

# Media Viability, Covid-19 and the ‘Darwinian’ Experience in Southern Africa: Glimpses from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe



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**Abstract** Political economy predicates suggest that media viability is about the influence and balance between politics and economics of media systems. It is about survival and control. This logic informs this study, which seeks to gain insights into the impact of Covid-19 on media viability in Southern Africa. For decades, the media industry in Southern Africa, and indeed globally, has been trapped in an existential struggle—experiencing, for instance, the steady demise of traditional business models amidst rapid technological developments and proliferation of digital communication, waning trust in legacy media, and an uncondusive political and legislative environment. In this qualitative study, we learn from leading industry experts from eight countries about the wide-ranging impact and paradoxes of the pandemic on the media industry—a phenomenon some have referred to as ‘a Darwinian moment’ or ‘media extinction event’. In this study media-house size and ownership, trustworthiness and ability to fully switch to digital operations were key to survival, as was the need for newsroom and work-form restructuring. The study raises concerns over the Covid-19-exacerbated dangers regarding journalists’ welfare and cautions against the deepening threats to press freedom, the further marginalisation of minority groups and the relegation of the media’s public interest role.

**Keywords** Covid-19 · Media viability · Southern Africa · Journalists’ welfare

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## Introduction and Context

Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the media industry around the world had been trapped in an existential struggle. Key among the challenges was the fact that the key traditional pillars of financial sustainability (i.e. advertising and sales) were increasingly becoming obsolete (Pickard and Williams 2014; Barland 2013; Hollifield 2019) amidst rapid and fundamental shifts in digital technologies and online communication (Chyi 2005; Schubert and Klem 2011; Hill and Bradshaw 2018). For instance, it is well documented how the proliferation of social media and citizen journalism (Olsen et al. 2020; Berger et al. 2015) has contributed to the diminishing trust and credibility of legacy media (Reuters 2020; Chyi 2005). Hill and Bradshaw (2018) and Jamil and Appiah-Adjei (2020) have offered an explanation for this diminishing trust in legacy media, highlighting the dangers of the ‘mobile first’ trends in news production adopted by many newsrooms in a bid to feed the insatiable 24/7 habits of digital news consumers—often at the expense of good verified news.

To make matters worse, the above trends are coupled with the rise in competition from and dominance of large media establishments (i.e. media monopolies/conglomerates) and international technology companies like Facebook and Google (Chakrabarty 2011; O’Connor 2012; Nielsen 2012). These companies are ‘digital omnivores’ as Goggin (2014) refers to them, for they tend to take up the biggest share of the markets—a fact that has forced some countries in Asia and Europe to renegotiate a redistribution of revenue collection in ways that are democratic and just.

It is within this context that the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Research is beginning to emerge on the scope of impact of the pandemic on an already weakened industry and workforce. Such research includes, for instance, Olurunyomi’s (2021) on media viability in Nigeria; and SANEF (2020), which foregrounds the impact of the pandemic on the media industry in South Africa. Jamil and Appiah-Adjei (2020), Repucci and Slipowitz (2020) and Reuters (2021) highlight the impact on 46 countries including South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya. In addition, scholars such as Jamil and Appaiah (2020), Osmann et al. (2021), Tyson and Wild (2021) and Wake et al. (2021) bring up the important topic of the impact of the pandemic on journalists, especially focusing on their mental health and the chilling effect on their work. The threats to democracy, particularly impingements on freedom of expression, are highlighted by scholars such as Repucci et al. (2020) and Papadopoulou and Maniou (2021). That the challenges are all-encompassing and existentially challenging has led some pundits to refer to the phenomenon as ‘a media extinction event’ or ‘a Darwinian moment’.

The chapter draws on industry experiences from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe with the main objective to deepen our understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the media industry (media houses, journalists, etc.) and implications for media viability. In doing this the

chapter also explores how the media houses responded to the crisis and shares good practices/recommendations for a sustainable media industry in the future.

The chapter makes three main contributions to the scholarship on media viability in times of (health) crisis. First, the chapter is among the first in the budding corpus on the subject to offer regional multi-country (from eight Southern African countries) perspectives on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the media industry. Studies into country-contexts such as the South African Editors Forum (SANEF) report (2020) and Free Press Initiative report from Zambia (2021) and the State of the media Quarterly report from Zambia (MISA 2020) are among the few that this study builds upon. The multi-country experiences shed light on the discourse of survival and control and the implications for media viability, journalist welfare, freedom of expression, digital divides and marginalisation, and other issues at the core of the journalism profession.

The second contribution lies in the critique of the hyperbolic notions of 'a Darwinian moment' or 'media extinction event', arguing that not all is gloomy and hapless. First, in acknowledgement of the devastation, the chapter points out how Covid-19 generated winners and losers in relation to media viability. Traditional print media, i.e. newspapers and magazines, as well as small and community/alternative media were clear losers as their economic model of sustainability (i.e. advertisements, sales as well as donations) became unsustainable, especially during lockdown. Among the winners—were broadcasting media such as radio and Television as well as those that embraced digital media. In the analysis, we show how these survivors adopted innovative sustainability schemes that gives hope to the future of the media.

For instance, several newsrooms are experimenting with new digital advertising models, others entered into strategic partnerships—say between small and big media houses—while others are investing in technologies (apps) and diversifying their sources of income. This is not to mention the fact that the shift towards 'online' versions of print media did attract many readers—indicating that legacy media are still trusted despite what other scholars have posited (Reuters 2020; Chyi 2005; Berger et al. 2015). With regard to the workforce, we see that some newsrooms (e.g. Botswana) chose the 'moral high ground', avoiding staff lay-offs and salary cuts and instead electing, through dialogue between management and staff, to find win-win solutions that kept them afloat in and after the worst of the lockdown. Another inspiring example is South Africa, through the Southern African National Editors' Forum's (SANEF) establishment of a Relief Fund, now in its fifth round—offering much-needed financial aid to the most vulnerable and struggling journalists (especially freelancers). It is a strategy now being adopted, albeit with some hiccups, by others including Zambia. In short, there is hope with innovative thinking, concerted efforts and ability to unlearn and relearn.

Third, in line with the broader implications of the impact of Covid-19 on the media industry, this study foregrounds and cautions against Covid-19-driven dangers to democracy, human rights and equality. For instance, caution is sought against the deepening threats to freedom of expression under the guise of 'national security and safety measures'; the moves or inaction against further marginalisation and

exclusion of traditionally marginalised groups, as well as dangers associated with further relegation of the ‘public interest roles’ of the media, are among several recommendations.

In short, the chapter builds upon findings from emerging research documenting the devastation caused by Covid-19 on the media industry in the selected countries. This study shows that the pandemic heightened the long-running existential challenges. For instance, the pandemic dealt a heavy blow to the traditional economic model but at the same time highlighted the importance of independent, public and trustworthy news. Also, while the pandemic accelerated the shift to digital, mobile and platform-dominated media environments in order to tap into the surge in digital consumers, this move did not result in growth in revenues—a paradox that left media houses wondering how to monetize online news consumers (MacLeod 2021). The debilitating impact on journalists is also documented, as is the implication of the Covid-19-induced dangers to freedom of expression, inclusion of marginalised groups and the dangers associated with public interest communication.

The following sections start with a summarized overview of the mediascape in the countries under study, followed by a brief examination of the conceptual and analytical frames as well as the methodologies of the study. The chapter features a thematic presentation and discussion of key issues regarding media viability during Covid-19 and concludes with reflections on the implications not just for media viability but also broader issues around freedom of expression, marginalisation, and the future of the journalism profession. Recommendations come at the end.

## **Overview of Mediascape in Context**

A review of the African Media Barometer for Botswana (2018), Eswatini (2020), Lesotho (2018), Malawi (2012), Namibia (2018), South Africa (2018), Zambia (2021) and Zimbabwe (2020) indicates, to varying degrees, a number of common features of the media. Some of these are summarised below for the purpose of this chapter.

Much of the media is elitist and urban-centred; there is a presence of native-language media products but mostly a predominance of English-language media products. Persistent digital divides, especially among the poor and rural dwellers, persist despite a rise in mobile phone subscriptions (e.g. a high number of the populace cannot afford smartphones and Internet access to obtain multimedia products). Radio is the leading medium especially for the marginalised and rural population for its ability to transcend geographic and distribution challenges, local language use and affordability. Media ownership is mostly by governments, the monarchy and the private sector, while few of these are owned by NGOs and local communities. Often there is interference in media content and freedom of expression especially by governments and monarchy. Media products and access to Internet are costly amidst high levels of poverty and limiting legal frameworks. Advertising is dominated by governments and corporate companies, and in several instances, these

are politically steered (e.g. Zambia). With a few exceptions like South Africa (SANEF 2020), there was a general lack of strong journalism unions with/and financial support structures (such as the SANEF relief fund) in place to support journalists in difficult times such as the Covid-19 crisis. It is within this mediascape that media viability in relation to the Covid-19 crisis is discussed.

The theoretical framework derives from principles within the political economy of the media that analyse the interconnectedness between economic processes, technological developments and political situations (Schubert and Klein 2011). The connection between the political and economic emanates from the understanding that both influence and shape national media systems and structures that in turn shape practice (Richter and Gräf 2015; Murdock and Golding 2005). According to Richter and Graf, a good way to understand political economy is to ask the question:

Who has the means and the power to produce media content and who has access to it? To what extent do specific political and economic structures form media institutions and thus regulate flows of information? ... how do media technologies shape the economic and political practices that eventually create structures. (2015, p. 25)

Jasques Guyot (2009) argues that political economic factors driving news cultures can have pervasive influences on media, including political influences over editorial content in which media ownership plays a key role, and economic pressure from competition and advertising (Guyot 2009, p. 2). This pressure, Guyot posits, extends to journalists, with newly employed journalists being most vulnerable (p. 10).

The balance between capitalist ideologies and information as a public good (Murdock and Golding 2005) is an important dichotomy in media viability studies because it tackles discourse on marginalisation (Chakrabarty 2011). The Hardy (2014) argument that political economy analyses deal with power, control and survival supports Richter and Gräf's (2015), i.e. we entertain the need to revisit hegemonic power structures within mediascapes in defence against modern forms of injustice while tackling issues around representation and awareness in relation to inclusion and exclusion (p. 29). Hence, the study interrogates hegemonic influences and their limits on the cultural independence of sub-Saharan countries (Mattelart 1994; Siebert et al. 1963; Guaaybess 2013; Rozumilowicz 2002). It is within these frames that we study how the media are able to survive and adapt to change in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the context of existing digital and social changes affecting the viability of an industry already in peril (Mosco 2009).

The above theoretical underpinnings form part of a corpus on media viability globally. Media viability is understood as the ability to produce media products sustainably without compromising professionalism and public interest functions (DW 2018). It is also about the ecosystem within which the media operates meaning; networks, users/consumers and legal/regulation as well as training, content, finances and general performance play an important part in media viability (Albarran 2016; Schiffrin 2019; UNESCO 2015; Moore et al. 2020). According to DW, media viability indicators<sup>1</sup>: politics, economics, community, technology, and content and

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.dw.com/en/media-viability-new-indicators-show-what-is-at-stake/a-47874028>.

expertise, are important factors to streamline for media to survive and thrive in the long run.

Studies affirm that across the sub-continent, media houses explored ways to remain sustainable in an age of technological disruptions that overturned the traditional media's modus operandi (Reuters 2020; Taremwa 2021; Moyo et al. 2019; Chyi 2005). Sometimes amidst political persecution and censorship (Reporters without borders 2020). Studies show that in a bid to remain relevant, media houses had disruptions in their production and consumption practices, several of which embraced social media, i.e. incorporated Facebook, Twitter and Instagram handles (Olsen et al. 2020). Other studies highlighted the weakened role of journalistic gatekeeping due to the rise in citizen journalism (Berger et al. 2015) and that the resulting lack of trust in legacy media made matters worse amidst the infodemic of fake news, including legacy media casting heavy doubt upon the future of the industry (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020; Ahmed 2020; Reuters 2020).

Some studies documented how the digital shifts led to fragmenting audiences to tap into different demographics, something which undermined sales and advertisement-based business models (Reuters 2020; Chyi 2005; Berger et al. 2015). Others showed how, faced with the dramatic dwindling in circulation and advertisements (Pickard and Williams 2014), print media houses were exploring new ways to remain viable. Many experimented with various new models, such as different kinds of subscription models and paywalls including soft, metred and hard (Taremwa 2021; Chyi 2005) and digital advertising (Tzuo 2020). Another approach was to change content formats, i.e. storytelling targeting social media (Newman et al. 2020; Berger et al. 2015; Reuters 1999; Taremwa 2021) or just quality of journalism (Barland 2013) and paid content (Bradsetter and Schmalhofer 2014). Others focused on distribution channels and platforms (Olsen et al. 2020), pricing logics (Goyanes 2014; Taremwa 2021) and donor funding (Mare<sup>2</sup>), lobbying governments to fund the media as public good (Dahir 2019), but also revisiting legal and taxation regimes on both legacy media operations and social media (Dahir 2019; Taremwa 2021) and more (Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie 2018). This had an impact on the content produced and audience access, which was likely detrimental to democracy (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020; Shuker 2019; Dragomir 2017; Papadopoulou and Maniou 2021), media dependencies (Mare footnote, 12), social justice, inclusion and representation, or marginalisation (M'ule interview).

Studies showed that despite the fact that over the years Southern Africa witnessed a rise in digital media production and consumption (SANEF 2020, African Media Barometers), there was still a ways to go in terms of accessibility among marginal and rural consumers. Younger consumers who were mostly online were unwilling to pay for digital content (African Media Barometers of all the countries make note of this). The overall picture indicated that the digital divide was still an issue despite the rapid growth in mobile and smartphone use and access to the Internet in the region (African Media Barometers Botswana 2018; Eswatini 2020; Lesotho 2018; Malawi

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<sup>2</sup><https://gga.org/challenges-and-hope-for-africas-media-sustainability/>.

2012; Namibia 2018; South Africa 2018; Zambia 2021 and Zimbabwe). According to recent global Internet statistics, only 40% of Africans (525 million users) had access (Internet World Statistics 2019). The numbers varied between 1% in Eritrea and 90% in Kenya. This discussion revisits these debates and explores the impact of Covid-19 on media viability—focusing on media house experiences, journalists and journalism practice concerning the topic of media viability.

## Methodology

This was an online qualitative study (Howlett 2021) derived from a webinar that the author facilitated in April 2021 and follow-up questions administered through email. The author was invited by the Director of the Southern African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF) Windhoek to facilitate its first Zoom webinar on the sub-theme: *The viability of media (in COVID-19 times and during dominance of Oligopolies) and their role in the production of information*. The discussion that took place on April 13 and two others that followed were precursors to the 2021 World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD) celebrations in Windhoek (May 3). The aim of this discussion was to help SANEF shape another groundbreaking Windhoek ‘+30 Declaration’ (M’ule interview).

Online methodologies were employed for the research, i.e. a public webinar and qualitative questionnaire. The eight panellists were editors and chairpersons of SANEF chapters or leading journalists’ associations in Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The webinar was conducted through Zoom Archibald et al. (2019); Gray et al. 2020; Howlett 2021). In his study “Looking at the ‘field’ through a Zoom lens: Methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic”, Howlett (2021) shares some of the positives of online research, identifying among others, relaxed informants, remote embeddedness and negatives such as lack of access to non-verbal communication, and longer, stressful online interviews (2021, p. 3). In addition to this, the researcher, as the moderator, felt that the 2 hours for the webinar were insufficient to obtain a nascent deep conversation covering issues in the context of the eight countries as well as incorporate an audience Q and A session. Nevertheless, despite the limitations, the researcher panellists obtained useful experience-based insights into the discourse on media viability during the Covid-19 pandemic. Permission was granted by the panellists to write and publish this chapter. The chapter abides by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics regulations on *Internet Research Ethics* (NESH 2016),<sup>3</sup> which permits use of public debates/information such as this without seeking permissions. However, all informants were apprised of this publication and apart from the Director of SANEF, no

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/a-guide-to-internet-research-ethics/>.

other names are mentioned. Although the data is drawn from the webinar, the author is responsible for the interpretations in this analysis.

The analysis harvests some key discussion points from the webinar that were discussed through the theoretical lens of the political economy of the media as well as references from earlier studies.

## **Findings and Discussion: Devastation, Paradoxes and Opportunities**

Key impacts raised at the webinar were extracted and discussed under three main themes: (a) impact on media houses—showing that Covid-19 accelerated digital shifts amidst media house closures; a paradox showing high digital news consumption vis-à-vis massive revenue loss and experimentation with third-revenue streams; (b) journalists paid a high price amidst newsroom restructuring and changes to work practice; and (c) threats to freedom of expression and marginalisation. Overall, the findings not only affirmed previous research, highlighting the existential challenges faced by the media industry/profession, but also provided fresh insights into the traumatic impact on the industry of Covid-19.

### **Media Houses—Survival and Control**

**Covid-19 accelerated digital shifts amidst media house closures** Building upon research on the impact of new technologies and online communication on the media industry Pickard and Williams (2014) and Berger et al. (2015) affirm emerging Covid-19-related research showing the accelerated and devastating impact of the pandemic on the media (SANEF 2020; Olurunyomi 2021; Taremwa 2021). The findings indicate that the transition processes that were under way from old to new models, were given impetus, as one South African discussant elaborated:

Through retrenchments and restructuring over the last few years, many newspapers only managed to cut costs enough to continue for another few years but we see later with Covid, many magazines and small print media houses closed. (South African Discussant, SANEF 2020 report)

This accelerated the digital shift within media houses, as reported by all discussants. The shift was attributed to restrictions in movement that led to consumers and media producers going digital. During the pandemic, the print operations and supply structures ceased to be functional and at some time, several were not printing—as elaborated by a Zimbabwean discussant:

Print media in Zimbabwe just stopped the printing of its already dwindling supply because there were no readers out there. People were not out and about buying because most of the



newspapers still rely on the street sales. People were at home and they concentrated on looking for news and information online.

The urban and elitist centeredness of legacy media, as documented in the country media barometres, meant that with this concentrated subscription base, the restriction (lockdown) that ensued because of the pandemic would naturally deal the media a heavy blow. We get a clearer picture from our informant from Zimbabwe:

And the structure of the market is such that between 60% to 80% of the market for Zimbabwean print media is in Harare, the capital, and then the 40% is generally shared across other cities like Bulawayo and the rests. So you'll find that if people are not out there because the subscriptions are low and due to restrictions in movement, it means that you can't sell the hard copy. So they stopped printing.

### **Paradox of evaporating revenues despite upsurge in news consumption**

Already traditional revenue structures and streams that sustained legacy media organisations over centuries had started to scramble before Covid-19 (Pickard and Williams 2014; Guyot 2009), as a result of, among other things, the advent and proliferation of digital technologies and social media (Mosco 2009). This study reveals that none of the media establishments escaped the economic downturn. The discussants articulated how Covid-19 expedited the demise of traditional revenue streams. Several of the countries acknowledged sharp drops in advertising, especially in print media as readers migrated to digital platforms—mostly television and radio genres.

The surge in digital consumers was a positive development indicating that consumers still trust the importance of verified information that legacy media provide as opposed to social media. However, the paradox remains that the digital shift did not bring along revenues. This in itself was linked to a deep concern over sustainability:

There is a disequilibrium between the increase in readership online and the increase in revenues online. It doesn't necessarily mean that when you have huge readership growth in that direction, it means that you are going to have a better chance of survival. So it's a very new territory, uncharted waters. (Zimbabwean Discussant)

Hence, media houses found themselves with the same huge cost structures, but diminished revenue:

We witnessed a massive rise in digital readers. So, we have much more readers now digitally that read journalism in South Africa than we ever had in print and that can be a good thing. But they were not paying readers. So how do we turn these into paying readers because we still need to pay the bills and we still have our rental, we still have our salaries, we still have technology to pay for, etc. (South African Discussant)

**Winners and losers—survival of the fittest?** In line with Chakrabarty (2011) and Richter and Gräf (2015) criticism of hegemonic power structures in media regimes that favour the large and strong, this chapter establishes a clear picture of winners and losers from the crisis, confirming Darwinian notions of 'survival of the fittest'. Among the losers considered were the traditional print media, i.e. newspapers and magazines, which suffered the most from the unsustainability of their economic model, i.e. advertisements and sales. In addition, small community

and private media came out as clear losers for the same reasons. The study from South Africa shows similar findings (SANEF 2020). Questions about media diversity, public interest, marginalisation and social justice, especially among large sections of populations (all African Media Barometers), were a matter taken up, among others, by Chakrabarty (2011) and this study. For instance, the SANEF director underscored the following concerns regarding the impact of Covid-19 on minority groups and on journalism practice:

SANEF has seen a considerable reduction in investigative journalism, poor coverage of already marginalized communities, especially those in the rural areas. So, instead of providing access to information to these communities they are further marginalized because media houses cannot frequently send out teams to cover these communities as it involves travel and daily subsistence allowances. Trust in media is also slowly eroding because print runs have been slashed and the number of pages printed daily or weekly, reduced drastically. Moreover, there is a greater dependence on events coverage—this needs to be addressed.

Among the winners were the large media houses and international technology companies. This is mainly because, during the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers turned to digital platforms such as Google and Facebook for news and marketing in a bid to reach the massive online audiences at the expense of local media houses. Media conglomerates moved their print content online and revamped their broadcast sections monetising all their online content and consequently surviving the worst of the economic crisis, as shown below:

If you look at digital advertising, what we're seeing in South Africa, and I am fortunate enough to work for the largest news publication in South African, which has about 13 to 15 million readers a month. We have managed to turn the ship in terms of digital advertising. So, a few years ago, the bulk of advertising was still going to print, but we now make easily the same or more money than a normal newspaper publication on digital. But, and this is a big BUT, I'm afraid this model will only work for the largest news sites, probably the two or three largest news sites in your country.

There was a sense of hopelessness when addressing the international technology companies eating up large shares of the advertising market. The injustice resulted from these companies circumventing nationally bound legislation and tax regimes placed on local media—in addition, they are tech companies acting as conduits for conventional journalism products (Nielsen 2012; O'Connor 2012; Goggin and Hjorth 2014). Therefore, hegemonic power structures were sustained since market models and globalisation favoured large and international companies over the small local/national ones (Chakrabarty 2011).

**New trends in third-revenue stream innovations** Political economy predicates suggest the centrality of economics in media viability (Schubert and Klein 2011; Richter and Gräf 2015). Below are ways media houses harnessed third-revenue streams for viability.

**Start-ups** The stark digital shift meant the process of transitioning from the old models to the new models was given impetus. In Zimbabwe, for instance, there was the mushrooming of digital media start-ups, which:

Have been a positive thing in the sense that it widened the diversity and pluralism in the media. It has also given the media a new way of renewing itself because that’s the direction anyway. So that process has been accelerated which is positive.

**Partnerships** Partnerships between small publications and large media houses emerged. In South Africa particularly there was emergence of small digital early publications funded by donors and memberships like *ama Bhungane*. These publications conducted amazing investigative journalism based on poor rural areas and wrote stories where mainstream newsrooms no longer sent journalists nor had bureaus:

We see these organizations having these stories published on the largest websites in exchange for eyeballs (views). So that is a very good relationship emerging in South Africa where the small publications journalism gets published on the larger websites as well.

**Government funding** Government funding, an option in some of the countries, faced challenges like strings attached, delays in funding, arm-twisting by government, etc. The problem with strings attached was elaborated as follows:

We have seen government stepping in at a time of hardship for the media in exchange for positive coverage. An example involves evidence of state capture of the commission of inquiry, in which a South African intelligence agency paid money to a media house to produce journalism that reflected positive on Ex-president Jacob Zuma and his regime, which is a huge, huge threat to media freedom and credibility in our country.” (South African Discussant)

**Relief fund** SANEF offered support to journalists struggling with basic necessities. The recipients applauded having strong support structures in the media industry for its survival. Zambia, at the time, was experimenting with a government relief fund—internal mechanisms and impact needed studying. At the time, a research project by SANEF was under way to investigate ways to galvanize funds for and within the different chapters to support journalists, freelancers and contracted journalists who had lost their jobs (SANEF’s director).

**Paywalls** Subscription services and various forms of paywalls had existed for a while (Chyi 2005). This system of monetising media content expanded during the pandemic to include different approaches. For instance, almost all the major news websites in South Africa activated some kind of paywall, i.e. either a ‘hard paywall’ where one only accessed content after paying or in the case of *News 24* accessed a ‘leaky paywall’, where certain content was free and the rest was through paid subscription. The gap resulted from media literacy:

I think it is critically important that we educate our readers, why they have to pay for journalism. For too long we gave away journalism for free on the Internet because everything was free on the Internet, but also globally, that trend is changing very fast. People now pay for music, they pay for movies, they pay for TV shows. So why not pay for journalism? And I think that’s something that we, as colleagues across the continent can do and should strengthened together. (South African Discussant).

## Journalists Pay High Price: Retrenchments, Mental Health, Death

Many economies are struggling because of the pandemic and several industries have collapsed. Thus, it is a challenge for media to get adequate revenue to sustain themselves. Many have laid off experienced senior journalists in efforts to reduce the wage bill, while some have slashed the salaries of those who have stayed on by as much as 20%. (Interview, Director, SAEF)

This is a snap-shot of the impact of the pandemic on journalists. This section revisits political economy debates in the context of journalists and their practice (Guyot 2009). Generally, life during the Covid-19 pandemic was a nightmare for journalists. While veteran journalists did not survive the shocks, the findings indicate that young, newly employed journalists were first to be laid off—but the dilemma arose from the fact that they were more tech-savvy than their older counterparts. Consequently, given the online/digital shifts, this was a setback which clarified that journalism underwent severe notable disruptions such as working in shifts, part-time work, changes from newsrooms to home offices and online news production. The pandemic also negatively impacted journalists' mental health through exposure to death, stress and the chilling effects on media content/production.

**Cost-cutting measures: lay-offs, working in shifts, leave, lack of pay, home office** Media houses resorted to cost-cutting measures including changes to news production and newsroom structures along with layoffs/retrenchment, working in shifts and indefinite leave, which impacted work pressures.

In Botswana, much as many journalists lost their jobs as several media houses laid off staff, there were exceptions: we did not cut staff. Instead we took a moral ground and worked towards possible phasing out of print but only after digital has started generating enough revenue to take care of staffs. So for us it was important that the staff and management worked together to find ways for sustainability. (Discussant from Botswana)

It is worthy of note that journalists who were laid off were young and new to the newsroom, while those who were retained were not tech-savvy.

In Malawi, journalists were either laid off or sent on indefinite leave. The remaining few bore the burden of news production and thus they had to “multitask to produce for online platforms, TV station, radio in addition to the business newspaper” (Saltzis and Dickinson 2008).

In Namibia, two-week working shifts were introduced as a self-help approach aimed at taking “responsibility and finding solutions by ourselves and not looking at government to solve them. We needed to be modest and be creative and innovative in helping to solve our own issues, especially those of the viability”. In the long run, however, the newsroom scaled down staff, especially radio journalists who resorted to freelancing, which features poor work conditions and uncertainties (Blaising et al. 2019) that worsened especially for photojournalists:

... I think photographers are groups of media workers who have been exceptionally vulnerable during COVID times ... and when things are hard in newsrooms, it's usually freelance journalists don't work. They don't have contracts, they work adhoc. And, you

know, from different countries, we see freelance journalists lacking the basics like food and so on. So, calling for, a union or other initiatives to support the weak among us, is quite important.

In South Africa, major media houses retrenched to cut costs. For example, we were informed the *Avusa*, a public broadcaster, retrenched between 500 and 600 staff members. It is worth noting, however, that SANEF established a media relief fund which enabled it to help retrenched journalists with basics like food, shelter, children’s school fees and clothing.

According to the discussant:

I can report that we had almost 300 applications from journalists who literally lost their livelihoods overnight, who we could luckily support, but obviously not in a sustainable way. These are people who will have to either review their careers, start new jobs, look for other jobs in other industries.

Government media house journalists also lacked adequate funding. The state-owned Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation had to contend with employees going on strike demanding their salaries, as one discussant explained: “Salaries are always late. And then when this COVID came in, it has become a curse for Tv and radio. The newspapers are hardest hit”.

For others, remote work became a new normal given the blanket COVID-19 restrictions, in Zimbabwe. The loss of revenues for the media houses impacted on the structure of the newsrooms—as people were no longer working in the newsrooms but from home. This, disrupted their workflows and methods of reporting. People had to rely on new apps and innovations, including zooms among others, in order to conduct duties and the coordinator stories.

**Mental health and the chilling effects of stress, psychological trauma and death** Mental health among Southern Africa journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic was a topical issue (Tyson and Wild 2021; Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020; Wake et al. 2021; Osmann et al. 2021)). Experiences from Eswatini, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe indicated its seriousness during the pandemic:

A very difficult situation we are dealing with in our own media and newsrooms is the tragedy of the mental and psychological health of journalists as frontline workers who not only have to cover the biggest story of our times but must do this in the face of the looming job losses and existential threats to the profession. (Eswatini Discussant)

The Lesotho discussant added: “Not only must journalists work with the depressing nature of the (Covid-19) news, they must do this while facing the danger of infection and death in the line of duty”.

This, consequently, had a chilling effect on journalists and manifested through self-censorship:

The nature of the frontline role journalists play in the fight against the Covid-19 puts them in direct line of danger. As journalists, we are not immune to the chilling effects of this danger—leading some to opt out of reporting from the frontline and exposing ourselves. (Lesotho Discussant)

Death as an ultimate threat to journalists was confirmed by this Zimbabwean discussant:

We actually lost some very well-known journalists who died of Covid-19. One of them was Foster Dongozi, well known in Zimbabwe and across Africa on issue of the human rights and the welfare of journalists and trade unionism. So we see here that Covid-19 had a devastating impact on the media in some bad way.

## Threats to Journalists and Media Freedoms

This study emphasises the heightened threats to media freedom affecting journalists but also the overall media roles and functionality, especially in Lesotho, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Some governments in Southern Africa took advantage of Covid-19 to crack down on journalists and the media:

We then saw a targeting of certain journalists who were very active in exposing government corruption around the Covid-19 related issues. The example of Hopewell Chin'ono is pertinent. He was arrested many times.<sup>4</sup> At one time detained for 45 days, but overall, he was detained for a longer period for getting involved in a media exposure on corruption. Another one young journalism student was abducted, tortured and basically his life disrupted for good and forced to flee the country into South Africa. These are some of the brutalities that were visited upon the media and journalists by the regime in Harare under the cover of Covid-19. (Discussant from Zimbabwe)

Reporters Without Borders (2020) warned against the impingement of media freedoms under Covid-19 yet the impingement of media freedoms were reported in Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Our respective discussants faulted the lacking accountability measures within national policy and the lack of democratic and inclusive processes in policy making.

The Zambian<sup>5</sup> experience was influenced by the background of oppressive laws against the media. In the face of Covid-19, the government demanded free advertising on Covid-19 issues. Media houses such as the *Post* and Prime TV which refused to follow the directives were shut down. Media houses agreed to carry stories on Covid but not adverts, arguing: “Well, for stories, we can carry, but for advertising, no. We already give a lot of space to Covid-19 for free”.

According to the Free Press Initiative (FPI) study on Zambian media, there was a downturn on economic activities due to lost sales and lost advert-revenues following government directives to support the Covid drive. Over 70% of the media houses needed aid. By April 2020, there “had been no support whatsoever to anchor them from the Covid-19 impact and journalists had to survive through ‘resilience’”. Consequently, there was a need to establish a fund to salvage the media and establish

<sup>4</sup>Sixth arrest in six months reported here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/08/zimbabwe-journalist-hopewell-chinono-arrested-for-third-time-in-six-months>. Last accessed 21 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup>[https://zambia.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/SOM\\_Report\\_Q4\\_Final\\_version.docx20204.pdf](https://zambia.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/SOM_Report_Q4_Final_version.docx20204.pdf).

a self-regulatory framework.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the impingement of journalists' freedoms and rights under the cover of Covid-19 raised serious concerns for media viability in the countries concerned.

SAEF, in implementing support structures, laments:

The self-regulatory mechanism option is promoted by the forum (to which all discussants here are members and country representatives). The option is voluntary but does not enjoy the support of all media in any given country. This has played into the hands of governments who want to regulate media as very often the non-members are the ones breaking the codes of ethics.

## Conclusion and Way Forward

The study highlights political and economic predicates (Schubert and Klein 2011; Mosco 2009) and technological imperatives at play. At a media outlet level, all panellists reported gross loss of income, and permanent and temporary closure of several newsrooms leading several media outlets to adapt lean structural changes to survive the lockdown. Media houses embraced digital operations since consumers were online. However, the digital shift did not translate into revenues, forcing media houses to embark on austerity measures to survive.

The above trends gravely impacted the workforce, resulting in lay-offs, salary cuts and cancelled annual leaves. Vulnerable media workers without safety nets such as contracts were hit hardest. Likewise, journalists' welfare and mental health as fundamental to media viability were a matter of concern that needed to be addressed by media houses, government and regional media organisations.

This study identifies winners and losers in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on media viability. Traditional print media, i.e. newspapers and magazines, were losers as the print economic model of sustainability (i.e. advertisements and sales) became unsustainable. Small, community and private media were also losers for the same reasons. However, migration online meant that people found these 'online legacy media' credible and trustworthy. Nevertheless, the heavy migration did not increase revenues. It was up to these organisations to harness new audiences into paying customers and find innovative ways to sustain them post-Covid. Small community media played a crucial role in serving sections of the poor rural population. Community media offer diversity and social justice and hence their promotion/resurrection was encouraged.

The media in South Africa responded to the devastation through establishing relief funds to assist struggling journalists. This kind of help was dependent on donors and well-wishers, transparency and clear criteria for distribution. Other opportunities or strategies for sustainability included migration to online platforms in a bid to follow the migration of consumers to TV, radio and online print versions.

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<sup>6</sup>But as of August 2021, the researcher has discovered that a stimulus package for journalists during Covid in Zambia had been announced but this was embroiled in challenges.

Other media houses in the region saw a rise in start-ups and social media Apps indicating that not all hope was lost. The onus was on the media industry to find ways to maintain media viability.

Other threats to media viability were political (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020; Papadopoulou and Maniou 2021; Dragomir 2017). This chapter cautions against the enactment of unproductive laws and praxis aimed at impeding freedom of expression and journalists' fourth estate roles as well as exploiting journalists (reported, e.g., in Zambia and South Africa). Likewise, the intimidations and harassment of journalists (reported in Zimbabwe and South Africa) must stop. The study cautions against further marginalising minority communities and groups (Chakrabarty 2011; Dralega 2009)—citing the persistent digital divide manifested in poor infrastructural outreach and inclusion of marginal communities in media discourses in times of crisis. Media content and information as a public good (Murdock and Golding 2005; Richter and Gräf 2015) is another factor to consider for a viable media—as the importance of credible, transparent and trustworthy media cannot be underestimated (DW 2018).

## Recommendations

Media viability in Southern Africa and indeed in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa required strategies that targeted broader media ecosystems: governments, media houses, journalists, corporates, citizens, etc.

This study revealed the need to engage in multi-actor partnerships and dialogue around media viability, in-house training and journalism education. There is need for media literacy campaigns for governments and general publics on the major shifts and importance of paying for quality information (as public good), protecting rural and community media, unionisation (especially protecting vulnerable journalists like freelancers and photographers), and most importantly finding sustainable revenue streams (also refer to Fig. 1) to ensure media viability in the long run.

**SAEF's role in strengthened national and regional discourses on media viability** SAEF plays an important role in mobilising and supporting media in member states but cannot achieve its mandate without resources. SAEF needs to be funded by all stakeholders who subscribe to freedom of expression and freedom of the media, so that in turn it can run programmes that will strengthen national chapters to provide a livelihood to the many journalists and other media practitioners who lost their jobs because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, SAEF proposes:

- (a) Funding for research in nine of the 10 member states on the impact of Covid-19 on media viability in the region
- (b) Funding to commission laid off and experienced journalists to cover marginalised communities
- (c) Obtaining guarantees from media in respective countries to publish and broadcast stories on marginalised communities





**Fig. 1** Summary of emerging third-revenue streams

(d) Galvanising funding from Internet companies for all media through paying for content that they have not generated but wish to use

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