

Nigerian Newsrooms Under COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

A global pandemic garners a great deal of media attention. The COVID-19 crisis is no exception. It was distinctive because more than a third of the world's population had to undergo quarantine in the first quarter of 2020 which had far-reaching social effects. This study provides a historical overview of Nigerian newspapers and explores how the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria impacted upon the newsrooms of mainstream media organizations. It draws on interviews with heads of newsrooms and mid-management staff from six elite newspapers in the country. Findings reveal that although the pandemic was economically challenging for news organizations, they had no choice but to stay in business, providing information to the public during lockdown and the protests which followed. This took a toll on journalists whose work was impeded by mob and police actions and had broader implications for news production and the survival of news organizations.

This study examines how the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria affected journalistic culture and newsrooms, with reference to the newspaper industry. This qualitative research was carried out in two phases. The first was conducted in April 2020, two weeks after the lockdown was introduced by the Nigerian government. The second phase was in the last two weeks of October 2020 when the nationwide lockdown had been lifted by the government (Adebowale, 2020). It is instructive to note that soon after this, the bottled anger of the citizenry was let loose with the #EndSARS [1] uprising across the country. This raises a central question: Did the COVID-19 lockdown give birth to the uprising or were these parallel developments?

In regard to the mediated dissemination of public health information, there have been recurring instances of fear, sensationalism, and online misinformation. The critical role of media practitioners in informing society during this period is not in doubt. Thus, the professional activities of journalists attract scholarly interest. It is arguable that journalists in a certain milieu serve as frontline or key workers during a pandemic such as COVID-19, although those in the health sector are closer to viral outbreaks.

The public expects news coverage to disseminate prevailing national concerns about the pandemic and its social havoc. Most importantly, journalists are obliged to report on the handling of COVID-19 by public office holders and hold them to public account. During the health crisis, the capacity of the media to set issue agendas and frame facts and figures about the pandemic influenced public responses to it. This article sheds light on these matters from a non-Western

perspective. It follows Silvio Waisbord and Claudia Mellado's thoughts about the importance of research that produces "knowledge that reflects local realities", rooted in "indigenous intellectual and cultural traditions" (2014: 362-363).

Journalism during a pandemic

Many studies have focused on the role of the media in the coverage of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, Swine Flu, and Ebola as well as the effects on audiences (Brodie, Hamel, Brady, Kates and Altman, 2004; Smith, Rimal, Sandberg, Storey, Lagasse, Maulsby, Rhoades, Barnett, Omer and Links, 2013; Smith and Smith, 2016; Ophir, 2018). Others have examined emotions emanating from pandemic news coverage (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) as well as the change in journalistic roles during a pandemic outbreak (Klemm, Das and Hartmann, 2019, Thompson, 2019). Added to this is the proffering of strategies on how journalists may improve their pandemic reportage of epidemics (Thomas and Senkpeni, 2020).

Journalists operating in a democracy, are expected to provide citizens with "relatively accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely independently produced information about public affairs" (Nielsen, 2017: 2). These tasks, which are foregrounded in journalistic routines, makes it possible to understand the course of the pandemic. It is important to emphasize here that, outputs produced by media organizations largely depend on the resources available. This will indirectly shape the actual production of story content. As Adrian Monck notes, "Stories aren't valuable. Readers, viewers, and listeners are. How valuable? Advertisers, not journalists, decide on that" (2008: 99). This implies that the work of media practitioners is shaped by, and subject to, the economic vagaries of their organizations.

According to Champagne (2005, p.49) "journalistic production is always strongly dictated by the social, especially political and economic, conditions in which it is organised". This leads us to consider the state of newsrooms within the political economy of Nigerian media. Historically, one must understand the state of newsrooms prior to the pandemic in order to illuminate the changing conditions of journalistic practice in the country.

Locations of study in contemporary Nigeria

With a population exceeding 200 million people and a large economy, Nigeria is usually referred to as 'The Giant of Africa' [2]. With over 500 ethnic groups and 300 languages, Nigeria is generally divided into Northern and Southern regions, although many ethnicities live throughout the country. Northern Nigeria mostly contains the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, and the predominant religion is Islam. The North can be delineated into three geopolitical zones: the North-West, consisting mainly of Hausa-Fulani with Muslim beliefs; North-Central, consisting mainly of Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups and various minorities (with Muslim or Christian beliefs); and North-East, consisting mainly of Hausa-Fulani, the Kanuri and other minority groups who are Muslims and Christians.

The Southern part of Nigeria contains three geopolitical zones. The Southwest, where most of the Yoruba ethnic group are domiciled, is the only zone that is nearly evenly divided among Muslims and Christians. The South-East, which belongs to the Igbo ethnic group, is mainly Christian by faith. The South-South zone, which is the oil-rich region that sustains Nigeria's economy, is home to many ethnic minorities, mostly Christians.

In order to cover Nigeria effectively, a media outlet requires extensive human labor, as the country presently has 36 states as well as a national capital—Abuja, which enjoys almost the status of a state.

Political economy of the media in Nigeria: A historical perspective

Media ecology and journalistic practices in Nigeria have been shaped by successive turns in the nation's political history. At the conclusion of the Berlin Conference between 1884 and 1885, which was designed to fashion an agreement among European powers on colonization and trade within the African continent, Great Britain was allocated certain areas. They included the present regions of Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone as well as part of Cameroon in West Africa.

At this time, the British were primarily concerned about preventing intrusions from the French and the Germans. Consequently, a Charter was granted to the Royal Niger Company to establish a protectorate. This provided the foothold that enabled Britain to establish control over the territory now called Nigeria (see Uzoigwe, 1976; Hargreaves, 1984). By 1900, the Charter had been cancelled, and a royal protectorate was declared such that the Northern region was governed through indirect rule. Southern Nigeria, on the other hand, was governed through direct rule.

This governance style was introduced under the leadership of the British soldier and explorer, Sir Frederick John Dealtry Lugard who was charged with "strict instructions to avoid unnecessary military conquest" (Pierce, 2016). By 1914, for economic reasons which proved attractive for European trade and commerce, the Southern protectorate was amalgamated with the Northern protectorate to form the present 'Nigeria'. The name, originating from the 'Niger area', was coined by Flora Shaw, a journalist, who later became the wife of Frederick Lugard.

A considerable literature covers the origins of a newspaper industry which predates the formation of Nigeria itself. The early press was linked to the activities of proselytizing Christians and the activities of liberated slaves connected with the British anti-slavery movement (Omu, 1967; Oduntan, 2005). The missionaries introduced Western style education in Southern Nigeria, and this underpinned the formation of colonial government.

The Northern region's acceptance of Western education clashed with already existing Arabic and Quranic education. As a result, both the Western and Eastern parts of Southern Nigeria were more Westernized in terms of education and media culture. The North, which is larger than the two other regions, was behind in infrastructure development. This explains, in part, why colonial officials were often seen as paternalist towards the Hausa-dominated Islamic North (see Chick 1996; Bourne, 2018). In general, the Northern rulers deferred to the colonial masters, who were trusted to help them develop like the South.

Prior to the British intervention, Nigeria's first newspaper was published in Yoruba; *Iwe Iroyin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* (Newspaper for the Egbas and Yorubas). It was established in Abeokuta in November 1859 by Henry Townsend of the Christian Missionary Society and was largely dedicated to promoting Christian evangelism and education of the local people (Abubakre, 2004). It reported in Abeokuta, Lagos, and other parts of Yorubaland [3]. Oduntan noted that the paper provided commercial information for the trading route of the Atlantic coast. This enabled European and African traders "to know what was most in demand, what to trade in, and what to produce" (2005: 300). With an estimated 300 daily readers, the sale price of 120 cowries was not enough to sustain it; subsidies from London were needed to pay staff and missionaries (Oduntan,

2005: 302). The eventual choice of Lagos, about 80 kilometers from Abeokuta, as Colonial Headquarters contributed to the demise of the newspaper.

The Colonial Office and Nationalist Pressmen (Southern Nigeria)

The Colonial Office, stabilizing governance over the natives, administered political institutions and shaped their ideology. After the first World War, it was crucial to fend off the Soviet anti-imperialist narrative, while promoting Western liberal norms and values. In so doing, the Colonial Office articulated colonial policies and entrenched the imperial hegemony of the British Empire (see Jenks, 2016).

One must also acknowledge the critical importance of nationalism and nationalist leaders. Idemili (1978) reinforces this view by paraphrasing the thoughts of Williams Hachten. He noted that:

...to study either nationalism or the press in British West Africa is to study the other. The press, he says, gave rise to nationalism, its prime means of diffusion, the medium through which the idea could be disseminated. Similarly, nationalism gave to the press its *raison d'être*, in extending its circulation. (Idemili, 1978: 85)

There was a marked antipathy between the Colonial Office and young nationalists who propagated anti-colonial sentiments through the print media (the content of which created a lasting impression in the minds of the public). However, the colonial hegemony, to a certain extent, was needed to maintain an accommodating relationship with nationalist newspaper men (see Newell, 2015: 110-112). Their stance was a precursor of later moves toward decolonization. Regionally, prominent among nationalist agitators were Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, both of Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

In Nigeria, two important figures stand out—Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. Their efforts served as a springboard for the nation's political development and enabled the establishment of mass media infrastructure in the country. For nationalist newspaper owners like Azikiwe, survival, influence, and political activity required a major public profile. In other words, newspapers in the hands of nationalists did more than champion the cause of self-rule; Nationalist leaders could shore up their personal image and promote their political identity.

Censorship and the prohibition of publications was considered extreme by the colonial authorities. But the writings and activities of anti-colonial actors could bring prosecutions for sedition. Notwithstanding such truculence, the British Administrators sought to attract British investors to the media sector of West Africa. In this context, the famed Mirror Group of London came to Lagos, Southern Nigeria in 1947 (Chick, 1996). Further, the Mirror Group is inarguably linked to the 'professionalisation' of journalistic practice in Nigeria, in contrast to the nationalistic newspaper men who were necessarily partisan. Another dimension to colonial hegemony concerns the role of transnational global news agencies. Reuters, for example, were granted secret subsidies by the British government to influence the African media sphere and to fund professional journalistic training (see Jenks, 2016).

The profit-oriented approach to newspaper business in Nigeria stems from the establishment of the *Daily Times* in 1926. Here, some European members of the Lagos Chamber of Commerce joined hands with a wealthy and influential Nigerian, Sir Adeyemo Alakija, to set up the paper in opposition to Herbert Macaulay's nationalist-owned *Lagos Daily News* [4]. The *Daily Times* board

of directors and shareholders were united by their financial interests. Beyond supporting the economic progress of Nigeria, the editorial policy of the paper was unaligned to any creed or party.

Obafemi Awolowo, one of Nigeria's foremost statesmen who worked previously as a reporter with the *Daily Times*, would later portray the paper as "an unpardonably dull journalistic and literary product" in comparison to the thriving *West African Pilot* [5], which he described as "a fire-eating and aggressive nationalist paper of the first order" (cited in Derrick, 2018: 245). The *West African Pilot* was founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe, who studied in America and took on journalism as a vocation. He was more an astute politician who understood the politics of the time [6] than a professional journalist. Both Macaulay and Azikiwe formed the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons political party in 1944, with the former and latter serving, respectively, as Chairman and Secretary-General.

To survive the challenges confronting his newsroom, Azikiwe cultivated friendships among those who mattered. He became so popular that his publication was tolerated even by some colonial governors. It was a relationship from which Azikiwe benefited immensely especially in terms of his newspaper enterprise (see Flick, 1999: 150-151).

In his autobiography, Azikiwe (1970) admitted that he established these newspapers to be "economically secure and free from want" (286). Newspapers edited by Azikiwe were reputed for their commercial success. For instance, in 1936, while serving as the editor of the *African Morning Post* published in Accra, Gold Coast (now Ghana), circulation grew from an initial 2,000 to 10,000 copies daily. Its content focused on "politicizing a mass audience with simple, hard-hitting, and often scurrilous language, designed to be read aloud by literates to illiterates" (Flint, 1999: 146).

With the *West African Pilot*, set up in 1937 and published under his Zik Press Limited, Azikiwe was able to replicate the success recorded at the *African Morning Post*. By 1939, circulation of the new paper had reached 10,000 copies daily. Azikiwe would go on to establish a chain of titles [7] under the Zik Group of Newspapers in February 1940. Colonial officials did adopt punitive measures against his medium. These included the withholding of adverts from his papers and non-renewal of the wireless license through which he received news reports as Reuter's Agent for British West Africa. His was the only indigenous media outlet that could afford to subscribe to the service (see Newell 2016: 312-313). Known for his championing of egalitarian ideals, anti-racist principles, and human rights, Azikiwe kicked against the sanctions imposed by writing protest letters to the Colonial Office, England. Beyond the newspaper business, this publisher diversified into other commercial ventures including setting up the African Continental Bank in 1944.

Azikiwe's contemporary and closest political rival in the Southern region was Obafemi Awolowo, who had made inroads into journalism and the newspaper industry with the publication of the *Nigerian Tribune* in 1949. This title consistently championed the political interests of its proprietor and the southwestern region, and it has become, remarkably, the oldest surviving, privately-owned newspaper in the country.

In the 1960s, Awolowo's political party, the Action Group, asked Fleet Street media mogul, Roy Thomson, to invest funds in print media outlets that were well disposed to publicizing the region's interests. It was, however, not an entirely successful relationship due to the adverse political atmosphere of the period. As one commentator noted:

Action Group leaders were not the best business partners. They clashed with Thomson and the ruling party, which led to some of them being jailed on treason charges, while others just wound up broke. That left Thomson paying all the bills. (Jenks, 2016: 10)

The friendship between Rupert East, a colonial official, and Abubakar Imam, an educated northerner led to the formation of the Gaskiya Corporation, which published *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* (Truth is Worth More than a Penny). It was largely financed by the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund established in the aftermath of the Second World War (Furniss, 2011). Abubakar Imam became editor of *Gaskiya*. However, East's liberal aspirations soon clashed with the Board members' profit-making imperatives [8]. Conflicts arose over the commercial viability of the entity, which resulted in East losing his position as Chairman (see Furniss, 2011). By 1948, the English edition of the paper was published under the title *Nigerian Citizen*, which later, following its reorganization, became the *New Nigerian* during the independence period. It was the mouthpiece of the North and its prominent politicians, such as Tafawa Balewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello. The paper competed favorably with those established in the South.

In 1935, the *Daily Times* was acquired by a shrewd European businessman, Robert B. Paul, who managed West African Newspapers Limited. The company also held in its stable two magazines—*West Africa* and the *West African Review* (Derrick, 2018: 234). This development was expected to “counteract the influence of the increasingly belligerent nationalist press” (Chick, 1996: 379). Not much success was recorded on this front as the change of ownership led to a decline in *Daily Times* readership.

Cecil Harmsworth King took charge of the paper following its acquisition by the Mirror Group of London in 1947. He favored the liberal norms of British colonial rule in running the newspaper. On employer-employee relationships, King stated: “Our relations with our African staff are of the greatest importance to the continued success of the paper and even apparent high-handedness can do the firm permanent harm...It is no use our prating on about Africanisation in the paper if we do not practice it in the paper” (cited in Chick, 1996: 383).

At its peak in 1975, the *Daily Times* weekday titles sold up to 275,000 copies per day, while its *Sunday Times* title sold 400,000 copies. Oso (1991: 44) wrote that the commercialization of the *Daily Times* led to the “gradual depoliticisation of the Nigerian press” and subsequently shaped the organization and production of news. In 1973, the Federal Military Government took over the paper by acquiring 60 percent of its shares and those of *New Nigerian* under a military decree. According to the Federal Government, the acquisition of 60 percent equity was meant to underline the government's “policy of full support of press freedom at all times” (*New Nigerian*, 1975: 14). Subsequent actions by the Government (under military and democratic leadership) proved otherwise, especially with the introduction of draconian anti-Press laws in 1984. Here, the editorial culture of the Nigerian media was seen to have petered out into “slavish and virtually sycophantic mega-phones of the government or of the party in control” (Ayodele, 1988: 110).

After the transition from military government to civilian administration in 1999, the *Daily Times* in 2004, under the administration of ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo, was sold to a private investor, Folio Communications Limited. At this time, the Federal Government owned 96.05 percent of the *Daily Times*' equity. At the 90th anniversary of the paper in 2016, the Chairman of Folio Communications, Fidelis Anosike, stated: “We have quietly reinvented and reinvigorated the newspaper toward providing leadership in quality news dissemination for Nigerian youths, the political and business elites” [9]. But, with frequent changes of ownership, the *Daily Times* lost the influence it once commanded within the Nigerian media industry.

The *Daily Times* as a viable media enterprise prompted the establishment of other newspapers in the country during the early 1970s and 80s, especially in the Southwest region. With the take-over of the paper by the military government, private individuals, including some politicians [10],

provided somewhat credible news alternatives which canvassed the transition of power from military dictatorship to civilian leadership. Around this period also came a crop of young, well-trained journalists with university degrees who were smart, bold and prepared to criticize the military rulers. These journalists were groomed by Babatunde Jose [11] as Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Times* in the early 1970s to become independent reporters and columnists (Duodu, 2008). Jose, himself, was a beloved protégé of Cecil King.

The proprietors of some emerging news outlets did not mind the absolute powers which the military wielded against the Nigerian people. Such newspapers and magazines established around this time included *The Punch* in 1971, the Concord Group of newspapers with its flagship, *National Concord* in 1980, the *Guardian* in 1983, *Newswatch* in 1984, *Vanguard* in 1984, and *Tell* in 1991, amongst many others. Except for *Concord* and *Newswatch* [12], all the other publications are still in existence. Media practitioners in these organizations provided useful data for the present study.

Two years after *Newswatch* magazine was established, Editor Dele Giwa was assassinated by a letter bomb; the military rulers were the major suspects. Dele Olojede was one of Giwa's mentorees and a close associate. In sympathy, the US Ford Foundation enrolled Olojede at Colombia University for a journalism degree. He worked for several years at the *Newsday* paper before returning to Nigeria in 2007 to establish his *Next* newspaper group, which thrived, remarkably, for four years before folding. More recently, Dapo Olorunyomi, who admired both Dele Giwa and Olojede, established his own online newspaper, the *Premium Times* in 2011. This is now one of the most vibrant newspapers in Nigeria.

Structural adjustment programme and the Nigerian media market

Upon independence, agricultural produce was the mainstay of Nigeria's income. There was cocoa, coffee, and rubber from the west, palm oil and palm kernel from the east, while the north produced groundnut and cotton. Nationalist governments got money from cocoa boards and other agricultural boards to fund their political parties and newspapers.

The farmers were expected to produce while receiving a fraction of the export proceeds from their produce. Nationalist elites utilized these revenues to fund their political activities which made agricultural activities unprofitable and triggered rural migration to the cities. This movement was aided by the oil boom of the mid-1960s which compelled the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon to declare that Nigeria has no problem with money but with how to spend it (see Odunfa, 2010; Legum, 1975).

Nigeria thus became a mass importer of goods, including agricultural products which had been hitherto exported. In these circumstances, and with the domestic impact of global economic recession in the early 1980s, newsprint imports were banned by media houses under the Buhari military regime. With the structural adjustment programme introduced by the Babangida military government in 1986, on behalf of the International Monetary Fund, the purchasing power of many Nigerians declined. Spending on newspapers fell sharply, leading many outlets to cut their print runs by over 50 percent. Citing data obtained from the Annual Report and Statement of Account of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Olukotun (2004) notes that the rate of inflation galloped from 7.4 percent in 1990 to 44.6 percent in 1992 and to 57 percent in 1994. Between 1994 and 1997, more than 32 press publications closed because of the harsh economics of production, unfriendly economic policies, and political persecution of privately-owned publications by the government. Since then, newspaper circulation figures in Nigeria have remained shrouded in secrecy. The Audit

Bureau of Circulation in Nigeria, which is supposed to provide credible data about the media industry, has barely operated.

The impact of digital technology

During the mid-1990s, the internet reshaped the media ecology in Nigeria and became an important source of news for many, especially the huge youth population. The influx of highly affordable smartphones—particularly Asian brands like Samsung and Tecno, mass produced for the Nigerian market—boosted information exchange among the populace. Citizens could obtain news about politics from Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms. WhatsApp was, and remains, another significant platform for the dissemination of political messages. Nigeria has a high level of WhatsApp users, coming just behind Kenya and South Africa (Iqbal, 2021). The Mobile Telephone Network recorded a 2020 turnover of NGN1.346 trillion in Nigeria (Adamolekun, 2021). For nearly two decades, the digital migration of major Nigerian newspapers to the internet has reshaped the Nigerian media-public sphere.

Media and COVID-19 lockdown

Deuze and Witschge (2018: 165) portray newsrooms and news work as a part of a “self-organising social system” made up of “shifting coalitions of participants”, the activities of which are sustained by advertising, distribution and other services. With COVID-19, the loss of thousands of lives and government impositions or ‘lockdowns’ were damaging for journalists.

In the last weeks of March 2020 and by mid-April, various news organizations across the world announced plans to furlough hundreds of their employees (Gabbatt, 2020). In the United States, the largest newspaper publisher, Gannett, initiated cost-saving measures, including layoffs and pay reductions among staff (Guynn and Braga, 2020). The journalism research organization, Poynter.org, compiled worldwide examples of media outlets that had to introduce newsroom furloughs, layoffs, and closures (Hare, 2021).

In Africa, the lockdown was further compounded by cases of press violations, human rights abuse of citizens, and intimidation of journalists in several parts of Africa, from Ghana to Nigeria to Zimbabwe. Journalists were beaten, arrested, and detained despite proof of identification as professionals. The situation was similar in some parts of Europe where Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [13] documented attacks and intimidation against journalists covering COVID-19 issues in Ukraine.

Despite a relatively weak healthcare sector, Nigeria’s use of real-time surveillance coupled with laboratory capabilities enabled the detection of new health risks (See Dixit, Ogundeji and Onwujekwe, 2020). The country has a reputation for producing well-trained medical practitioners, as was evident in the handling of the Ebola pandemic in 2014. Following the advisory signal from the World Health Organization urging nations across the world to prepare for, and contain the spread and containment of, the COVID-19 virus, the Nigerian government deployed no less than 60 doctors to support screening activities at Lagos International Airport.

Reports on the first reported case in the country, linked to an Italian national, quickly displaced the trending story on the removal of the Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, a hitherto influential Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (BBC, 2020). The Italian was reported to have arrived in Lagos from Milan on 25 February 2020. From this index case, which was confirmed by the virology research laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), a total of 39 people

had to be quarantined while contact tracing measures commenced for all others aboard the same flight (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020). Irrespective of measures put in place by the government, as of 11 November 2020, the country had recorded 1,162 deaths from the pandemic, according to data provided by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

On 30 March 2020, the Nigerian government introduced lockdowns for Lagos, its commercial nerve center, Abuja, the nation's capital, and Ogun State in the southwestern part of the country. These three locations are home to most of the mainstream media organizations. Only media workers who could prove that they were unable to work from home were exempted from the government's 'stay at home order.'

Prior to the quarantine, after it was reported that a powerful presidential aide [14] had contracted the coronavirus, the number of journalists covering Nigeria's presidential villa, Aso Rock, was reduced from 108 to 20. Some viewed this as a strategic move to insulate the presidency from media houses who were critical of the government. They rejected the official government line that the decision was intended to prevent journalists from contracting the coronavirus (Oweh et al., 2020).

These developments lead to the central research question of this article: In what ways has the COVID-19 lockdown affected the newspaper industry in Nigeria? The study involved recorded telephone interviews with heads of newsrooms and mid-management staff at six mainstream newspapers in Nigeria. Journalists/editors from *ThisDay*, *Punch*, the *Nation*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, and the *Guardian* were interviewed. These newspapers, published in Lagos, Ogun and Abuja, were chosen according to their profile and geographical reach. The interviewees were divided in half. The first category contained six journalists who were heads of newsrooms, while the second category comprised another six senior journalists who served at mid-management level in the six mainstream media organizations. Participants in the first category are designated as participants A, B, C, D, E and F. Those in the second category are referred to as participants G, H, I, J, K and L. The interviewees were media workers with high journalistic capital; they had earned professional recognition and won major media awards for themselves and their organizations.

The median age of the interviewees was 49.5 years, and their years of experience in journalism ranged from nine to 23 years. They were all males and possessed a university degree plus higher qualifications in communication and related disciplines. Recorded telephone interviews lasting 10 to 20 minutes were transcribed. From the transcribed interviews, themes were generated and analyzed. The findings are summarized and sub-categorized in the following discussion.

Economic viability and adherence to the social purpose of journalism

The lockdown period made mainstream media organizations much more vulnerable to insolvency. The papers faced sharp revenue declines owing to the dearth of advertisements and newspaper sales and the pandemic's impact on media workers' welfare. It became more expensive to produce newspapers, leading to a reduction both in the print runs and pagination. As Participant A confirmed:

Newspaper sales dropped because of the lockdown, the vendors who usually sell at street junctions and in traffic are no longer there, so everything about newspapers is in crisis right now, even advertisers. All the advert agencies have shut down, people who ordinarily will walk into the newsroom and place adverts- nobody can move...even burials, obituaries, public announcements are at a standstill.

Corroborating the above assertion, Participant C stated that,

The few adverts that we get, the advertisers say payment will be after the lockdown; significantly we have lost income. I do not think we can survive if it persists, we will have to look for what to do. We have the responsibility to inform the public though. This time around, it is not about business, it is about constitutional responsibility to inform, and of course we must document for history. Twenty years from now, people would want to know what happened during COVID-19, we should be able to get the newspaper and get the required information.

The latter part of Participant C's submission is quite significant because it suggests an adherence to the social purpose of journalism irrespective of the financial difficulties confronting the industry. Here, these news organizations continued to operate in deference to the public interest during the pandemic lockdown. Interviewees saw it as a statutory imperative to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people [15]. Hence, they were in agreement that the newsroom must remain open. On this testimony, journalists were united in their belief that staying in business and providing information to the public even at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown was worth the effort. In this sense, they shared a "universe of tacit presuppositions" (Bourdieu, 2005, p.37) that could not be abandoned.

In wealthier nations, such as the United Kingdom, lockdown effects were cushioned by the provision of lifelines to support cultural industries, including the media industry. This allowed staff of these organizations to stay in their homes and observe the quarantine. Thus, the remuneration of journalists and other news workers was guaranteed as and when due. This contrasts with the Nigerian situation. As Participant B observed:

The government in Nigeria will be happy if newspapers cannot even publish; because the truth is that there are certain things, they will not even want you to publish anyway, especially some of the things that have not been done properly. The government will be happy as it is less concerned with media houses surviving.

On 11 May 2020, a report by a non-governmental based media organization, Media Career Development Network highlighted measures introduced by some media organizations to cope with the challenges. These included non-payment of salaries and salary reductions by as much as 50 percent across different cadres (Otufodunrin, 2020).

Journalistic routines and content

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen journalists produce content from home during lockdown. News organizations, in compliance with public health measures, prioritized submission of reports online to limit physical presence in the newsrooms. Participants' views were consistent on this matter. Participant B, for instance, explained:

Only the desk heads and people doing production, the sub-editors and graphic artists come to the office. More than 50 people worked in the newsroom before now but now reduced to less than 20.

He continued,

Those who come to work, we send vehicles to go and pick them so that social distancing can be observed, and we also return them to their homes at the close of

work. Reporters do not come to work. We have stopped receiving visitors to our office. The editorial meetings have stopped. We now hold meetings on the phone through zoom.

Aside from using their platforms to promote public health information through reporting and broadcasting of measures to contain the coronavirus, media organizations themselves adhered strictly to these precautionary measures. Social media, especially Twitter, served as the major platform and information stream for reporters. News gathering and news content was greatly influenced by the immense coverage devoted to the coronavirus scourge. Continual reports on the number of sick and dead people sidelined other news items. Participant B dwelt extensively on this, noting that:

Our work has changed, most of the stories we get are usually centered on coronavirus. Before now, you hear of other stories but most of the stories now centered on coronavirus; because of the lockdown, reporters cannot go to different places. As a matter of fact, nobody will even be in those places you want to go.

Participant E noted the impact of COVID-19 on journalistic routines:

Since I started practicing journalism two decades ago, I have never seen a thing like this whereby journalists and everybody has to quarantine. Although journalists in Nigeria have been exempted, but other sectors of the economy have been shut down. There is really nothing journalists can do because journalists do their work with others. All government offices that provide perhaps 50 percent or 60 percent of daily news have been shut. All key officials are quarantined.

Similarly, Participant G remarked that,

Lockdown means restricted access to even the most essential of contacts. Though journalists are exempted from the movement restrictions orders, the fact that others are locked out means journalists may not get what they want. With the lockdown comes complete shutdown of public transportation. What this means is that journalists without personal or official means of transport find movement very difficult. The newsrooms are being sustained from homes thanks to online tools and social media platforms enabling crowdsourcing and monitoring of happenings. News makers are also increasingly providing information through the social media and by regular emailed releases.

The number of journalists covering the Nigerian State House were greatly reduced prior to the lockdown; however, journalists were needed to align with the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 under the leadership of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation in order to protect public health. Interviewees highlighted their cooperation with the government during the period of health crisis. Participant A, who headed the Northern bureau of his media organization, disclosed:

I have assigned three reporters to cover the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and Chairman of the Taskforce, the Health and Science reporter for the Minister of Health and the Director General of the Centre for Disease Control, and the Foreign Affairs reporter for Minister of Foreign Affairs.

With the lockdown came the realization that changes in news gathering were affecting news content. As Participant J observed, "It is still the same news journalists cover; the only thing is the quality of the stories. You are not likely to find very big stories". Participant I also reinforced this

when he stated that his organization had come to depend on newswires like the News Agency of Nigeria.

Human rights and press violations

Interviewees also mentioned that law enforcement agencies were intimidating news workers, even though they were exempted from the lockdown. Narrating his unpleasant encounter with security officers, Participant E noted that journalists working with media organizations whose names were not well known experienced most of the intimidation from security officials. The interviewees also highlighted the attack from military personnel on media organization vehicles distributing their titles during the lockdown (Akwasike, 2020). This caused major revenue losses for which there was no compensation. It seemed as if the seizure of newspapers was part of the restrictions necessary to control the spread of the pandemic.

All interviewees reported a significant reduction in the print runs and pages of their respective newspapers due to the lockdown. Participant A stated, “we have reduced our pagination, before now we were doing 48 to 56 pages, but we have reduced it to 32”. The limiting of pages was common to all of the mainstream newspapers chosen for this study. Participant C offered more explanation on this:

We do not get enough sales because people do not go out. Our sales have dropped and what are we reporting? We cannot bore people with too much of it (COVID-19). That is why we reduced our pagination. We have reduced our print run by more than 50 percent because people are not in their offices. People cannot get to buy it because most vendors cannot get to where to collect copies of the paper. A vendor who lives at Oshodi for instance has to go to Ikeja to collect his own copies but there is no vehicle to take him.

Similarly, Participant L stated, “most of the people who are supposed to buy newspapers cannot buy; they will essentially be concerned with the money to feed themselves and their families instead of looking for money to buy papers, because of that, we need to reduce the number of print out.”

Findings obtained after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted

In this second phase, the same interview participants of the first phase were followed up. They were asked to again reflect on the COVID pandemic and to give an update on how the health crisis had affected them and their work.

A recurrent theme was lament over the income losses experienced by many colleagues and subordinates who had lost their jobs in the previous few months. Their plight heightened uncertainties among those still working in their respective news establishments. As Participant F put it,

I am lucky to still have my job as many staff have been sacked in our company. Indeed, nearly 100 workers have been told to go in a bid to sustain and stabilize the company. We are not surprised because it simply means our fears are turning into reality. As it is now, no one is sure of tomorrow.

One of the participants (K) also disclosed that with retrenchments, the work output expected from the remaining few increased. He stated:

I am not satisfied with the hours spent at work. I function in such a way that I do not have a closing time. The problem is that they do not recognize it and I do not even get any emoluments for it.

He revealed that some staff members who were discharged by his organization, were later asked informally to submit stories as freelancers on a ‘pay as you go basis.’ Interviewees talked about how staff shortages forced them to make sacrifices, such as taking a pay cut, receive fewer allowances, and working long hours.

Participant I talked about the “injustice” and ethics surrounding the process of discharging workers. According to him, many of the workers had “put in a lot when the days were good”. He then asked, rhetorically, “Is this how to reward them?” In September 2020, a leading candidate for the position of leadership in the Lagos branch of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) implored the management of *The Nation* news outlet to recall journalists who had been sacked because the pandemic. However, in response, the Editor-in-Chief stated that this was not possible because of the “systemic situation” which the paper, and many others like it, was in (Oduah, 2020).

Prior to that, the National President of the NUJ, had written to the head of the Nigerian Government, Muhammadu Buhari, requesting a financial bail-out on behalf of the media. In a letter entitled, “Convulsions in the Media Industry”, he pointed out that media organizations in the country were daily being asphyxiated by the economic crisis caused by the lockdown. He enjoined the Federal Government to urgently intervene to avert what he termed a “catastrophe” in the media industry (Obi, 2020).

Although the Nigerian government had indicated a readiness to assist, this raised issues of media credibility. Some critics pointed out that assistance for the media industry would make nonsense of the journalistic commitment of holding power to account. In a Tweet-chat seminar organized by the *Premium Times* Centre for Investigative Journalism as part of activities to mark the 2020 World Press Freedom Day, senior media practitioners took turns to deliberate on the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Nigerian media industry. One of the participants, Ejiro Umukoro, declared that “our mental dependency on government aid shows a very sick infrastructural decay at play in addition to the media’s lack of self-innovation, having to kowtow to ‘scratch-my-back-I-scratch-your-back’ revenue models” (Okafor, 2020).

In an interview with Dapo Olorunyomi, veteran journalist and publisher of the respected online medium *Premium Times* [16], the issue of media sustainability was raised. He stressed the need to innovate and introduce measures that went beyond the traditional market model of advertising and pointed out that the *Premium Times* online newspaper had adopted a “mixed model” whereby advertising constituted only about 30 percent of revenue. Olorunyomi’s remarks below shed further light on this matter:

We have invested earlier on in data. We do a whole lot of work in the area of data. We are also a not-for-profit newsroom as I mentioned earlier. This helps us to seek purposeful grants. We entered into partnership with development organizations, and they help in funding some of our programs. For instance, our health program is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Some of the accounts on the war against terror are funded in part by the MacArthur Foundation. Our work against fake news and things like that are also funded by both the McArthur Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

It is important to mention here that a number of journalism professionals interviewed for this research were reluctant to examine the business challenges posed by the COVID-19 lockdown in regard to the operations of their news organizations. This could perhaps be attributed to the surrounding political culture in which journalism professionals operate. Although these journalists proclaim an ‘autonomous’ identity in the discharge of their roles, members of the public remain unconvinced. The idea that media ownership in Nigeria is independent overlooks the fact that members of the political class sponsor media organizations in order to acquire institutional legitimacy. Politicians are often behind the organizational forces shaping news coverage on issues that matter. A recent example was the targeting of media organizations said to be owned by Ahmed Bola Tinubu the national leader of the ruling All Progressives Congress. This occurred during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria from 8 October 2020. Tinubu, who is seen as the strongman of Nigeria’s politics owns *The Nation* newspaper, published under the platform of the Vintage Press Limited, as well as the Television Continental Broadcasting Service (TVC), a 24-hour channel based in Lagos [17]. Both of them were burned down in the wake of the #EndSARS protests that rocked the country (Kabir, 2020). This scenario explains the synergy of COVID-19 lockdown with #EndSARS protests.

In terms of news content, participants said that there was a gradual shift away from issues relating to the COVID-19 lockdown toward a major uprising which reflected political divides. However, both issues were interlocked with each influenced by the other. Participant A declared that “The trending issue now is #EndSARS!” and added that:

We see how government officials have salted away coronavirus palliatives in warehouses looted by #EndSARS protesters. Unlike before, we are not so overly focused on reporting COVID-19 number of deaths and infections. We now report about other matters arising.

Other interviewees also corroborated this shift in content and sought to uncover the root causes of the protests, which were ostensibly against the high-handedness of the elite police—SARS. This is discussed extensively in the following section.

#EndSARS and COVID-19

SARS is an acronym for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, an elite unit of the Nigerian Police Force that went rogue. Many of its members were alleged to have carried out extrajudicial killings, torture, extortions, and other related activities, especially during the lockdown. Popular protests erupted soon after the lockdown across Nigeria. Celebrities and social media influencers also became involved under the #EndSARS banner. While police leaders responded by banning SARS, they also quickly announced a replacement unit—Special Weapons and Tactics Team.

This initiative failed to assuage protesters’ demands, and demonstrations spread to the chagrin of the government. As the #EndSARS movement became a public uprising, it was infiltrated by hoodlums who ransacked government properties, including warehouses where relief items donated by individuals and corporate bodies to cushion the effects of COVID-19 were stored. Law and order broke down, and online videos circulated on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, showed citizens following the lead of hoodlums in looting private businesses. The residences of leading politicians, and other figures said to be associated with the Muhammadu Buhari-led government, were also

ransacked. In reality, #EndSARS was an opportunity for the public to unleash their bottled anger against the government for their harsh treatment of the poor during the six-month lockdown.

From a government perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic had seriously affected the Nigerian economy, which was dependent on revenues accruing from the sale of crude oil. This supported local expenditure, debt servicing and the building of foreign reserves to purchase imported goods. When the pandemic started, the price of oil fell by over 50 percent. The industrial nations that buy this product from Nigeria were also grappling with the consequences of economic contraction due to the COVID-19 lockdown. At one stage, ships loaded with oil remained on the high seas for lack of demand.

The closure of land, sea, and air borders during the lockdown affected government revenue. Meanwhile, the prices of imported food items to augment local produce, such as rice and other grains, skyrocketed. In these circumstances, people did not immediately take to the streets to bring the government down as occurred in Sudan and Lebanon. Instead, sections of the population seized opportunities during the #EndSARS protests. It is therefore unarguable that the protests resulted from the hardships suffered under the COVID-19 lockdown.

The government was able to attract aid and donations from within and outside the country. Allocations mainly went to medical treatment and control of COVID-19 infections. Not much attention was given to the social welfare of the citizenry. The government was also open to taunts that there were many diseases deadlier than the coronavirus, such as malaria and cancer, that did not bring lockdowns. It was further argued that hunger led to the death of more people than coronavirus (Adepegba, 2020).

Public sentiment was already inflamed by the time criminal elements took over the peaceful protest. Killing and maiming of the police and widespread lootings began. Popular anger reached a climax when it was discovered, in warehouses across the country, that food and other items meant to be distributed during the lockdown had been stockpiled by different State governments. The insensitivity of the government toward the Nigerian people was then publicly apparent (Mbah, 2020; Orjinmo, 2020).

The government's explanation was that items were distributed during the lockdown as they were received from the donors but that the warehouse stocks were incomplete; outstanding items were yet to arrive. It was also advanced that even if the remaining items were received, the repackaging of food for large numbers of people still needed to be done (Salau, 2020). In any case, the COVID-19 lockdown and related uncertainties certainly fueled the uprising of #EndSARS from October 2020.

Participants in this study talked of modifications made to the traditional coverage of news beats. One new development was journalists' dependence on press releases put out by corporate organizations who had assisted media organizations. One news editor mentioned that assistance could be in the form of food items, such as grains and hygiene products (e.g., soap and hand sanitizers). In August 2020, the management of the Nigerian Breweries Plc, donated COVID-19 palliatives to members of the NUJ Chapel in Aba, Southeast Nigeria. To quote the Corporate Affairs Director of the company,

Whether it is through newspapers, radio, television, or social media we are getting COVID-19 updates. They come from you. So you are endangering your lives. When the lockdown was very much in force, you were allowed to go and get the news. That is a front liner job. This is our way of saying thank you. Our way of saying we know what you do (Ofurum, 2020).

COVID-19, #EndSARS and disinformation

Another revelation which surfaced in the interviews with journalism professionals was that the coronavirus pandemic provided them with the opportunity to perform their public service role, as social media presented fake news, especially during the #EndSARS uprising. Some observers in Nigeria christened October 2020 as a month of fake news to mark the scale of the problem. Twitter's CEO, Jack Dorsey lent the platform to pro-#EndSARS hashtags and weighed in on the matter by creating a specially dedicated emoji for the #EndSARS protests. This trended heavily worldwide. There were claims that platforms owned by Facebook and Instagram circulated false information from the Nigerian Army in its bid to discredit promoters of the #EndSARS protests. As Edward-Ekpu (2020) puts it:

‘fake news’ labels by Facebook and Instagram inadvertently helped to promote a self-serving, anti-fake news campaign by the Nigerian Army, which had come under intense scrutiny after men in military uniforms opened fire on unarmed, peaceful protestors at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos on Tuesday (October 20). The Nigerian Army has claimed its soldiers were not involved in what some have labelled a ‘massacre’ despite plenty of video evidence. Many Nigerians now perceive its announcements as government propaganda to discredit the #EndSARS protest.

Hence, media reports were rife with accusations and counter accusations concerning the protests and the extrajudicial killings said to have been perpetrated by the Nigerian military.

Journalism professionals contacted for this study agreed that there was increased reliance on digital media technologies and platforms in their work routines during the COVID-19 lockdown. In relation to this, an interviewee pointed out that, “news sourced from the internet are easy to produce”. The #EndSARS issue provided opportunities for journalists to tap news from digital social platforms especially on Twitter. Commissioned research by Action Aid Nigeria into the impact of the pandemic on media operations in the country also emphasized how the COVID-19 pandemic had altered news gathering by journalists (ActionAid Nigeria, 2020). Journalism scholars Logan Molyneux and Shannon McGregor (2019) suggest that “Journalists have come to rely on Twitter so powerfully that they treat tweets as if they are already verified and in need of no further journalistic processing”. They further argue that by conferring authority and legitimacy to Twitter, journalists were undermining their own authority.

After the #EndSARS protests subsided, certain mainstream broadcast media outlets were sanctioned for airing content calculated to escalate the uprising. African Independent Television, Channels Television and Arise TV were fined NGN 3 million (USD 7, 870) each by the National Broadcasting Commission as a deterrent to broadcasters who did not verify news. According to the Acting Director General of the regulatory body, the mentioned news outlets “continued to transmit footages obtained from unverified and unauthenticated social media sources”. He added that, “We believe that the whole country has now seen why the spurious [actions] and recklessness [of actors] on the social media must not be patronized by the mainstream traditional media” (Premium Times, 2020).

Different political opinions and explanations about the #EndSARS uprising were trending within news discourse. While some commentators (Ayodele, 2020) link poverty to the conflict, others emphasize popular resentment of bad governance (Agbalajobi, 2020). Yet others attribute it to the uncoordinated devolution of power within the Nigerian Federal system. The multiple ramifications of COVID-19 are not restricted to Nigeria. Across Africa, there has been a surge in

the number of desperate migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Their hopes for a better life arise from the hardships brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown. A number of migrants have lost their lives on the high seas due to the capsizing of boats or on-board explosions. The economic consequences of COVID-19 kill more than the virus itself.

Conclusion

It can be gleaned from this study that the challenges faced by mainstream news media organizations during Nigeria's COVID-19 lockdown involved the imposition of financial stringencies. This raises a central question: how can media organizations attain genuine financial sustainability? As discussed, the successful example of the *Premium Times* as a non-profit newsroom with diverse sources of funds is instructive.

Nigeria was, and is still, not immune from the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, which spanned a period of six months. This entailed an unprecedented public uprising against a government that had been tolerated through thick and thin in the years prior. The spread of fake news via social platforms was a key feature associated with the #EndSARS protests. As noted, this was exacerbated by the impact of the lockdown itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be economically destructive. By the same token, fake news can tip a country into a civil war. No doubt the popularity of the Federal Government waned significantly because of the restrictions dictated by the COVID-19 as well as the excesses of the nation's security forces. This, in a way, is not dissimilar to the plight of Donald Trump, the ex-U.S. President whose inability to curtail the fallout of racist policies or check the spread of COVID-19 undermined his November re-election campaign.

From this study, one can conclude that communication scholars should explore media coverage of the coronavirus and consider how journalists might perform their roles more effectively during a health crisis. Specifically, more needs to be done to improve the working conditions of journalism professionals in Nigeria. This will require, initially, an adequate record of practicing journalists in the country which registers the challenges they face. Such an initiative will help to ensure that employed and freelance journalists are given reasonable contracts by media owners.

Author bio

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Endnotes

- [1] SARS is an acronym for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, an elite unit of the Nigerian Police Force gone rogue. The #Endsars was a protest against police brutality which saw allegations leveled against security agencies that they had opened fire on unarmed protesters.
- [2] One in four Africans is a Nigerian and Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa. See Herskovits J (1975) Nigeria: Africa's new power. *Foreign Affairs* 53(2), 314-333.
- [3] Yorubaland subsumes Southwest Nigeria.

- [4] The efforts of Macaulay served as a springboard for other nationalist publications published by other notable Nigerian statesmen such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and Tafawa Balewa.
- [5] *Pilot* was founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe, another nationalist and Awolowo's peer.
- [6] His efforts were not in vain. He became Nigeria's first President, albeit in a ceremonial capacity.
- [7] Other papers published by Zik were: *Eastern Nigeria Guardian*, *South Nigeria Defender*, *Daily Comet*, and *The Outlook*. However, it was the *West African Pilot* that had the greatest impact among the titles.
- [8] Members of the Board who were East's colleagues in the Colonial Administration and opposed him also worked hand in glove with the political powers of the time in the restructuring of the Gaskiya Corporation.
- [9] See ThisDay, Daily Times clocks 90 years 6 June 2016.
<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/06/06/daily-times-clocks-90-years/>
- [10] Celebrated politician, MKO Abiola established the Concord Press.
- [11] Ismail Babatunde Jose: Newspaper editor who dominated journalism in Nigeria for three decades, *Independent*, 25 September.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/ismail-babatunde-jose-newspaper-editor-who-dominated-journalism-in-nigeria-for-three-decades-941408.html>
- [12] Efforts were made to revive these two publications over the years, but these have remained largely unsuccessful.
- [13] See <https://rsf.org/en/news/wave-attacks-reporters-covering-coronavirus-lockdown-ukraine>
- [14] Abba Kyari was Chief of Staff to President Muhammadu Buhari, and in this position, all matters of State, including security issues, were routed through Kyari's office to get the attention of the President. He died of Covid-19 on 17 April 2020.
- [15] Section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution recognizes the role of the media in society. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.
<http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm>
- [16] This online newspaper, though relatively young compared to other mainstream media organizations in Nigeria, has carved a reputable niche for itself through its flair for investigative journalism.
- [17] Tinubu usually employs the services of his proxies to run his media establishments. This is common knowledge in the Nigerian media sphere. The publisher of the *Premium Times*, Dapo Olorunyomi, who once worked with the TVC, also disclosed this in an interview with this researcher.

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