

Controversy in the Time of COVID: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Three Case Studies from South African Online News Sites

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), first identified in 2019 and still raging at the time of writing in 2021, has impacted on every sphere of life in every country. This situation is almost unprecedented apart from the two World Wars of the 20th Century and has pervaded both the mainstream media (print, broadcast and online) and social media. This article surveys the media reporting and representation of various controversies in the first few months of the lockdown in South Africa, from 23 March to 17 August 2020. It is based on a content analysis of articles culled from two aggregated online news sites, News24.com (www.news24.com) and the South African Independent Online (IOL) (www.iol.co.za). After an initial survey of the material, three dominant themes were chosen on which to focus: the manner in which the security forces, made up of the South African Police (SAP) and sections of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), enforced the lockdown in its early phases; the ban placed on alcohol and tobacco products during the first three levels of the lockdown; and the highly controversial deployment of medical staff from Cuba who came to South Africa in order to aid South African medical personnel. These themes were purposely chosen for their dominance in the news coverage of COVID-19 related controversies.

The recent coronavirus that was first identified in China in late December 2019 before engulfing nations across the world, has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). This pandemic undoubtedly defined the course of history in the year 2020 and probably beyond. Initially dubbed the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), it was later named the COVID-19 pandemic, the nomination used in this article (WHO, 2019). The illness presents as a severe acute respiratory condition, displaying a range of symptoms including fever, cough, and dyspnoea.

In South Africa the first case was announced on 5 March 2020. As with most of the early cases, the infection was contracted in the course of foreign travel. On 15 March, a National State of Disaster was announced, coming into effect on 17 March 2020. This allowed the South African government to “make regulations or issue directions or authorise the issue of directions

concerning the matters listed therein, only to the extent that it is necessary for the purpose of: (a) assisting and protecting the public; (b) providing relief to the public; (c) protecting property; (d) preventing or combatting disruption; or (e) dealing with the destructive and other effects of the disaster". In other words, this enabling legislation permitted the government to issue laws and provisions without going through the usual legislative channels. Legally, such laws and provisions could be deemed necessary in the case of a disaster—in this instance, COVID-19. The importance of this last caveat is that while emergency regulations have the binding force of law, they may be challenged in a court of law, and if found to be excessive or unconstitutional, they could be overturned. This was the rationale for the later legal challenge to some of the emergency provisions, for instance the ban on sales of tobacco products. This challenge was not upheld by the courts.

On the same day (17 March), the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority announced it would expedite review of treatments, vaccines and clinical trials. The following day (18 March), the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, signed a notice in the Government Gazette outlining the terms of the National State of Disaster, including closure of Schools; travel restrictions; social distancing; cancellation of physical sittings of Parliament and other measures. A system of 'levels' was introduced, beginning with the most stringent restrictions (Level 5) and concluding with the least stringent (Level 1).

Health Minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, estimated that the pandemic would have a massive impact on the South African population. Compulsory quarantine was imposed on incoming travellers. In the first of a series of televised high-level presidential addresses and statements on the progress in the national effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national lockdown, initially set for three weeks. During this time, among other regulations, all gatherings were prohibited as was the sale of alcohol and tobacco products. Movement outside of homes and between provinces was restricted, and foreign and domestic passenger flights were prohibited except for evacuations and repatriations. Borders were closed, and the wearing of face masks in public made compulsory. These measures applied to the entire citizenry, with the exception of 'emergency personnel' who were required to apply for permits. The national lockdown came into effect on the 26 of March and, after the initial period of 21 days, was renewed until the end of April 2020. From March 2020 until the time of writing in August 2021, different levels have been applied, consequent on the severity of infection at that time, while taking into account the need to balance health concerns with those of the broader economy. For reasons of concision, the current article only incorporates the following periods. This includes:

Period one: 5 March–30 April 2020 (prelude and level 5) = 5 weeks

Period two: 1 May–31 May (level 4) = 4 weeks

Period three: 1 June–17 August (level 3) = 11 weeks.

It would be a truism to state that the media coverage during this period focussed largely on Covid-19 and the related consequences. This article surveys the media reporting and representation of some of the controversies in the first few months of the lockdown, 23 March-17 August 2020. It is based on a content analysis of articles culled from two aggregated online news sites, News24.com (www.news24.com) and the South African Independent Online (IOL) (www.iol.co.za). After an initial survey of the material, three dominant themes were chosen on which to focus: the manner in which the security forces made up of the South African Police (SAP) and sections of the South

African National Defence Force (SANDF) enforced the lockdown in its early phases; the ban placed on alcohol and tobacco products during the first three levels of the lockdown; and the highly controversial deployment of medical staff from Cuba who came to South Africa in order to aid South African medical personnel. These themes were purposively chosen for their dominance in news coverage of COVID-19 related controversies.

Methodology and analysis

Content analysis

Content analysis is used for the systematic investigation of communications content. It is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data. Using content analysis, researchers can scrutinise the presence, meanings and relationships of words, themes, or concepts. Researchers can then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture of time of surrounding the text. Content Analysis is a widely used method within media studies and can be used both quantitatively and qualitatively; to provide either a relational or conceptual analysis. Furthermore, it can be applied deductively or inductively (Elo and Kyngas, 2007: 109). This study used a qualitative approach and applied inductive reasoning. Quantitative content analysis operates by determining frequency and prominence of specific key words, concepts and tropes. The purpose is to develop a series of ‘frames’ that examine “the selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages” (Matthes 2009:349). Quantitative content analysis has been criticised for being naive and simplistic in this description of data. Qualitative content analysis is inclined to study the discursive importance attributed to particular thematic clusters. While it does not disregard the quantitative aspect in identifying the themes presented in the media, qualitative content analysis is more concerned with the manner in which these themes are presented, and the narratives they convey. Therefore, the methodology tends to focus on smaller samples in a more in-depth manner, while still adhering closely to the necessity of a systematic and relatively structured procedure. Qualitative content analysis has the advantage of being an “unobtrusive and nonreactive way to study the phenomenon of interest” (Babbie, 2007:330).

Identification of research question, selection of the media and the sample

The first step in content analysis is to decide on the research question. In this study, the researcher initially examined the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic was mediated in South Africa. However, the temporal sampling of content analysis data is important because of the need to discern patterns. As a rule of thumb, the longer the period, the more likely the validity of the findings. However, given the volume of published material, it is impossible to research very long periods in a qualitative fashion. This requires the researcher to settle for shorter intervals. Since the current research utilises a conceptual rather than relational analysis, there was little point in undertaking an interval sample, rather, a contiguous period was deemed more suitable. Thus, the period of research has been confined to the first three levels of the National State of Disaster, i.e., from 23 March 2021 to 17 August 2021, a period of 20 weeks.

The media examined were two online news sites, chosen for their accessibility and the facility of being able to find all the material catalogued by date and headline. Thus, all the material was taken from Independent Online (www.iol.co.za) and Media24 online (www.news24.com). Both sites

produce news articles in English, drawn from a variety of newspapers and magazines, originally published in English, Afrikaans or isiZulu. As aggregated sites drawing from a range of print and online publications, they afforded good coverage of national and international issues. While both sites have some articles behind encrypted 'paywalls', as a paid subscriber, the researcher was able to access the content.

Undertaking the research: a reiterative exercise

Content analysis is intrinsically reiterative, with repeated steps of coding and condensing material. As with much qualitative research, content analysis involves large amounts of material, and logistically, only a small part of the material is used in the final reporting. In the current research, three levels of search, coding and exclusion were undertaken. In the first, a large blanket sample was drawn from the two media sources, within the enclosing dates. Using only the keyword 'COVID', the first 200 articles to appear on each site were recorded and coded into five broad categories. In the second round, the category 'controversies associated with COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown' was purposely selected from four possible areas of discussion (see below). Three 'blunt searches' were undertaken, using the keywords discussed. The third iteration was the selection of 20 articles for each of the three sub-themes, generating the final set of data that was used for the report and discussion. This entire process is unpacked in greater detail below.

Step one: making sense of the data holistically

Entering the search term 'COVID', cross referenced by the enclosing dates, the researcher downloaded a list of the first two hundred articles from each site. Following an initial open coding exercise, the resultant articles were grouped into cognate themes and further simplified to create four categories of reporting. These were:

1. *Monitoring and tracking the pandemic globally and nationally*, including: first infections; declaration of pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO); and declaration of National State of Disaster and subsequent regulations regarding lockdown.
2. *Everyday life under lockdown*, including: staying at home; working from home; homeschooling, part time schooling; remote communications (especially electronic communications); hobbies, skills and home-based activities; shopping and provisioning under lock down; and isolation, loneliness and alienation.
3. *Bio-medical and scientific discussions of the virus*, medical interventions and best practice, including: wearing masks; hygiene and hand washing; social distancing; the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and other equipment; hospital readiness and crises; and finding and trusting a vaccine.
4. *Controversies associated with COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown*, including: the ban on the sale of alcohol and tobacco (including arguments for and against this provision); the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in policing the compliance of the provisions in this national state of disaster; and the importation of Cuban health workers into South Africa.

Any one of these four categories would make a fascinating analysis. However, given the limitations of a single study, it was only feasible to undertake one, and it was decided that the case study

research was to be confined to the fourth category only, that of controversies. News values analysis (Palmer, 2000) has emphasised that negative news stories and themes that are contentious and polemical are more likely to receive attention than positive or affirmative news.

Step two: the 'blunt search'

The second set of data was generated by using the Boolean both/and combination of COVID and a series of key words that spoke to the items in category four (controversies). The words included 'cigarette ban', 'tobacco ban', 'alcohol ban', 'police', 'SANDF', 'Cuban doctors', 'white coats'. Only articles that were longer than five paragraphs were included. Both 'news stories' and 'editorials/ commentaries' were collected. For the banning of tobacco and alcohol products, 87 items were identified; the SANDF/policing sub-category yielded 26 items. Articles covering the Cuban medical teams amounted to 31.

Step three: finalising the data tables

In order to reduce the material to manageable limits, a purposive sample of 20 items per sub-category were chosen. Three considerations were taken into account in the final choice of articles. Firstly, all overt repetitions were excluded (if the same or very similar articles were repeated on the same or competitive site). This was done to provide more space for alternative positions. This point illustrates the chief differences between a qualitative and quantitative approach to content analysis; in a quantitative study, repetition is seen as a key indicator of the weight or significance of a category, while in qualitative analysis it is seen as less significant. Secondly, the research strove for a balance between material taken from each of the two sites (IOL and News24). Finally, a balance was sought between 'news stories' (journalistic reports) and 'editorials.' This was done in order to capture not only the events as they unfolded, but also the more discursive opinions and commentaries concerning the topics under discussion. The final site selections are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Balance between sites and articles by news type.

| | IOL Articles | News24 Articles | News Stories | Editorials |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|
| Banning of alcohol and tobacco | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Role of security forces | 9 | 11 | 12 | 8 |
| Cuban medics | 12 | 8 | 15 | 5 |
| Total | 31 | 29 | 37 | 23 |

Once the coding categories were identified, the researcher built a code schedule. This allowed the coding process to be kept organised and consistent. The code schedule took the form of a tabular instrument with the date, publication, article type (news story or editorial), theme and headline included. In the working document excerpted quotations were also included; these formed the basis of a narrative account that makes up the body of the article. Tables 2-4 list the coded articles, but without the quotations, which were fed into the narrative of the 'case studies.'

Table 2: Articles for Law enforcement of the lockdown regulations under the Disaster Management Act (Blunt search = 26; final table = 20)

| # | Date and site | Report/ Editorial | Theme | Headline |
|----|----------------------|-------------------|--|---|
| 21 | 2020.03.24 IOL | News Article | Legal framework | SANDF deployed to support the SA Police Service |
| 22 | 2020.03.27 IOL | News Article | Employment of security forces | Lockdown: It will cost R641M to deploy army for three months |
| 23 | 2020.03.30 IOL | News Article | Abuse of power; Use of social media | DA calls for military ombudsman to investigate abuse by the SANDF members during lockdown |
| 24 | 2020.03.30 IOL | News Article | Abuse of power | Watch: push-ups and squats. SA soldiers slammed for 'abusing power' |
| 25 | 2020.03.29 IOL | News Article | Legal framework | Cape residents question army's capacity to contain coronavirus crisis |
| 26 | 2020.03.27 IOL | Editorial | Employment of security forces | SANDF's message to SA under lockdown: we dare not and will not fail |
| 27 | 2020.03.30 IOL | Editorial | Abuse of power | Change the story: let artists, activities and academics lead during this COVID-19 |
| 28 | 2020.03.29 IOL | Editorial | Legal framework; Abuse of power | The worst of times could unearth the best in us |
| 29 | 2020.04.05 News24 | News Article | Abuse of power; Use of social media | Soldiers and police face the heat over lockdown brutality |
| 30 | 2020.03.29 IOL | Editorial | Legal framework; Abuse of power | The power to save ourselves from coronavirus is in our hands |
| 31 | 2020.03.23 News24 | News Article | Employment of security forces | Coronavirus: Army moves from peacetime to wartime footing as 21 days of national lockdown announced |
| 32 | 2020.03.26 News24 | News Article | Abuse of power | Morale-dwindling to acts only on orders of the police |
| 33 | 2020.03.31 News24 | News Article | Abuse of power | Lockdown: concern over conduct of law enforcement after three deaths |
| 34 | 2020.03.28 News24 | News Article | Employment of security forces | SANDF calls in reserve to assist in coronavirus |
| 35 | 2020.04.05 News24 | News Article | Abuse of power | Soldiers and police face heat over lockdown brutality |
| 36 | 2020.04.03 News24 | Editorial | Abuse of power | Opinion: Fear and policing in the time of COVID-19 |
| 37 | 2020.04.03 News24 | Editorial | Legal framework | Opinion: Parliament's role in a state of national disaster |
| 38 | 2020.04.02 News24 | Editorial | Legal framework | Eddie Rakbe: This is different - the economy may not survive |
| 39 | 2020.04.02 News24 | Editorial | Abuse of power | COVID-19 lockdown: The people are not the enemy, the virus is |
| 40 | 2020.03.27 news24 | News Article | Legal framework; Employment of security forces | There is no need to move around - SANDF will help police to limit movement during lockdown |

Table 3: Articles for alcohol and tobacco ban (Blunt search = 87; final table =20)

| # | Date and site | Report/ Editorial | Theme | Headline |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | 2020.04.22 IOL | Editorial | Economic impact | Heineken beer sales slide amid lockdowns, worse to come |
| 2 | 2020.04.17 IOL | Editorial | Economic impact | Covid-19 lockdown has enabled us to imagine the possibility of an alcohol-free South Africa |
| 3 | 2020.04.17 News24 | News Article | Prohibition | Restricting drinking and smoking after lockdown will save many lives: experts |
| 4 | 2020.04.21 IOL | Editorial | Economic impact | Lockdown is a recovering addict's nightmare |
| 5 | 2020.05.05 IOL | News Article | Economic impact | Ill-considered tobacco ban impacts health, welfare of millions across SA' |
| 6 | 2020.06.09 IOL | News Article | Prohibition; Corporate contest | High Court to hear FITA case on tobacco ban on Wednesday |
| 7 | 2020.06.09 IOL | News Article | Corporate contest | BATSA to challenge lockdown tobacco sales ban in court |
| 8 | 2020.06.10 News24 | Editorial | Prohibition | Cigarette ban is both legal and supported by science, state argues in court |
| 9 | 2020.04.23 News24 | Editorial | Prohibition | Why the cigarette ban during lockdown? Five medical experts weigh in |
| 10 | 2020.06.20 News24 | News Article | Bootleg, loss of tax | Illegal cigarette may reduce economic harm of tobacco ban - Government in court papers |
| 11 | 2020.07.17 IOL | Letter | Economic impact | Ramaphosa's alcohol ban leaves bitter taste in mouth and condemns families to uncertain futures |
| 12 | 2020.07.18 IOL | Editorial | Economic impact | 3000 000 jobs may be snubbed out by tobacco ban |
| 13 | 2020.08.07 News24 | Editorial | Bootleg, loss of tax | Cigarette ban is impoverishing decent citizens - South Africa |
| 14 | 2020.08.07 News24 | News Article | Economic impact | Alcohol ban: Liquor traders losing an estimated R300 million a day |
| 15 | 2020.08.12 IOL | News Article | Economic impact | 'The alcohol ban has turned us into criminals' |
| 16 | 2020.08.12 News24 | News Article | Economic impact | Ramaphosa told to lift cigarette & alcohol ban and move to level 2 lockdown |
| 17 | 2020.8.15 IOL | Editorial | Corporate contest | FITA to persist with court action on tobacco ban |
| 18 | News24 | Editorial | Bootleg, loss of tax | Alcohol ban: illegal trade in the black market |
| 19 | News24 | Editorial | Prohibition | Booze ban: Mabuyane to push for alcohol ban in the Eastern Cape |
| 20 | News24 | News Article | Corporate contest | Police investigating fake news on reinstatement of alcohol ban |

Table 4: Articles for the Cuban army of white gowns (blunt search =31; final table = 20)

| # | Date and site | Report/ Editorial | Theme | Headline |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|--|---|
| 41 | 2020.04.27 News24 | News Article | Announcement | Pics: Over 200 Cuban health workers touch down in SA to boost Covid-19 fight |
| 42 | 2020.04.28 IOL | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans | SA Medical Association unhappy Minister jumped the gun by recruiting Cuban doctors |
| 43 | 2020.04.28 IOL | News Article | Announcement | Opposition parties welcome arrival of Cuban medical team |
| 44 | 2020.04.29 News24 | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans; Suitability | Cuban doctors came at our request - Minister of Health |
| 45 | 2020.04.29 News24 | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans; Suitability | Doctors are here to save lives, not to enrich themselves. - Cuban embassy in SA |
| 46 | 2020.04.29 News24 | News Article | Ideological divide | Profiting from the pandemic - US politician slams SA for taking Cuban Doctors |
| 47 | 2020.04.29 News24 | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans | South Africans spent at least R400m on Cuban medical brigade deployment |
| 48 | 2020.04.30 IOL | News Article | Ideological divide | Cuban embassy defends its doctors being deployed in SA after outcry |
| 49 | 2020.04.30 IOL | Editorial | Ideological divide | Opinion: Cuba a shining light in fight against coronavirus |
| 50 | 2020.05.03 IOL | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans | International medical graduates outraged over arrival of Cuban doctors in SA |
| 51 | 2020.05.03 IOL | Editorial | Ideological divide | Opinion: Sama should appreciate Cubans helping us in the this fight for our lives |
| 52 | 2020.05.13 IOL | Editorial | Announcement; Ideological divide | Cuba lauded for one of the best health systems in the world |
| 53 | 2020.05.15 IOL | Editorial | Suitability; Ideological divide | Q&A: We speak to Cuban specialist doctor Herman Zaldivar Ricardo about his work in SA |
| 54 | 2020.04.18 IOL | News Article | Ideological divide | Cuban doctors and medical train adds muscle to KZN's fight against Covid-19 |
| 55 | 2020.05.25 IOL | Editorial | Ideological divide | Opinion: Africa will always be an inseparable part of Cuba |
| 56 | 2020.05.27 News24 | News Article | Announcement; Taking jobs from South Africans | It takes most foreign-trained doctors months to register in SA. How did Cuban health workers do it in 3 days? |
| 57 | 2020.06.09 IOL | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans | R239m - That's how much taxpayers will cough up for Cuban doctors |
| 58 | 2020.08.14 News24 | News Article | Announcement Ideological divide | What benefits do Cuban doctors bring to SA? Zweli Mkhize explains |
| 59 | 2020.08.14 News24 | News Article | Taking jobs from South Africans; Ideological Divide | You are comrades in combat '- Zweli Mkhize praises Cuban doctors deployed to South Africa |
| 60 | 2020.08.14 IOL | News Article | Ideological divide | Health Minister praises Cuban medical workers for helping SA 'in our time of need'. |

Step four: Writing the analysis

Writing the case studies was accomplished by narrating each of the sub-themes identified in the coding schedule. Fidelity to the original articles by using direct quotations allowed for the 'voice' of the reporters and commentators to be heard. Articles were referenced by way of the numbers that appeared on the coding schedule, a tactic that avoided undue repetition of information.

Case studies**Case study one: Law enforcement of the lockdown regulations under the Disaster Management Act***Legal framework*

The legal framework for enforcing provisions of the lockdown were spelt out under the Disaster Management Act. Among other provisions, this Act allows for the mobilisation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to aid in the maintenance of public order during a declared period of disaster (article 37). The first media references to the deployment of the defence force simply outlined the proclamation, explaining the intricacies of the public having to stay at home; the meaning and extent of the curfew; the ban on gatherings and the application of travel permits (article 21). "Travels with no permits will not be taken lightly by the law" admonished the IOL. This was all new territory for South Africans, and the report explained in some detail the prohibition of gatherings, including religious meetings, and the conditions under which limited exceptions were made for funerals (article 21). In the first few days of the lockdown, several articles appeared explaining the 'level' system and its implications for ordinary people. "The national lockdown is definitely not meant to punish citizens by restricting their movements but is meant to contain and minimise the spread of this virus", a government spokesperson was quoted as saying, adding that "there is no need to move around" (article 40).

Employment of security forces

The first reports of the military presence were taken directly from an official communique: "Infantry soldiers have begun mobilisation in Gauteng (greater Johannesburg) as part of *Operation Prosper* and *Operation Chariot*, in support of government's efforts to contain the spread of the deadly Covid-19 disease" (article 31). According to the document, two companies of soldiers would be deployed in Gauteng, and one each for the other provinces, "to provide support to other government departments". The deployment commenced on Monday, 22 March 2020 for an initial 21 days, with a further extension until the end of September 2020 (article 31).

The employment of military personnel in the civilian sphere is a highly unusual situation in post-apartheid South Africa and runs the risk of a comparison to the heavy-handed repression of anti-apartheid activists in the 1980s and during the political transition before 1994 (articles 28, 30 and 34). It is therefore unsurprising that the military went to significant lengths to reassure the public of their benign intentions. "You will see our men and women on the streets of the nation for the next 21 days" said Defence Force Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula at a media briefing (article 40). Their duties would "include foot patrols and support at roadblocks" (article 22). The repeated message was that there was "no need to move around", and that SANDF would "help police to limit movement during lockdown" (article 22). "It's not about being spiteful. It's not about an abuse of excessive power, it's not about demonstrating how powerful the state is. It's about

protecting one another, protecting ourselves from this virus”, reassured the Minister of Defence (article 40).

The message took on a heroic tone when an entire memorandum from Siphwe Dlamini, head of communications for the Department of Defence, was reported verbatim. Comparing the 2020 situation with that of the Spanish Flu in which “October 1918 would forever be dubbed Black October with at least 300 000 of our great grand-parents dead, many unrecorded in unmarked graves”, he gave the rousing assurance that “[w]e dare not and we will not fail” (article 26).

Abuse of power

The most serious controversy associated with the Defence Force was abuse of power allegations. Most of the articles cited make no mention of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in their headlines, however, in the content of the articles both the Defence Force and the police were often conflated under the banner of ‘security forces’ (article 29). In most instances, it was SANDF that were seen as the perpetrators of excesses (articles 35 and 39). In terms of the State of Disaster Act, SANDF was required to consult with SAPS when dealing with civilians; however, each tended to act on their own command (article 32). An editorial in early April 2020 entitled “Fear and policing in the time of Covid-19” opined that “since the lockdown was declared a week ago, it feels like South Africans are living in a pseudo-police state. Our freedom of movement has been severely curtailed.” The editorial further suggested that “it now appears that fear of South Africa’s security forces among ordinary South Africans is at highest level since 1994” (article 36). The same article argued that the South African government tended to “opt for repressive practices and punitive punishment that has existed since the colonial era.” This attitude was evident in the manner in which “non-compliant South Africans” were described as “enemies that have deserved to be disciplined by police or soldiers” (article 36).

Both SANDF and SAPS were accused of humiliation, coercion and the physical assault of civilians during the lockdown (articles 24, 27 and 33). Initially, SANDF proved to be overzealous, with a number of extreme examples of repression and misinterpretation of the lockdown provisions. “It is unclear how one is expected to walk to the shops to buy essential goods if one is being beaten up by the police or the military for merely being on the streets” (article 39). Extreme examples include the shooting of one man in his own yard, and the death of another as a consequence of being tasered by the police.

Role of social media

As has become the pattern internationally, many complaints resulted from the distribution of videos circulated on social media platforms by ordinary citizens, and then taken up by activist groups. Early in the period, IOL reported that SANDF had come “under scrutiny as a video surfaced on social media showing soldiers allegedly abusing their power” (article 23), leading to the political opposition, the Democratic Alliance, laying a complaint with the Military Ombudsman (article 23, 29). Further reported allegations included “deaths owing to police action,” injuries to children “caught in crossfire” and “degrading and inhuman treatment.” Taken together, these were “tantamount to the abuse of power by law enforcement officers” (article 29). The Military Ombudsman and the police watchdog, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), and the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, were all interviewed by the media for their responses. The Human Rights Commission chairperson stated that “while he acknowledge[d] the government’s swift action, he believe[d] that more should be done to lessen violence and undue force during this

period, and that police should not use the outbreak as an excuse to skip procedures when arresting citizens” (article 29). The criticisms levelled at the security forces were largely swept aside by the authorities, and during the period under review no charges were brought against any security personnel. However, in later months at least two policemen were convicted of culpable homicide as a consequence of actions taken against civilians during the lockdown period.

Case study two: alcohol and tobacco ban

One of the most contentious aspects of the lockdown was the ban on the sale of tobacco and alcohol, the latter both in restaurants and taverns as well as in ‘off-licence’ liquor stores. The purported purpose of the prohibition was to safeguard medical facilities by taking the pressure off hospitals and clinics dealing with alcohol-related trauma (articles 1 and 3). The reasoning for the ban on tobacco was more contentious, beyond the often-reiterated statement made by the then Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, that there was “a connection between smoking and contracting a severe case of COVID-19” (article 6).

In a previous portfolio, Dlamini-Zuma had been the Minister of Health (1994-1999), during which time she spearheaded the Ministry’s strongly anti-tobacco stance, including introducing legislation that made smoking in public spaces illegal. It came as no surprise then, that the organised tobacco industry saw her as a foe. When challenged by the tobacco lobby, a Ministerial spokesperson noted that “the evidence is clear that smokers are at heightened risk of developing a more severe form of Covid-19”. This was corroborated by the World Health Organisation and “if the Minister were to wait for ‘definitive proof of links between more severe Covid-19 infections and smoking, she would be in breach of her obligations” according to a Ministerial spokesperson (article 8).

Countering the ban on the grounds of health alone was never going to sway the argument. As an editorial from the division of Media24 concerned with reporting health matters noted: “from a general health perspective, the message is pretty clear - smoking is bad for you, and at Health24 we agree. This stance won’t change” (article 9). However, the outright ban on the entire tobacco industry, particularly in view of the huge economic consequences of the move, was more problematic: “in relation to this unprecedented period in our history, we are still not clear on the relevance of this ban to the lockdown”. The news service questioned the efficacy of the ban, “frankly, warnings regarding smoking have been around for years, it is front and centre on packaging, yet people still choose to smoke” (article 9).

Economic impact

Objection to the bans on both alcohol and cigarettes were commonly linked to the likely impact on the economy. Income from tobacco products in South Africa is significant, with the entire value chain of the legal trade estimated at ZAR30 billion (US\$2.2 billion). In the financial year 2017/18, the industry contributed nearly ZAR2 billion (US\$135 million) in excise duty (tax) to the fiscus. Further, much of the tobacco trade is ‘under the radar’, with one source suggesting that up to a third of all cigarettes consumed are illicit (BAT South Africa). Of the country’s population of approximately 60 million people, an estimated 8 million are smokers. Thus, the use of tobacco is widespread in the country, and the government’s move to ban the habit was extremely contentious (article 4).

The liquor industry too plays a significant part in the South African economy with an estimated value of ZAR173 billion (US\$7billion). The extended value chain of retail outlets, ‘taverns’, restaurants, and packaging companies including glass and aluminium cans, raises this figure. The beer and spirit sectors are dominated by large global companies with strong brands, mature production facilities and massive distribution networks. An immediate and recurrent objection to the ban centered on the impact it had on companies, specifically the loss of turnover, investment and the waste of stock (article 11,14). There was an acknowledgement of the effect of COVID-19 on the alcohol industry across the world. Heineken, the world’s largest brewer, reported a 14% slide in international beer sales “as the Covid-19 pandemic closed pubs and restaurants across the globe” (article 1). Locally, the South African Heineken plant shut down production, with an immediate shedding of jobs and household incomes (articles 5, 15). Newspaper reports lamented “the massive number of livelihoods at risk” and their “uncertain future” (article 12). Commentators noted that “the government’s decision to suspend economic activity through the ban on the sale and dispensing of alcohol has become a very confusing strategy at a time that the economy has been bleeding jobs” (article 2). Job loss was a particularly important concern, since the ban put “more than one million jobs” at risk, both “upstream and downstream of the entire alcohol industry” (article 11). By August 2020, liquor traders estimated a loss of R300m (US\$2.6m) per day as a direct consequence of the ban of alcohol sales (article 14). In the same month, close to the end of the level 3 lockdown, newspapers reported rumours that “senior government officials” had met in order to discuss lifting the alcohol and tobacco ban: “Four sources who have knowledge of the discussions told News24 that the economic devastation of the cigarette sales ban could no longer be justified. The country has lost billions of rand in tax revenue as a result of the ban and the illegal selling of cigarettes has flourished.” (article 16). A similar argument was made for the resumption of alcohol sales (article 16).

Bootleg liquor, cigarettes and loss of revenue for SARS

An unintended consequence of the cigarette and alcohol ban was the huge increase in their illegal trading on the black market. It is alleged that most of the illicit trade in cigarettes was due to a “rise in organised crime” (article 13). While the source of illicit alcohol was not always clear, trade was brisk. Interviewed under a pseudonym, ‘Maris’ an unemployed mother of three told her story of how she “started selling alcohol on the black market” in order to make ends meet: “The government’s ban on alcohol has turned people like Maris into criminals”, bewailed the newspaper (article 18). Illicit cigarettes have been a divisive political issue for some years prior to the lockdown. Some are smuggled in from Zimbabwe, north of the country, while others are said to be produced in South African factories, but not declared as part of their legal stock.

Rumours have circulated since 2017 that a Cape Town based company, headed by Adriano Mazzotti, is central to the illegal trade in cigarettes, an accusation he denies, and for which he has never been charged. To add frisson to the story, it has been alleged that Mazzotti cultivated a financially improper relationship with Minister Dlamini-Zuma when she was campaigning as the successor to Jacob Zuma, and that he leveraged this association during lockdown, so as to benefit from the black market. While it is clear that he was a financial political benefactor, no hard evidence of smuggling has been forthcoming; nonetheless, the story is sufficiently salacious to link the Minister to the illegal trade, and in the process discredit her motives for banning tobacco (article 10).

Corporate business contests ban, leads to court cases

Given the huge economic investment at stake, it is unsurprising that organised sectors of the industry and corporate businesses contested the ban. The Fair-Trade Independent Tobacco Association (FITA) brought a High Court case against Dlamini-Zuma (article 6 and 17). The international conglomerate, British American Tobacco South Africa (BATSA), were supported by “Japan Tobacco International as well as groups and organisations representing the tobacco value chain across the country, including consumers, tobacco farmers and retailers” (article 7). In papers before the court, FITA again cited the loss of investment, the loss of tax revenue, and the waste of stock as reasons for concern (article 6). The BATSA lawyers lamented the “lack of response from government” relating to the direct scientific connection between smoking and COVID-19 (article 7). The country’s lockdown status changed from level 3 to 2 just as the case was going to court. As a consequence, the ban on tobacco was lifted and the issue became moot. It is worth noting that in subsequent re-settings of the lockdown status back to a ‘modified level 4’ in June 2021, the tobacco ban was not included in the measures enacted, although alcohol was (article 20).

Six weeks after the declaration of the State of Disaster and the commencement of lockdown, a contingent of Cuban medical personnel arrived in South Africa. They were made up of “family physicians, epidemiologists, biotechnology experts, healthcare technology engineers and biostatisticians” and were described as “carefully selected for their knowledge in planning, execution and management of clinical cases and public response.” The press dubbed them as “an army of white gowns”. The Cuban doctors deployed in different parts of the country (article 41).

The arrival of the Cuban contingent was part of a longstanding South African-Cuban connection in the field of medical cooperation. In 1996 a scheme was devised to send South African students to attend medical school in Cuba before returning to complete their internships in South Africa (articles 52, 56 and 58). Although beset by controversy, this scheme has been in operation up until the present time (Sui et al., 2019).

Taking jobs away from South Africans

While they were welcomed by many (article 43), objections were immediately raised concerning the presence of the “Cuban Brigade” health care workers (articles 42; 47; 50). The South African Medical Association (SAMA), among other medical trade unions, objected to the importation of Cuban medical staff. This was on three grounds: the high cost of the project; the employment of Cuban personnel while there were unemployed South African doctors (article 57); and the fact that they had not been consulted prior to the importation of the doctors (article 42; 47). Finally, it was alleged that the foreign doctors did not have the required experience of endemic diseases plaguing South Africa, most notably TB and HIV/AIDS (article 44).

The cost relating to the employment of Cuban medical staff was characterised as “wasteful expenditure [...] while South Africa has other pressing financial needs” (article 47). The Cuban Embassy dismissed the accusations by stating that “the Cuban government pays the full salary of all the doctors while they are assisting other countries. Host countries, including South Africa, assumed the transportation, accommodation, food and basic means for the doctors” (article 45). There is contention regarding the veracity of this statement as other sources made the claim that South Africa did indeed carry all the costs.

The issue of awarding employment to Cuban doctors at the expense of South Africans attracted far more media attention. SAMA chairperson, Dr Angelique Coetzee, suggested that government

hospitals should have employed retired South African doctors due to their wealth of experience instead of bringing in foreign doctors. The advantage would be that older doctors could “mentor the younger doctors” (article 44). In an editorial, IOL launched a scathing rebuttal: “It was nothing short of despicable to watch the national chairperson of the SAMA, Dr Angelique Coetzee, criticising the government for requesting assistance from specialist Cuban doctors and health-care professional when other developed countries [...] have been requesting all the help they can get from the Cubans” (article 51). The uproar opened the door for a group of young, unemployed medical graduates who had obtained qualifications abroad (mostly in China). They accused the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the National Department of Health of deliberately keeping them jobless and “depriving them of an opportunity to service the country” (article 50). The reference to the HPCSA referred to a longstanding complaint that students who studied in China were denied internships in South African hospitals and rendered ineligible for professional registration. However, the Cuban medical personnel were registered within days of their application (articles 56; 59). Stung by the criticism, the Minister of Health responded that while HPCSA had not been able to accredit all the Chinese universities, they had “reviewed Cuba’s medical school curriculum and found it to be on par with that of South Africa”. Thus, newly arrived Cuban healthcare workers ought to be registered timeously. He then requested medical associations to provide a list of unemployed doctors in order to offer them openings. “We will take as many South African doctors as well [as Cuban doctors]” (article 59).

Suitability

The suitability of the Cuban doctors to work under South African conditions was hotly contested (article 53). SAMA alleged that the Cubans lacked local knowledge and were unable to communicate in either English or local languages. Since South Africa has a high rate of HIV/AIDS and tuberculous, conditions “might not be familiar to the physicians coming in” (article 44). This was rebutted by the Health Minister, who pointed to their training in primary health care, including TB and HIV, and noted that “they are well acquainted with community medicine, [and are able to] work around problems such as lack of water and electricity” (article 44). The Minister continued that “they have strength in community treatment. Our model is about ‘if you are sick, you go to the hospital’. Cuba has a different model.” He reiterated that the Cuban doctors “will not take anyone’s posts” and “they will be working along South Africans” (article 45).

Ideological divide

At the heart of the disagreement between SAMA and the Ministry was a deep ideological divide. South Africa’s indebtedness to Cuba in a variety of developmental areas, including medicine, inclined the Ministry to support their intervention. Several articles and editorials appeared in IOL praising the selflessness of the Cuban contribution and providing an uncritical platform for Cuban self-promotion (articles 49, 52 and 58). The Cuban ambassador was quoted as saying that the medical teams were not in South Africa for the money, but rather “they are here as an act of solidarity in a time of crisis” (article 51). Taking the opportunity to press home the American-instigated isolation of Cuba (article 44), the ambassador waxed lyrical, saying that the Cuban effort was “the humble contribution of a small nation with very limited resources and affected by a brutal economic blockade imposed for 60 years by the US government. In their obsession to destroy the Cuban Revolution, the Trump Administration and its allies also promoted a campaign of denigration against the presence of Cuban doctors in other counties” (article 48). Caught up in the

spirit of his own rhetoric, he quoted Che Guevara: “The life of a single human being is worth a million times more than all the property of the richest man on earth” (article 48).

Several feature articles and editorial pieces picked up similar themes (articles 54, 55 and 58). In an opinion piece entitled “Africa will always be an inseparable part of Cuba”, the Ambassador was again given a platform from which to expound on the historical connection between Cuba and Africa, noting that Fidel Castro called Cuba “the Latin African people”. He quoted Castro as saying that Cuba had a “moral debt” and a “duty of compensation” towards Africans (article 55). For his part, the Minister of Health thanked the Cuban medical contingent: “they have answered the call during one of the toughest seasons experienced in modern times” (article 59).

Conclusion

This article has provided a tiny ‘slice of life’ account of some of the lived experiences of people under the first few months of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa, as mediated by two online new aggregators. The research chose to present material on three of the most controversial aspects of the lockdown: the role played by the security forces in the initial implementation of the lockdown; the responses to the ban on alcohol and tobacco products; and the deployment of Cuban medical personnel. In many ways these examples are specifically South African, in others international readers will find some resonance. Looking back more than a year later, they seem quirky and almost irrelevant to the global fight against COVID-19, but at the time, they were all consuming to both the media and South African public. The year 2020 is one that will always be remembered as the year of lockdown; but what and how we remember that year will vary widely. It is hoped that through this qualitative content analysis of three small case studies, some of the more arcane aspects of the lockdown will be recorded.

Author bio

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