutjinazo 2019). Pressure due to reduction in advertisement revenue and the decrease in readership forced the media to migrate to online platforms.

By the end of 2019, a few Namibian media had adopted these measures, apart from those that finally migrated to online platforms after the pandemic. The motivation for this restructuring was to cut production (both labour and printing) costs, while also trying to follow readers and advertisers on digital platforms. For you to have an idea on the printing and distribution costs in Namibia consider the *New Era* newspaper, which is state funded, and its results are publicly available. In 2017, the State spent N\$24 million (about US\$1, 6 million) for printing and N\$9 million (about US\$600,000) to distribute the newspaper across the country. *New Era* does not have a high print run like its commercial counterparts, as in 2017 only 17,000 copies were printed daily from Monday to Thursday and 25,000 copies on Fridays (Tjitemisa 2017). However, it can be seen that the printing and distribution budget was extremely high for a small non-profit newspaper.

The migration to online platforms eliminated these huge production and distribution costs for many newspapers. Knoche (2019, p. 301) explains; “capital succeeds in radically lowering fixed constant capital (the costs of the means of production), because there is no longer a need for the reproduction and distribution of physical products”. But this development had adversely affected media personnel. Knoche (ibid.) further argues that the reduction of costs leads to change in the organic composition of capital, which is achieved through the reduction of the number of workers (journalists) by replacing their labour power with production technologies (machines). The reason for the reduction of these major costs of production was to increase profits by commercial media.

The media restructuring process in Namibia started in earnest in 2016 with media migrating to online platforms. Two weekly newspapers with small print run, *The Villager* and *Namibia Economist* were among the first to venture online. By the beginning of 2019, this restructuring process shed 40 jobs in the media industry (Kahurika and Ngutjinazo 2019, p. 4). In the same period, the total number of Namibian journalists was estimated to be 300 for a country of about 2.4 million inhabitants (Remmert 2019, p. 14). Consequently, the loss of 40 jobs represented a 13% reduction in the total media labour force, which is a significant number of people in the Namibian context, considering that most of the retrenched people have families to look after.

While Namibian media managed to cut production costs, it is debatable as to whether it managed to increase profits. The digitalization process allowed Namibian media, like others, to post their editions on Social Network Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook in return for a reasonable fee. But these posted media products (articles, pictures and videos) as well as their users (formerly “readers”) and their online activities, called the Users Generated Content (UGC), provide “free labour”, which is appropriated by the owners of the SNSs, the GAFAM corporations. The UGC is the main source of capital accumulation by the GAFAMs, as this work and their labourers (users/readers) are sold to advertisers (Jin and Feenberg 2014, p. 57).

Secondly, apart from the UGC, the GAFAM corporations are also engaged in other “multi-commodification strategies that are marked by aggressive economic synergy and technological convergence” (Jin and Feenberg 2014, p. 57). This is done by transforming the labour used to produce the UGC into markets and advertising medium labour. Thus, the process of audience commodity production itself is turned into the creation of another commodity, called rating.

This process is referred to as “immanent commodification”. Vincent Mosco notes that “ratings” are commodities “born directly out of the process of creating another” (Mosco 2009, p. 141). Ratings, according to Eileen Meehan (1993), play such a crucial role in the production of cultural commodities as they “set the price that networks (SNSs)” demand. These strategies enable the SNSs to attain high profits as well as financial rent, which is a major source of financial evaluation for the GAFAM corporations. Through these activities, the GAFAM are able to reinforce their financial competitiveness (see Jin and Feenberg 2014, pp. 53–59).

The Namibian media editions posted on digital platforms and their readers and listeners are subjects to the processes described above. In fact, the GAFAM

companies make more money from the media and their users than the owners of the media organizations. That is why there have been campaigns aimed at convincing GAFAM companies to share profits with the media whose content they use (Bloomberg 2021). While Europe is spearheading this campaign, Australia has enacted a law that requires GAFAM corporations to share their profits with the Australian media (AFP 2021). It needs to be noted that some GAFAM companies offered some form of assistance to media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on Namibian Media Restructuring Process

While the Namibian media had been in restructuring due to changes in the capitalist mode of production, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that wielded the final push, fast-tracking the restructuring process and thereby, negatively affecting the media's two core roles.

As indicated earlier, the pandemic attacked the economic base and almost brought the core media economic activities to a standstill. This development affected the lifeblood of the media, i.e. the advertising sector which consequently failed the media from effectively performing its political role. The initial problem it faced before the pandemic was economic, as advertisers cut advertising spending due to the economy coming to a halt. The first COVID-19 infections were reported in March 2020 and the government immediately declared a State of Emergency placing the country under lockdown. Businesses and even governments (largest advertisers in the economy) cut advertising budgets.

Two months into the lockdown, the largest print media group, the Namibia Media Holdings, that publishes three dailies in English, Afrikaans and German, announced plans to cut employees' salaries by 20% (Ngutjinazo 2020a, p. 5). During the same lockdown, the English daily *The Namibian* adopted a "restructured" process through which the company offered early retirement packages to those above 55 years, while others were granted voluntary retrenchment. Those who opted to stay had their benefits reviewed downwards (APA 2020).

A weekly newspaper, *Confidante*, reduced employees' salaries by 15% (Ngutjinazo 2020a, p. 5). It also temporarily suspended the operations of its two regional offices and asked staff at these offices to operate from home. *Windhoek Observer* went through a major restructuring process both pre- and during the pandemic period. It moved to the online platform, abandoning the print edition completely. It significantly laid off staff and left core staff, supported by freelancers and interns/apprentice writers.

Newspapers' print run and circulation were reduced significantly. *The Namibian* newspaper saw its printed copies dwindle to a mere 17,000 per edition during the pandemic, from as high as 78,000 copies per edition in 2016 (Ngutjinazo 2020a, p. 5). The weekly *Windhoek Observer* reduced its print run from 36,000 to 16,000

during the pandemic, before it ultimately abandoned its print edition. The national broadcaster NBC downsized its staff while it reduced its programmes and broadcasting hours. Some staff were furloughed, as it suspended most programmes that required journalists to interact with their sources (Ngutjinazo 2020a, p. 5).

Ironically, *The Namibian* opted to cancel its subscription to the only local state-owned news agency (wire service), the Namibia Press Agency (Nampa). The agency provides regional and international news and picture services to local Namibian media. This seemed odd, considering that the operation of most of Namibia's newspapers is confined to urban centres leaving the rural and far-flung areas uncovered. Nampa covers most parts of the country as it has offices in the greater parts of the country's 14 regions. It is Nampa that supplies the local media with regional and rural news. When major clients like *The Namibian* cancelled subscriptions, Nampa was forced to reduce its subscription rates by half to entice its subscribers to stay.

With the reduction of staff and realignment of operations, coupled with the cancellation of its subscription to Nampa, this meant that *The Namibian* newspaper, and many others that had embarked on these strategies, could not only report on rural news, but had significantly reduced their iron core responsibility through their actions. In return, most of these newspapers opted to fill column spaces with opinion pieces from readers and other experts or political commentators. While comments on various issues are important, personal views of people cannot replace the iron core material, as readers need to get the original information to form their own opinions in the first place.

With retrenchments of journalists, only those tasks that could be completed in a day were preferred, an aspect that also compromised the iron core of the Namibian media. In-depth stories, including investigations, and assignments that had some risk on reporters were avoided. The easy options available as, Alex S. Jones (2009) noted, was to dilute the iron core of journalism, while feeding readers, the few that remain with traditional media, with the news from the same sources, and a lot of information from press conferences, and opinions rather than factual news (Benton 2020).

By 2020, the Namibian media had not invested much time and resources in investigative journalism, albeit with a few exceptions. Conspicuously lacking in 2020 were major investigative stories, such as the "Fishrot" scandal. This clearly demonstrated the negative impact of the pandemic on the public service mandate of the media.

While a full study needs to be conducted to determine how far the iron core had been affected in the Namibian media context, it is evident that the general reduction in the overall coverage of news and related issues significantly and negatively affected the iron core. Therefore, further studies need to address much of the loss which affected the iron core, the robust coverage of issues which citizens needed to be informed on for them to function as well-informed citizens during the pandemic. We need to ask ourselves as to how far the media has protected its iron core in efforts to cut on production due to austerity measures they implemented as a result of the pandemic. Democratically inclined and serious media would prefer to cut on

lifestyles, features hobbies, reviews etc., rather than on political, national, community and business coverage.

Perhaps the most single concrete outcome of the impact of COVID-19 on the Namibian media had been the realization by media workers, following the decimation of jobs and salaries and retrenchments, that they needed to organize themselves as a class for itself and fight for their rights. Media restructuring, hastened by COVID-19, enhanced the de-individualization and de-qualification of journalists, a process that uses computers as “universal machines” to achieve automatization (Knoche 2019, p. 296), and some of the Namibian journalists “superfluous and a substantial industrial reserve army” (ibid.). Karl Marx noted “when machines gradually take over an industry” it creates a chronic misery industry between the workers who had to compete with machines (Marx 1990/1867, p. 557; Bakioğlu 2021, p. 8).

Digitalization, therefore, embraced by Namibian media companies tended to favour capital to the detriment of the journalists. This is what the journalists realized and therefore decided to set up their own trade union (Jason 2020; Ngutjinazo 2020b). This was the first successful attempt by Namibian media personnel to unionize because of the impact of COVID-19 that threatened job security and livelihoods. The formation of the trade union was a realization that journalists were not conditions of production, but only their labour was. Put in simple terms, it meant they had come to acknowledge that their labour is a commodity that can easily be replaced with technology, and they needed to protect it.

Conclusion

The chapter sought to demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the media restructuring process (digitalization) in Namibia. The Namibian media had been operating in a neoliberal capitalist environment, a foundation that had been shaken by the pandemic to its core. As indicated at the beginning of the chapter, the pandemic wiped out the foundations of the media income, both sales and advertisements. This is how we should understand the impact of COVID-19 on the digitalization of Namibian media.

The chapter further sought to locate the media restructuring process within the broader transformation in capitalism, which came about as a result of inherent crises in this mode of production. It then highlighted the major changes in the Namibian media due to digitalization, before examining how the pandemic had fast-tracked its digitalization process. It has been argued that COVID-19 negatively affected the economy, which is the media’s lifeblood. Consequently, the media migrated to digital platforms since their traditional business model based on advertisements and circulation was decimated.

The idea behind digitalization was to eliminate production costs that required huge capital. This led to retrenchments of staff and streamlining the core production processes. This development had an adverse impact on both the labour force as well as on the main function (the “iron core”) of the media, as demonstrated above.

However, one positive outcome was the formation of the first Journalists' Union in Namibia. This was a specific outcome of the digitalization process which was fast-tracked by the pandemic.

The chapter provides opportunities for further work to closely test the assumptions and propositions made and thereby grow this burgeoning critical scholarship. While the focus was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the digitalization of the Namibian media, the broader objective remains to encourage media research grounded in critical (Marxist) perspectives in Africa during digital capitalism.

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