

Endangered Voices: Nigerian Journalists' Safety amid the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Abstract This chapter examines the difficult conditions Nigerian journalists faced while reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the threats and dangers faced by Nigerian broadcast journalists and its implication for journalism practice amid a pandemic. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted nine in-depth interviews (online) with broadcast journalists in 2020 and employed thematic analysis to address the study's findings. The study found that the safety threats encountered by journalists during the COVID-19 outbreak include the risk of contracting the virus, financial insecurity, and emotional trauma, among others. To combat these safety threats, journalists were responsible for their safety; hence, they ensured adherence to safety protocols with little or no support from the media houses they worked for. The implication of these safety threats to journalism practice includes reduced work output, reduced dissemination of factual reports, low-quality stories, and the lack of in-depth and investigative news reports during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Keywords Journalist safety · Mental health · COVID-19 · Nigeria

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported and identified a novel Coronavirus disease caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2 in China on 31 December 2019. On 30 January 2020, WHO (2020) declared Coronavirus also known as COVID-19, a public health emergency of international concern and issued temporary recommendations for curtailing its spread, including travel and trade restrictions. As of December 2020, COVID-19 cases were recorded in 213 countries with 1,845,597 deaths and 84,532,824 cases tested and confirmed in the laboratory (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2021). Of these over 84 million cases, Africa accounts for over 2 million, with Nigeria categorised by WHO as one of the

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13 high-risk African countries susceptible to the spread of COVID-19 (Amzat et al. 2020).

The index case of COVID-19 was reported in Lagos State, Nigeria, on 27 February 2020 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control 2020). As cases increased and spread to other states, the Nigerian government initiated lockdown restrictions to curb the virus's spread. The lockdown was announced for an initial period of 14 days with immediate effect in Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja states on 30 March 2020. The government further extended it for another 14 days with the inclusion of Kano state on 27 April 2020 (Ibrahim et al. 2020). Nevertheless, in these states and other states in Nigeria, essential workers, including journalists, were required to carry out their duties despite the lockdown. Alongside public health workers, journalists were at the frontline of "an emotionally loaded, complex playing field; and are pulled in many directions" (The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University 2009) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The crucial educative and informative roles of journalists and the media were heightened amid the pandemic as they informed the public on the accompanying effects of COVID-19 (UNESCO 2018). To help the public make informed decisions during the pandemic, journalists' safety was threatened as they faced unprecedented challenges to report accurate, credible, and reliable information about the COVID-19 pandemic; hence, the novel Coronavirus heightened the existing threats and safety issues faced by journalists and media workers. For instance, several national governments took legal actions against journalists and used the health crisis to punish them for their COVID-19 reportage (Cooper 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerian journalists faced safety issues bordered on freedom of expression, verbal and physical assault by security agencies, political party agents, and unknown gunmen, indiscriminate arrest, and detention by Nigerian authorities among others (Amnesty International 2019). However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the safety issues associated with journalists and journalism practice in Nigeria have taken a new dynamic. Journalists' voices are endangered as they are exposed to the risk of contracting the Coronavirus while carrying out their sacrosanct journalistic duties, which has implications for their safety.

Drawing on in-depth interviews, this study explores new and emerging safety challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced by Nigerian journalists who work in broadcast media houses. Specific questions this chapter seeks to answer are this: What are the safety issues or challenges experienced by Nigerian journalists during the pandemic? How did journalists respond to these safety challenges? What are the implications of these emerging safety issues associated with the pandemic to journalism practice in Nigeria? The findings of the study will inform future interventions for improving journalists' safety amid health crises. However, note that journalists' self-reports in this study are subject to intentional or unintentional misrepresentations of journalistic reality, which may constitute a limitation to the study.

Journalists' Safety in Africa: A Purview of the Past and Changing Dynamics Resulting from COVID-19

Globally, journalism practice is plagued with socio-political and socio-cultural factors that undermine media freedom generally and journalists' safety specifically (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020). Scholars identified these factors to include structural forces (Carlsson and Pöyhtäri 2017), cultural assumptions (Palmer 2018), and factors related to journalistic practice (Høiby 2019). However, the contextual practice of journalism in many developing countries of Africa varies widely from what is obtainable in the global north. As a result, the safety challenges encountered by African journalists may vary in detail, but it remains an apprehensive and unsolved phenomenon (Saleh 2015). Apart from challenges that include information disorder, lack of editorial independence, limited technical and financial resources, strict legal frameworks, etc. (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020), African journalists have a history of offline and online safety risks that undermine their freedom in the discharge of their duties.

Offline safety risks encountered by African journalists include killings and assassination in targeted attacks from extremist insurgencies and sectarian violence. Since 1990, 2658 journalists have been murdered globally; the International Federal of Journalists (IFJ) records that Africa accounts for 467 deaths out of this number (IFJ 2020). Alongside Arab and the Middle East, Africa was ranked third on the global list of the most dangerous region for journalists, with six killings, including three killings in Nigeria in 2020 (IFJ 2020). Journalists also encounter the safety threat of forceful arrests and imprisonment without trials beyond periods stipulated by constitutions. As of 2020, IFJ reported 235 journalists in prisons for work-related issues and ranked Africa second to Europe on the number of jailed journalists accounting for 62 media professionals held in jails in 2020 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020). These statistics are a pointer to the prevailing safety threats encountered by African journalists. In addition, most journalists are detained without charges proving that their arrests had to do with an abuse of power by perpetrators of violations against journalists and press freedom.

Also, obnoxious media regulations are imposed to gag the independent press in Africa. These legislations include archaic defamation and libel laws that facilitate journalists' imprisonment and outrageous registration and licensing fees. Other safety threats include physical attacks, harassment and intimidation, disappearances, torture, inhumane treatment, and confiscation and destruction of equipment and publications (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2012). These offline safety risks are perpetrated by state and non-state actors, including government representatives, security officials, influential individuals in the society, extra-state political groups, and terrorists (Harrison and Pukallus 2021).

Journalists are not only victims of physical violence; they are also subjected to psychological attacks online. These online safety risks include online hatred, death threats, verbal abuse, and sexual threats, particularly towards female journalists (Nilsson and Ornebring 2016). As a result, journalists are becoming vulnerable

and endangered in the digital world, with instances of being targets of trolling aimed at misleading and endangering them (Posetti 2013). Also, the advent of digital devices that allow for easy access to digital communication aids the digital surveillance of journalists by non-benevolent actors who pose safety threats to them (Waters 2018). Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2020) reported that governments are increasingly using digital surveillance to access journalists' digital communication in African countries like Egypt and Uganda. The online abuse of journalists has become prevalent that the United Nations (UN), UNESCO, RSF, and other civil organisations have recognised it as a problem and made calls to address it through research (Posetti 2013).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists encountered emerging challenges in reporting accurate information, and these have implications for journalism practice and journalists' safety. They include job and benefit cuts, reduced salaries, extra work hours, threats to media freedom, health issues, and safety risks (Posetti 2013). Mahoney (2020) projected that the existing threats for journalists in developing democracies like Africa would be heightened amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the case globally as data gathered by RSF (2020) during the pandemic revealed a significant surge in press freedom violations—with 35% constituting arbitrary arrests while 30% constituting physical or psychological violence. As a result of the state of exception laws and emergency measures adopted to combat the pandemic, journalists were arrested and sometimes jailed for their coverage of the COVID-19 health crisis. In addition, several governments used the excuse of false information to clamp down on press freedoms. In a tragic instance, an Egyptian journalist was detained for covering the COVID-19 pandemic but contracted the virus in detention and died there. Also, in 2020, there was an increase in arrests, prosecution, and attacks on the Nigerian media compared to 2019, with 60 journalists affected in 51 incidents (Article 19 2020). However, most journalists were released within a short period of arrest; 14 journalists are still in detention in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. There were also reports of assaults against journalists perpetrated by security forces in African countries like Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone (Knott 2020). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the violation of journalists in Nigeria, endangering their voices in the process.

While studies exist on journalism practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, an extensive review of literature reveals that they focus on coverage (Perreault and Perreault 2021) and combating infodemic and disinfodemic (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020). Also, research commentaries and essays (e.g., Bernadas and Ilagan 2020) on the changing dynamics of journalism practice during the pandemic exist and argue that COVID-19 has led to the emergence of new safety challenges for journalists and compounded existing safety issues. However, there are no existing empirical studies to back it up. Hence, the current study seeks to fill this knowledge gap.

Journalists' Safety in Nigeria

With a population of more than 200 million, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa (Varella 2020). Although the country enjoys media pluralism and the Nigerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression and press freedom, there are limitations to exercising these rights. For example, there is silence on the threats, and attacks press members are exposed to while reporting. The threats to journalists' safety in Nigeria date back to the colonial era when journalists were attacked for exercising their freedom of expression. For instance, two nationalists, Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, were jailed for challenging the colonial masters on colonialism and Nigerians' self-determination (Hajara et al. 2018). The colonialists also came up with obnoxious laws like the sedition law to limit press freedom.

Years after gaining independence from colonial rule, press freedom is still not guaranteed as Nigerian journalists continue to work in an environment that is unsafe and restricted. They are continually killed, attacked, and harassed with little or no effort to bring the culprits to book. In 2012, for example, the Committee to Protect Journalists recorded 143 cases of press freedom violations in Nigeria. Security officials were major perpetrators and accounted for 79% of these press violations (PEN International 2013). Also, between 2014 and 2015, there was a peak in the threats to journalists' safety as 47 journalists were assaulted due to elections and electioneering campaigns. Threats to journalism practice in Nigeria include attacks perpetrated by terrorists and security officials, trauma resulting from dealing with vulnerable populations, arrests, detention, and seizure of equipment, among others (Isola 2020). For instance, between January and October 2020, 3 journalists were killed, 52 were assaulted, and 12 were arrested (Article 19 2020).

In 2020, Nigeria ranked 115 out of 180 countries in the annual World Press Freedom Index (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020). This is an improvement because Nigeria was ranked 120 out of 180 countries in 2019. However, threats to journalists' safety remain, as the country is globally known for issues related to press freedom and is listed as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020).

There are several studies on journalists' safety in Nigeria. Scholars have examined threats to media freedom and journalists' safety generally (Umaru and Sharafa 2020), based on gender with a focus on women during elections (Adamkolo et al. 2020, 2021), etc. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the dynamic change it brought, scholars have provided commentaries on health and safety risks to journalists during pandemics (e.g., Bernadas and Ilagan 2020). While these commentaries exist, there are no existing empirical studies on the emerging safety threats and risks to Nigerian journalists during the pandemic. Understanding the emerging safety threats to journalists in a country like Nigeria, listed as one of the most difficult countries for journalists, is essential for understanding how safety threats to journalists are changing and heightening amid a pandemic. A revelation of these emerging safety threats and their determining factors is a crucial step towards proffering long-lasting solutions.

Theoretical Framework: Hierarchy of Influences

Journalism plays a pivotal role in the society; hence, journalists exist in an ecology where their work influences and is influenced by the environment surrounding it (Perreault and Perreault 2021). Several theoretical and conceptual groundwork exists to study the factors influencing and shaping news content and journalism practice (e.g., McQuail 2000; Preston 2009). However, the hierarchy of influences model remains one of the most widely known theoretical frameworks. The model, propounded by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), provides greater explanatory power and a framework for analysing the influence of combined factors at different levels on journalistic work. It explains factors that influence media production and organises it into a continuum from micro-individual to macro-social system levels. The levels in the continuum are individual, media routines, organisational, social institutional, and social system levels of influence, and the model suggests how influence at different levels may interact with one another (Reese 2019). The individual level of influence, the most micro level in the continuum, postulates that journalists' backgrounds, attitudes, personal traits, and professional orientation influence the media content they create (Hanitzsch et al. 2010). The media routine level of influence describes how newsroom routines and structures embedded in the immediate work environment of journalists shape their work and how media content is created (Reese 2019). The organisational level of influence refers to the media organisation's goals, roles, structures, and policies, and how they are implemented to balance commercial and professional concerns based on ownership goals (Hanitzsch et al. 2010). The social institutional level focuses on how the environment, sources, social institutions, etc., shape journalists' work, while the most macro level—the social system level explains how ideologies and the complex system within which journalists' operate as a whole can influence journalists' work (Reese 2019).

Apart from this model, several models also explain the levels of influence on media productions and journalism practice (e.g., McQuail 2000; Preston 2009). However, these sources portray similar influences, namely, individual, organisation, institution, societal, and international. The inclusivity of micro, meso, and macro levels makes the hierarchy of influences model distinct from other models. The model identifies individual and routine influences at the micro level, organisational influences at the meso level and institutional environment (i.e., political, socio-cultural, regulatory environments), and social system influences on journalistic practice at the macro level. Although the model has been used in journalism studies to unpack several communication concepts like professionalism and gatekeeping (Vos and Heinderycks 2015) across the proposed five levels of analysis, studies are lacking on how the model explains the concept of journalists' safety and the factors that influence it across the micro, meso, and macro levels. Therefore, the hierarchy of influences model underpins this study because it allows the researchers to examine the determinants of safety challenges journalists encountered while carrying out their

journalistic duties within the appropriate micro, meso, and macro levels in the Nigerian context.

Methods

By exploring journalists' experiences, this study provided an in-depth understanding of journalists' safety issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, we adopted a qualitative research method, including in-depth interviews that allowed research participants to express "their perspectives, thoughts, opinions, and behaviors related to their everyday experience using their sentences and expression methods" (Rapley 2004).

We used the purposive homogeneous sampling technique (Creswell 1998) that included the "snowballing" method—where the number of participants grew based on references made by interviewees (Henning et al. 2004) to select nine broadcast journalists in Lagos media houses interviewed between December 2020 and January 2021. Lagos was considered the most impacted state with 52,282 cases as of 10 February 2021—the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Nigeria during the pandemic (Varella 2021); hence, the focus on broadcast journalists in Lagos, Nigeria.

The respondents consisted of four male and five female journalists working with private- and government-owned broadcast media stations in Nigeria. Of the nine respondents, three work with radio stations, while six work with television stations. Six respondents have been journalists for 10–20 years, and the experience range of the remaining three respondents was between 3 and 9 years. The selected journalists have designations that include anchor, reporter, producer, researcher, among others.

Data Collection and Analysis

The in-depth interviews were conducted via telephone by one researcher and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for a thematic analysis conducted by reading the transcripts carefully and using an open coding procedure to analyse the data. The researchers coded the respondents' answers, and the coded responses were linked to themes categories related to the research objectives that emerged from the data. Next, we will discuss the key findings of the study related to the research objectives.

Results and Discussion

The challenges of journalism in making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the pandemic is transforming journalism practice are critical but have seldom been discussed. Given this, this study explores emerging safety issues journalists encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, how journalists responded to these safety issues, and the implication of the safety issues to journalism practice in Nigeria. We found existing safety issues and changes in the dynamics of journalists' safety that appear driven by the contextual specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic. We present and discuss the current safety issues viz-a-viz the changes in the dynamics of journalists' safety.

Emerging Safety Challenges and Journalists' Response(s) amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Risk of Contracting Coronavirus A significant safety challenge that resonated with Nigerian journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic was the risk of contracting the virus while discharging their journalistic duties. This finding is associated with existing literature identifying the danger of contracting diseases or viruses like Coronavirus as a safety issue for journalists (Collins 2001). Furthermore, the traditional media is already recognised as a poor vehicle for communicating accurate information regarding health issues because of sensationalism, omission, and inaccuracy (Leask et al. 2010). Hence, the risk of contracting a virus or disease during a pandemic further heightens journalists' inability to communicate accurate information on health issues like Coronavirus.

The safety challenge of journalists contracting COVID-19 while discharging their duties presented itself in different dimensions. First, the study reveals that journalists encountered sources who were dismissive about the virus's existence and spread. These sources refused to follow COVID-19 safety protocols; hence, journalists at an individual level had to continuously insist on the safety and social distancing protocol by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). As one journalist commented:

I work in the field and interview people in the studio, so I have the challenge of insisting on the social distancing protocol set by the disease control body in Nigeria. If you are in the studio and want to talk to someone and the person comes in, and you ask the person, can you please put on your face shield and the person says I don't have, and you don't have extra to give to the person. There are also some that you say to them, can you please wear this face shield and they say to you, for what now? There is social distancing, and more so, there is no COVID-19; I don't have COVID-19. (Private television reporter)

Second, carrying out specific journalistic duties such as sourcing for news, following leads, and conducting interviews required journalists to continually interact with members of the society whose COVID-19 status was unknown. Hence, the

potential risk of contracting COVID-19 from the public was another safety challenge Nigerian journalists encountered. Also, journalists encountered the safety challenge of contracting the virus from their colleagues as media organisations did not take adequate measures to carry out COVID-19 tests for journalists continually. Two journalists described the safety threat of closely interacting with the public and other journalists while discharging journalistic duties in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am mixing with people, and I had to protect myself as much as possible. I mixed with people with minimal PPEs, both on them and me. I just had on my face mask; some of them had, some of them didn't have. So mixing with people alone is a huge threat. In fact, that was the major threat I had. (Private television journalist)

I encountered the safety challenge of carrying out my reportage with other colleagues who might be suspected carriers of the virus, including me myself. (Private radio journalist)

Unlike previous studies that identified the predominant perpetrators of violations against journalists to include state actors like the government and security officials (Harrison and Pukallus 2021), the finding that safety threats to journalists were predominantly perpetrated by members of the society and media colleagues who were dismissive about COVID-19 and its increasing spread is interesting. The finding identifies an emerging safety threat that indicates a shift in the dynamics of journalists' safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dynamics of this safety threat are different from previous safety issues that can lead to journalists' death because journalists can control it when they take appropriate safety measures.

In responding to these safety threats, the study unpacks that journalists had to sensitise, educate, and appeal to dismissive sources relevant to the newsgathering process but dismissive about Coronavirus, on the need to maintain safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic at the individual level.

I had to go through the challenge of educating people and telling them you don't need to know if you have COVID-19 or not. Just wear the face shield to prevent it. I sensitized and appealed to people on the need for safety. This is what should be. For the sake of our older generation and for the sake of those who have an underlying illness, let's protect them by using a hand sanitizer and washing your hands. (Government television journalist)

These findings affirm the suggestion of the hierarchy of influences model, which proposes that social institutions (e.g., sources, environment) influence journalism practice (Reese 2019). However, it is important to note that the influence of sources at the social-institution level regulated the safety challenges journalists encountered and shaped how they carried out their duties at the individual level. Hence, this finding suggests that regarding journalists' safety, influence at the macro-social institution level interacts with and determines influence at the micro-individual level in this instance (Reese 2019).

Third, this study also finds that media houses did not provide journalists with broadcast equipment that aided safety protocols during the pandemic. Most journalists complained about using microphones without long stand; hence, they could not maintain social distancing and were increasingly exposed to the likelihood of

contracting the virus while gathering information from sources during the pandemic. A journalist described the frustration that came with doing fieldwork with inappropriate equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Go out, interview people, do vox-pop, how are you protecting me? Do I have a long stand to use for my mic? Because I am holding the microphone with my hands to their mouth, I am mixing with them. Our counterparts in the UK, US, Asia, etc., put safety measures in place. Their cameras and all the equipment they use on the field, they don't use it for the next 72 hours after polishing it with alcohol-based solutions. But here, you have to use the cameras over and over again because you probably three or four cameras, and you have four or five reporters going out, and so you don't have the time to drop it for 72 hours. (Private television journalist)

Also, some media houses did not provide journalists with protection kits (e.g., face masks, sanitisers) needed to protect them while they discharged their duties amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Where media houses provided journalists with face masks and sanitisers, they complained that the protection kits were not enough in relation to the journalistic work that had to be done and the increasing social interactions they had with the public. Hence, most journalists had to bear the cost implication of protecting themselves by securing protection kits. A reporter noted the following:

Working during the COVID-19 era has been challenging, especially as it concerns welfare and adequate PPE provision and transportation. Our job entails us to be part of the frontline workers, but our working conditions and allowances don't exemplify that. Safety on the part of journalists like myself is more personal rather than organisational. (Government television journalist)

These findings are consistent with Saleh's (2015) position that journalists are not equipped with Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs) and insurance to work within the confines of safety. At an organisational level, the findings also confirm the hierarchy of influences model proposition that the establishment and implementation of media organisation's structures to balance commercial and professional concerns influence journalism practice (Reese 2019). By not providing PPEs and appropriate equipment for reporting news during the pandemic, media organisations were positioned as sources of safety threats to journalists. This is an interesting finding because apart from censorship violations, media houses are seldom recognised as perpetrators of safety threats against journalists (Diedong 2017).

The unavailability of resources needed by media houses to provide PPEs for journalists posed a safety threat to journalists and influenced their decisions and actions at the individual level. Since the PPEs provided by most media organisations were not enough for reportorial duties, journalists took the initiative regarding safety protocols by regularly washing their hands, avoiding crowded places, taking private taxis to places, and buying PPEs for themselves and others while incurring the cost personally. This is illustrated by the remark of two journalists on how safety precautions were the personal duty of journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I had no option but to protect myself. I had to buy face shields and face masks for the people I was interviewing. I had to clean the table myself with an alcohol-based sanitizer. Yes, the

furniture I was going to sit on in the studio. Sometimes, I had to give people hand sanitizers and share with them to be protected. (Private television journalist)

First is survival of oneself, so I have to invest my resources to get my protective gear while trying at all times to be extra conscious of the necessary safety measures I should take to keep safe. (Government television journalist)

Based on this finding, the study shows that the inability of media houses to provide the needed resources for journalists is a determinant of emerging safety threats to journalists amid the pandemic and suggests influence at the organisational level (Reese 2019).

Financial Insecurity

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, financial insecurity from the non-payment of salaries or underemployment has plagued journalists in developing countries because many news organisations cannot afford resources that make journalists safe (Diedong 2017). Compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, we found that journalists' financial insecurity was heightened as spending increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since most media organisations failed to provide PPEs, most journalists personally incurred the cost of buying PPEs and protecting themselves while discharging their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also forced to commute using private taxis more expensive than the public transport system. Additionally, because most media organisations reduced the working population at the offices and moved work online, journalists consumed a lot of data to connect virtually with their colleagues and work online. Hence, journalists were faced with the safety challenge of financial insecurity as they incurred huge expenses while discharging their journalistic duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two journalists, for example, commented:

Having to consume lots of data in connecting virtually for some assignments resulted in huge expenses amongst others. Also, I experienced the challenge of spending much more money by taking a taxi from far distances. (Private radio journalist)

I have the challenge of getting the non-pharmaceutical equipment that I can use in protecting myself, like hand gloves, face masks, and alcohol-based hand sanitizers. This was because we didn't get those supplies, and if I wanted to get mine personally, it was very expensive. (Private television journalist)

The implication of this safety threat includes journalists choosing financial security over staying with the facts. Hence, journalists pursued agendas that give them access to financial resources instead of staying with the facts and reporting them. As a result, this safety threat led to the scarcity of factual and in-depth reports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Constant Fear and Emotional Trauma

Journalists reported that carrying out their journalistic duties during the COVID-19 pandemic was an emotional roller-coaster as they were plagued with feelings of fear and paranoia of contracting the virus. On the one hand, they were afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to their loved ones. On the other hand, their loved ones were also worried about journalists' safety. On this, two journalists said:

I have got family, I have people who depend on me, if anything happens to me, what happens to them? (Private television journalist)

I have family members who express worry over my safety as I might be infected while going out. (Government radio journalist)

While some journalists disclosed feelings of depression, some journalists also disclosed that they repeatedly questioned whether they were in the right profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questioning resulted from the fact that most media organisations did not tend to their journalists' safety and welfare during the pandemic. For instance, one journalist remarked:

At one point, I was thinking must I be a journalist? See what the bankers are doing, see what the oil and gas people are doing and other industries are doing for their people, and as a journalist, you are not taking care of me. (Private television journalist)

Generally, there was a consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic induced constant fear, emotional trauma, depression, and uncertainty among journalists who actively reported during the pandemic and their loved ones, affecting their mental well-being. The emotional trauma experienced by journalists was heightened by the inability of media houses to see to journalists' overall well-being and welfare. Hence, the emotional and psychological impact of dealing with COVID-19 was an emerging safety threat for journalists. The emotional trauma experienced by journalists has implications for journalists' work output (Seely 2017); hence, it is possibly one of the factors responsible for the reduced work output of journalists and low-quality reports produced during the pandemic.

Implications of Emerging Safety Issues Associated with the Pandemic to Journalism Practice in Nigeria

Journalists acknowledged that emerging safety issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria have implications for journalism practice in Nigeria. Some journalists agreed that the non-provision of PPEs by media houses increased the risk of contracting the virus through their interactions with individuals and organisations, thereby reducing their work output during the pandemic because they had to reject some assignments. These journalists further claimed that their rejection of assignments negatively affected their relationship with their direct superior. Hence, the

work environment in and outside broadcast media houses was not conducive enough for journalists, which affected their output. A journalist described this unconducive work scenario as:

Sometimes, they would tell you there is a gathering, go for this gathering, hear what they have to say, and come back with the story. I am like, I have no protection. I don't even have insurance, for crying out loud. There were some assignments I said no, I am not doing this, so I was short of reports, and it affected my relationship with my boss, but I don't care; it is my life. If you don't do anything to protect my life, why should I trust my life in your hands? (Private television journalist)

Also, because of journalists' safety issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many journalists agreed that they did not follow or stay with the facts. Hence, there was a reduction in the dissemination of factual news reports. The safety issue that particularly led to the reduced amount of factual news reports disseminated to the public during the pandemic is increased financial insecurity. Journalists indicated that their working allowances were insufficient to meet the increased expenses (e.g., buying large amounts of data, commuting in private taxis) incurred while discharging their duties. This increased financial insecurity of journalists has implications for journalism practice in Nigeria. First, the journalists agreed that financial insecurity would make journalists run with making money to meet their increasing needs of getting PPEs instead of getting the facts and running with it. Second, financial insecurity contributed to journalists' inability to *meet up with assignments* as they did not have enough money to go about their reportorial duties. Two journalists reiterated these implications:

More often than not, you need monetary resources, and some journalists would decide to fight for the money themselves. So it affects getting and staying with the facts, so people want to run with making money to get your PPEs. This happened during COVID-19. (Private television journalist)

It made me spend more finance in order for me to meet up. At some point, I didn't meet up with my assignments due to a lack of finance. (Private radio journalist)

The journalists agreed that the risk of contracting Coronavirus inhibited their ability to produce quality news reports. A journalist who works for a government television station noted that journalists were more interested in *thinking of their safety instead of concentrating on doing a good story*. As a result, most journalists did not effectively cover and report stories during the pandemic resulting in low-quality news stories. Also, the lack of PPEs and the fear of contracting the virus hindered journalists' ability to visit isolation centres. In the words of a journalist, *people were not ready to take the audacious move to go into isolation centres to bring to the people reports live from the isolation centre*. Hence, there were no ground-breaking stories or discoveries as journalists could not develop in-depth and investigative reports on the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, journalists reported encountering *overzealous* sources who didn't want to speak to journalists because of the fear of contracting the virus. This made the process of journalistic practice very difficult and tedious for journalists. A journalist described this situation aptly:

Sourcing for visuals and finding respondents to some topic issues became almost impossible to get because most people were reluctant to leave their homes to come out and grant interviews, which affected the quality of some of my reports. (Government television journalist)

Also, even though the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an increase in news production, journalists could not go the extra mile to obtain information on the pandemic due to fears regarding safety, which led to the creation of low-quality reports. These low-quality reports churned out by journalists during the pandemic potentially contributed to the rise of disinformation and misinformation associated with the pandemic (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020). Low-quality reports were aided by safety threats that included the risk of contracting the virus and increased spending during the pandemic.

Finally, journalists and health workers were on the frontline of combating the COVID-19 virus during the pandemic. As frontline workers, journalists are highly susceptible to contracting the virus. Hence, they have become endangered as they can become ill or die from the virus.

Based on the hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker and Reese 1996), these findings suggest that influence on journalists' safety at the organisational level, in turn, affects and shapes journalistic practice at the routine and individual levels as reflected in journalists' reduced work output, low-quality outputs, and not staying with the facts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 outbreak had a far-reaching impact on individuals, organisations, and governments in novel ways (Powell 2020). The need to report accurate information on COVID-19 changed the dynamics of safety issues experienced by journalists and journalism practice. On the one hand, the perpetrators of violations against journalists and press freedom are not limited to the government and influential individuals but now include every member of the society and media organisations representing the social institutional and organisational levels of the hierarchy of influences model (Reese 2019). This implies that the emerging safety threats identified by this study are determined and shaped by factors at the social institutional and organisational levels, which in turn influences and shapes journalists' decisions regarding media content and journalism practice at the individual level.

Journalism practice within the COVID-19 context has created a shift from the assumption that journalists are threatened by wars and civil unrest to the reality that the lives of journalists are threatened by possible disease or virus infection while reporting health crises resulting from infectious diseases or deadly viruses like Ebola and, recently, Coronavirus. This trend is likely to deprive the continent of important information as journalists have become endangered species. The findings of this study mirror some of the challenges journalism would likely encounter

post-pandemic and emphasise the need to re-imagine journalism's future regarding journalists' safety in African countries and developing democracies.

Although it has been established that many news organisations in developing countries like Nigeria may find it challenging to afford resources like PPEs that make journalists safe, in line with Bernadas and Ilagan (2020), we recommend that safeguarding the physical well-being of journalists during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic should not be the personal responsibility of journalists; it should be the responsibility of governments and news organisations. Therefore, governments should create and implement policies that enforce media houses' adherence to safety measures during health crises. Governments should also provide funding and support to media organisations during a health crisis. Also, journalists should learn to speak up, stand for their rights, and ensure that they are adequately protected during health crises.

Preparing and training regarding emotional distress aids adaptive coping mechanisms (Osofsky et al. 2005); hence, media houses should prepare and train journalists by providing them with an arsenal of coping methods to deal with emotional distress while reporting traumatic health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with Posetti (2013), we recommend that media houses provide mental health support and interventions and offer guidance to alleviate burnout and emotional distress during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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