THE STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN RWANDA
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June 2021
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1. INTRODUCTION

This report looks into the threats to press freedom and the media sector in general during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Rwanda. It covers the period from March 2020 when the Government instituted measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 until March 2021, focusing on the fate of journalists and the media during the lockdowns.

In March 2020 Rwanda imposed a total lockdown, the first in Africa and one of the strictest on the continent. Movement was restricted except for workers in essential services. The media was not explicitly listed among essential services but there were arrangements to facilitate media operations. However, not being recognised among essential services created a challenging work environment for the media in general as it exposed journalists to a range of threats such as being arrested in course of duty. The media faced a host of other challenges on top of the security threats. Some challenges arose from economic hardships occasioned by the lockdown; others were health-related such as contracting the coronavirus or developing mental health issues.

Summary of the report

This study employed a mixed methods approach to examine the threats to press freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures stakeholders took to mitigate those threats. The quantitative aspect involved a survey of 20 journalists and media managers, followed by qualitative in-depth interviews with selected respondents to throw more light on the findings of the survey.

The study examines the statutory bodies involved in the media sector and discusses the decade-old reforms that changed that sector. It presents summaries of how leading human rights organisations have described the press freedom situation in Rwanda, based on documented cases of abuse of media freedoms, thus providing background and context to the way the media was handled during the pandemic. Furthermore, the report identifies the roles state agencies such as the Police and media regulators played during the pandemic that impacted on press freedom.
2. THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Four bodies are in charge of the media sector, each with a specific role. These are the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), the Media High Council (MHC) (recently disbanded) and the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authorities (RURA). Their mandates span across areas of press freedom, content regulation, frequency allocations, policy formulations, and capacity building.

2.1 The Rwanda Governance Board (RGB)
RGB was established by Law No. 56/2016 of 16 February 2016. RGB, an autonomous self-accounting body, is responsible for monitoring service delivery and compliance with principles of good governance in the public, private as well as in non-government sectors. It monitors aspects of governance in the media sector.

2.2 The Rwanda Media Commission (RMC)
RMC was established by law N°02/2013 of 08/02/2013 Regulating Media. RMC is responsible for defining and implementing a self-regulatory mechanism that guides the relationship between media and the public. The creation of the body was part of various reforms that the media sector in Rwanda went through in the late 2013. RMC also handles complaints related to the right to information filed by media practitioners.

2.3 Media High Council (MHC)
The Media High Council (MHC), which was closed in 2020, was an autonomous body responsible for media capacity building. In line with law N°03/2013 of 08/02/2013, the MHC’s duty was to initiate and implement policies and strategies that enable the country’s media and practitioners

1 Law establishing the Rwanda Governance Board and determining its mission, organization and functioning. file:///C:/Users/User/AppData/Local/Temp/Law_Establishing_RGB_2016.pdf
2 Law regulating Media, file:///C:/Users/User/AppData/Local/Temp/LAW_REGULATING_MEDIA-08-02-2013.pdf
to study trends in global media and adapting to them. Part of its work involved media research, advocacy and engagement with stakeholders to ensure that new trends and needs were identified and provided for. However, the body was phased out in February 2021.

2.4 Rwanda Utility Regulatory Authority (RURA)

Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) was initially created by the Law n° 39/2001 of 13 September 2001 with the objective of regulating public utilities in telecommunications network and/or telecommunications services, electricity, water, waste removal management, gas extraction and distribution as well as passenger and cargo transport. In 2013, this law was repealed and replaced by a new law establishing Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA). This law gives to RURA an omnibus mandate, expanded to include new telecommunications, information technology, broadcasting and convergence electronic technologies including the internet and any other audio-visual information and communication technology. It also regulates postal services, renewable and non-renewable energy, industrial gases, pipelines and storage facilities; other divisions are water and sanitation; passenger and cargo transport; radiation protection and any other utility that may be deemed necessary.

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4 Law regulating Media, file:///C:/Users/User/AppData/Local/Temp/LAW_REGULATING_MEDIA-08-02-2013-1.pdf
3. MAJOR REFORMS THAT CHANGED THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The institutions discussed above form part of the reform package that the Rwanda Government introduced in 2013. These reforms include the enactment of the Access to Information Law, a progressive legislation that enabled journalists and the public to request information from public agencies and some private organisations.

However, despite the positive reforms that boosted media development, some challenges remain. According to the global media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), censorship and self-censorship are some of the key challenges the media faces in Rwanda. RSF observes that Rwanda’s media legal regime is still oppressive in spite of some reforms, and the 1994 genocide is still a point of reference authorities use to brand critical media as divisive and unpatriotic. RSF, however, noted that it had of late registered fewer cases of press violations, although “censorship is ubiquitous and self-censorship is widely used to avoid running afoul of the regime.”

On the annual Press Freedom Index, Rwanda fell by one place in 2021 to 155 on global scale.

The Government’s view is rather defensive. It has often dismissed reports by RSF. Officials say the state of media freedom has improved thanks to the above mentioned media reforms. The Rwanda Media Barometer (RMB) 2021 shows that the media development and professional capacity indicator scored 62.4%, the least performance compared to other indicators it considered. This was a 10% drop compared to the previous RMB which was published in 2018 in which it was recorded at 72.4%. Previous editions of the Rwanda Media Barometer indicated a steady improvement of media status from 60.7% in 2013 to 69.6% in 2016 and 72.4% in 2018. It was based on findings from questionnaires administered to over 800 respondents including 652 ordinary citizens and 165 journalists and media development organisations. Methods used to assess media development include desk research, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions.

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In a recent opinion article titled: “Ignore Reporters Without Borders – Rwandan Media Is Growing, along with Government Confidence in it” Mr. Ignatius Kabagambe, former media development staff at RGB notes that tremendous progress has been made in Rwanda’s media sector. “The sector seems to have grown in leaps and bounds to do lots of catch up. No longer a mismatch, no more lagging far behind. Media is now close.” Mr. Kabagambe noted.\(^8\)

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4. METHODOLOGY

This study is an investigation into the threats to freedom of the press and to individual journalists during the COVID—19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021. The study employed qualitative and quantitative approaches that include analysis and review of media reports of events during the pandemic, government statements, reports by media watchdogs, civil society organisations, human rights organisations, and statutory institutions in charge of the media. In addition, a survey of 20 journalists from print, online, broadcast based in and outside the capital Kigali was conducted to assess the state of press freedom during the pandemic.

The sample of 20 respondents that included reporters, correspondents, presenters, a graphic designer, a photographer, producers and sub-editors were interviewed. Sixty percent of respondents were full-time employees, 20% independent/ self-employed content producers, 15% were freelancers, while 5% was part-time employees. In terms of gender, 40 % of respondents were female while 60 % were male.

Respondents work in various types of media. Radio takes 45%, television 30%, on-line 15% while 10% work with print media. A survey was also used to collect data through a questionnaire administered to eight media managers to understand the impact of COVID-19 on media houses. A key informant interview with one civil society organisation that promotes rule of law was conducted.

The media managers interviewed included two general managers, circulation/sales managers and one head of programming, managing director, advertising manager and editor. Men constituted three quarters of managers. Two managers working with print, online and broadcast media were interviewed in the survey.
5. FINDINGS

5.1 Restrictions on movement and arrests

The COVID-19 pandemic in Rwanda prompted the first and harshest lockdown in Africa. The curbs on travel complicated the work of journalists. They could hardly move. When one looks at the incidents of journalists affected by the restrictions, and the way authorities reacted and commented, one gets the feeling that the actions of security forces were sanctioned. Journalists were arrested on the way to or from work, while government officials, including media regulators insisted that the journalists were not above the law. Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its May 2020 report called on Rwanda security forces to end mass arrests of people whom they detained in stadiums without due process or legal authority for allegedly breaching COVID-19 restrictions.

Table 1 below shows that 10% of respondents faced physical assault, arrests or detention; 5% faced charges by the media regulators; half of the respondents (50%) reported they were denied access to information from government officials or agencies. Moreover 65% of respondents said they faced restrictions of movement. A similar number said their salaries were reduced. A smaller percentage reported malicious damage to or confiscation of their tools of trade, and cyber harassment. It should be noted, however, that there were no cases reported in connection with imprisonment; death threats, or kidnap.

Nine journalists and one driver were arrested in April 2020 barely weeks after government imposed the first total lockdown and subsequent COVID-19 measures. According to HRW, since April 8 four bloggers who mainly do their journalism via YouTube channels and one driver were arrested for allegedly violating COVID-19 directives. On April 8, the Rwanda Investigative Bureau (RIB) and Police agents arrested Valentin Muhirwa and David Byiringiro, two bloggers working with Afrimax TV in Kangondo II, an informal settlement suburb in the capital Kigali. According to HRW, the online journalists had previously spoken with the local people about their concerns that included allegations of evictions, theft and cases of rape blamed on soldiers. Journalists returned to the area with food aid to give to the residents. RIB and the police accused the

journalists of flouting COVID-19 rules and organising unauthorised distribution of provisions and arrested them.

### TABLE 1: Threats journalists faced during COVID-19 pandemic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threats Suffered</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Assault</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest/detention</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court charges</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charges by media regulators</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of access to information/sources</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of movement</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death threats</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnap</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber harassment</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malicious damage or confiscation of tools</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay off</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of salary</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On April 12, RIB confirmed the arrest of journalist Theoneste Nsengimana, the owner of Umubavu TV, an online media outlet for alleged fraud. RIB accused the reporter of promising 20,000 Rwandan Francs (US $21) to the residents of a neighbourhood in Kigali in return for claiming that they were receiving assistance from abroad “for the purpose of soliciting a story for his own benefit”.  

![Image](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/24/rwanda-lockdown-arrests-abuses-surge)

Similarly, on April 15, journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga also known as Cyuma Hassan, the owner of Ishema TV, an online TV channel was arrested together with his driver Fidele Komezusenge. RIB accused the journalist of violating the lockdown measures and giving Komezusenge an unauthorised press pass.

![Image](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/24/rwanda-lockdown-arrests-abuses-surge)

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Other journalists arrested were Ivan Mugisha, correspondent for AFP and the *East African* weekly newspaper; Saul Butera, a correspondent for Bloomberg, and John Gahamanyi who works with *The New Times*. Butera and Gahamanyi were also accused of drunk driving and later released after five days in detention.

In June 2020 two freelance journalists, Samuel Baker Byansi and Janvier Nshimyumukiza were arrested for flouting curfew, even though they had identified themselves as journalists. They were detained at Kicukiro Police Station in Kigali City.

Given the travel restrictions during lockdown period, Government agencies including Police and the three statutory media agencies encouraged journalists to work from home. But this proved difficult for many journalists who had to be at scenes of news events, especially those related to the pandemic.

Survey findings for this report show that movement restrictions was a threat to press freedom during the pandemic. Respondents said they could not go to the field to report. HRW has described the arrests and detention as arbitrary in its report released in April 2020. The organisation said that journalists and bloggers arrested were trying to expose “abuses”. Authorities maintained those arrested violated COVID-19 measures. However, other observers including media watchdogs and rights organisations said the arrests were arbitrary and the fact that journalists were not among essential workers complicated their work and restricted their movements. The survey shows in Table 2 below that three quarters of sampled journalists confirmed facing threats during the pandemic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2: Percentage of journalists that faced threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FACED ANY THREATS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A civil society leader noted that it was a big gap not to have included journalists among essential workers because their movement was restricted.

16 ‘Rwandan Journalist, media worker detained since mid-April’, https://cpj.org/2020/05/rwandan-journalist-media-worker-detained-since-mid/
5.2 Restrictions affected access to information

After COVID-19 pandemic broke out in the country, the public wanted reliable information about the pandemic. Restriction of movement hindered access to information as journalists needed to go to the field to find out what was happening and inform their audience. The Ministry of Health (MiniSante) and Rwanda Biomedical Centre released daily information on the pandemic especially data but that was not enough as the press wanted more.¹⁷ Half of journalists interviewed in the survey said they faced denial of information or sources. Several factors influenced the violation of the right to information.

According to a civil society leader, movement restrictions was a challenge for journalists to get access to information especially COVID-19 news. For journalist's time is of essence, if you can’t facilitate journalists quickly to get access to information, it’s a problem, noted the Chief executive.

“I know some journalists who were arrested while they were trying to cover the implementation of curfew,” he said. “They ended up being arrested by the police, because they were trying to cover how police is implementing curfew,” he added those reporters wanted to find out how people are being arrested and detained in stadiums because they had violated curfew times; other journalists wanted to report about road crashes but they ended up being arrested. Some journalists have been trying to find out who is benefitting from this Social protection program launched during COVID-19 lockdown] these bloggers who were arrested were trying to uncover the facts.”

According to Table 3 below, 28% of survey respondents said that the biggest threat they faced was job loss, 28 % suffered salary cuts, 17 % feared death, 11% fell sick, while 11% experienced poverty as a threat, and 5% said restriction of movements was the biggest challenge they faced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIGGEST THREATS FACED</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job loss</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary cuts/reduction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of death</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling sick</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of movement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁷ Ministry of Health Rwanda, https://twitter.com/RwandaHealth
Other ways the journalists were affected include lack of access to equipment locked up at officers; failure to access Internet connectivity when working from home; distractions associated with working from home. Others were disadvantaged because of a ban on events that had been suspended during the pandemic. This affected journalists covering entertainment, business, religion and cultural events.

5.3 Psychological Effects on Journalists

As a result of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, journalists faced mental health problems. This was manifested through various psychological effects they experienced. At least 40% of respondent said they suffered depression, while 50% suffered anxiety. Another 30% said they suffered exhaustion or burnout, while 58% lost sleep, and 60% got negative thoughts. Another 60% said they felt helpless.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS SUFFERED</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustion or burnout</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of sleep</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting negative thoughts</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling helpless</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responding to mental health problems, some respondents sought doctor’s help. Others engaged in sports to reduce stress and be physically fit. Some sought help by communicating with their colleagues and advise one another from different media houses as they faced similar challenges. During that time, I would keep in touch with my workmates and other journalists from different media houses because we faced similar problems,” said one of the respondents.

“I felt less lonely because we counted on one another to work around common problems,” said another respondent.”

5.4 Responding to threats amidst pandemic

Journalists responded to what they considered as key threats they faced in the course of their work during pandemic. Some became self- employed to make a living. “I started a new and small business to survive and increase professionalism,” said a respondent. Another said they
started a [news] website to generate revenues. Other created their YouTube channels – using their skills to find other sources of income.

5.5 Economic Impact

All media houses suffered the brunt of the pandemic when they lost advertising revenue to the lockdown. Newspapers could not be sold because people were at home; so advertisers could not place advertisements where there was no audience. Analysts also said that the public mood was on basic survival during the pandemic times.

As a result, media houses in Rwanda, like elsewhere in East Africa, took measures to cut losses. Some laid off their employees including journalists and slashed staff salaries exacerbating the vulnerabilities of media workers. According to the World Bank, Rwanda's economy was most hit during lockdowns that resulted in unemployment and closure of some businesses.18

One of major impacts of COVID-19 on Rwanda has been economic difficulties that led to a recession. During the lockdowns many businesses were closed while others operated half-time with limited staff. This affected the country’s economy and the media sector that generates revenues mainly from advertising and other sources of incomes. Some journalists and media workers interviewed said their salaries were cut others were laid off, as media houses struggled to generate revenues. In May 2020, RMC, the media self-regulatory body appealed for the sector’s partners for the inclusion of media in the COVID-19 economic recovery plans saying publishers in Rwanda have been threatened by the coronavirus pandemic.19 “It is a time that the body says journalists committed more efforts to deliver much needed information to the population, although some were not able to fulfil that responsibility due to the impact of the pandemic,” read the news report published last year.

The findings from media managers’ survey show the media faced economic hardship as a result of the pandemic. Responding to the question whether COVID-19 has economically affected their media houses, all managers answered in the affirmative.

Media managers said that they lost clients, and the pandemic increased their budget yet they were not generating revenues from their sponsors and work. Lack of financial ability was cited as a results of sponsors who were not spending on media services, loss of staff was also cited. Unfavorable environment for businesses during the pandemic affected media houses. “Our clients

are businesses, when they are affected we are also affected because they don’t advertise,” said one of the media managers.

The findings show other economic effects of COVID-19 on media houses were the drop in circulation or audiences. Forty-two percent of respondents said they were affected. All media managers said their outlets recorded drops in revenues and that the failure to collect debts as a result of COVID-19 was one of the challenges.

#### TABLE 5: COVID-19 economic impact on the media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECTS OF COVID-19</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drop in circulation/audiences</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop in advertising revenue</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of staff</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to collect money from debtors</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.6 Mitigation measures

The economic hardships caused by the pandemic prompted the government, some media houses and individual journalists to design mitigation measures. Rwandan government in partnership with UNDP launched a 100,000 USD fund to support media during COVID-19. Thirteen media houses received grants but it was very competitive and limited. At least 50 media houses responded to a call for proposal for financial relief. As a result, few media outlets that met criteria including TV 10 Ltd, Umucyo Community Radio Station Ltd, TV 1 RWANDA Ltd (Radio & TV), received the grants that were meant to be used in three months.

A manager said: “We also changed our programs to make new income as a resort”. Some journalists also became self-employed to earn some income during the pandemic.

Survey results show coronavirus pandemic disrupted the work of journalists. Ninety percent said COVID-19 affected the way they work. Findings show the various ways the pandemic affected journalists. Some respondents said that they were not able to go to the field. “I wasn’t able to travel as usual so that I can cover and get new story ideas to report”, said a respondent. Others said their salaries were reduced. Working extra hours was also cited among the effects. A respondent said they had to work very hard because other teammates were working from home. One journalist lost a job and also got infected with COVID-19.
5.7 Media’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

As Table 7 shows, the different ways media outlets responded to the effects of COVID-19. Fifty-seven percent laid off staff, 63% reduced salaries of their staff, 33% changed the format of their platforms (e.g. print to online), Twenty nine percent produced, in-house, previously outsourced programmes, while 14% closed some outlets of their businesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 7: Media’s responses to economic impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSE FROM MEDIA HOUSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layoff of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of staff salaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing of frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing formats e.g. print to online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-house production of previously outsourced programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing some outlets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.8 Media houses’ adaption to the health crisis

The managers were asked how they are responding to the effects of COVID-19 on their business and journalism. They adopted different strategies to deal with impact of the pandemic on the media sector. Some decided to reduce staff and maintain the best employees who work productively. A manager said they reduced employees so that the remaining staff can get paid their salaries and produce more. “We are doing this so that the remaining workers will produce more and still get their salaries accordingly,” said one respondent from managers’ group.

As the pandemic’s economic impact hit businesses, the media houses are pushing back in new innovative ways to generate revenues. For instance, media house changed the programs to make new income. Another one is finding clients in new sectors to cover up the loss brought by COVID-19. Other creative strategies to adapt to the crisis cited include improving professionalism, strengthening content on COVID-19, increase and improve social media presence and the wider digital media platforms (websites). Working from home was another strategy adopted by the media especially during lockdowns. Widening the target markets was cited as another strategy to stay in business. “We are trying to work with other partners and look for work with government institutions so that we can have capacity to continue working,” read one response from the managers’ survey. Other managers said they reduced the price of advertisement and also gave special offers to new clients.
5.9 Reaction of other stakeholders

Amid movements restrictions that affected press freedom and other challenges during COVID-19, several stakeholders reacted to the situation mainly by criticising the arrests and calling for allowing journalists and media workers to do their work. Others, especially government agencies, wanted the media to observe restrictions and work from home.

Muthoki Mumo, Africa regional representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ called for unconditional release of arrested journalists including Dieudonné Niyonsenga and his driver Fidèle Komezusenge. The two men were released on 12 March 2021 after spending 11 months in prison.

Despite calls for allowing journalists to report freely during lockdown, RMC said the arrests of journalists had nothing to do with their work but for flouting COVID-19 preventive measures.20

Other human rights organisations to criticise Rwanda over journalists’ arrests were the Global Campaign for Rwandan Human Rights, an organisation that mainly operates on-line, and the ‘Rwanda Observatory for Human Rights (ROHR). Laurent Munyandilikirwa, the head of the organisation said that some of arrested journalists were asking questions about why authorities were demolishing homes in an informal settlement without compensation. In addition to the campaign organisation, an unregistered opposition party released a statement titled “Rwandan journalists become collateral victims in the fight against coronavirus pandemic” condemning the arrests of journalists.21

Media regulators also reacted mainly to the arrests of journalists and general working environment especially with movement restricted. The RMC cautioned the public against sharing information with ‘You Tubers’ “who masquerade as journalists but are continuously exhibiting unprofessionalism,” reported a news website.22 The decision sparked criticism among ‘You Tubers’, other media practitioners and human rights organisations

Rwanda Utility Regulatory Authority (RURA) urged online media to register and seek accreditation for their journalists from RMC in a move that appeared to support RMC’s decision on ‘You Tubers’. RURA warned online journalists against violating media law and commit cybercrimes saying that they will be dealt with by the law.23 While a reminder would be welcome by media

20 ‘Communique for Journalists during COVID-19’, https://twitter.com/RMC_Rwanda/status/1249730987703009280/photo/1
practitioners, it could also be seen as intimidation given that journalists were already supposed to be conversant with the relevant legislation regulating their profession and standards.

Some online activists also reacted to the arrests by denouncing them online. A twitter user announced the arrest of journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga claiming the reporter was arrested “at a crime scene where a child was killed”. Another Tweep, who appeared to be member of an opposition political party, tweeted that “six courageous journalists were arrested on 8 April 2020” and posted a statement condemning the arrests. Human Rights Watch released the most detailed report on arrests of journalists, ordinary citizens and called for an end to what it termed as a crackdown on the media.” Rwandan authorities should end the arbitrary detentions, including of journalists and bloggers trying to expose abuse, and ensure that security forces respect rights when enforcing the measures,” the campaign organisation said in its report released on 12 April 2020.

24 https://twitter.com/CKibeho/status/1384572325945757705
25 https://twitter.com/rwalindap/status/1250529564863934469
6. ROLES OF VARIOUS ACTORS ON PRESS FREEDOM VIOLATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

This section analyses the role various actors played during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it could have affected the press freedom and journalists’ work.

6.1 Police

The Rwanda National Police as the country’s law enforcement organ was charged with ensuring that the COVID-19 measures are implemented. These included lockdowns, curfews and monitoring the respect of other guidelines around the country. According to data collected and reports reviewed, Police was involved in several arrests of journalists for allegedly violating coronavirus measures. In some cases, Rwandan Investigative Bureau (RIB,) the organ that performs criminal investigations functions also played a role in criminal cases related to journalists’ arrests. Several times police insisted that they were enforcing the law adding that journalists are not above the law. According to a media report, The Rwanda National police spokesperson CP John Bosco Kabera said in reference to the arrested reporters that all people including journalists should respect measures put in place to fight COVID-19. CP Kabera was quoted in a news report as saying: “There is no body who is above the law, everyone who will be found violating the lockdown will be arrested”. Most of the arrested journalists were detained at Remera Police Station in Kigali. Police also alleged that some journalists were arrested for misusing their press cards to engage in acts that violated the lockdown.


6.2 Government officials

In May 2020, the Minister of Justice, Johnson Busingye told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) that the state would never detain or prosecute anyone in connection with their journalism work. The minister was responding to the arrest of Journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga. According to the campaign organisation, the minister and attorney referred CPJ to the office of the prosecutor general for detailed explanations. Faustin Nkusi, the spokesperson of the National Prosecution Authority told CPJ that “the alleged crimes that the ‘YouTubers’ are being investigated have nothing to do with their profession”.

6.3 Rwanda Media Commission (Media regulator)

Despite calls for facilitation of journalists to freely do their work without movements restrictions, the RMC appeared to have a different approach that encourage journalists to work from home. The body issued COVID-19 guidelines including a new regulation banning online media that operate on YouTube channels to conduct interviews and broadcast news. RMC also cautioned journalists against violating COVID-19 measures following a series of arrests. An arrangement between Police and RMC to allow journalists to move during lockdown was said to be in place but many rights groups called for journalists to be listed among essential workers. Regarding the arrests at the beginning of the lockdown, RMC said it has followed the matter and found that it has nothing to do with journalism. However, several human rights groups and media watchdogs raised concerns over the arrests that some termed as a crackdown on the media.

6.4 Rwanda Utility Regulatory Authority (Media Regulator)

Amidst arrests of journalists during lockdown, RURA urged online media to register and seek accreditation for their journalists. RURA warned internet based journalists against engaging in acts that would violate the law and committing cybercrimes. Similarly, the telecom and media regulator said that people who hide behind Internet platforms including YouTube to commit crimes and violate the journalistic code of ethics are liable to committing cyber-crimes. While a reminder is always important it could be seen as an intimidation given the context and timing of the reminder.

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29 ‘Rwandan Journalist, media worker detained since mid-April,’ https://cpj.org/2020/05/rwandan-journalist-media-worker-detained-since-mid/
7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously hindered press freedom and caused economic difficulties to the media businesses as a result of the slow economic activities in the country and around the world. The climax of press freedom violation was manifested in the documented arrests of journalists during lockdown. The justified measures to contain the deadly virus did not consider the essential role media plays in a crisis especially information dissemination that helps policymakers and the public to take informed decisions. The fund to mitigate COVID-19 economic impact on media is commendable as it helped successful applicants to boost their operations and contribute in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists faced several threats that made it difficult for them to fully perform their duties. They faced up to the consequences of the pandemic by creating other sources of income and in some cases seeking medical assistance for mental health. Some local and international campaigns organisations raised concerns on violation of press freedom and called for the facilitation of journalists to do their work. While the media regulators who promote press freedom followed up on some cases of press freedom threats they could have done more especially by advocating for inclusion of media among the essential workers and engaged relevant authorities to allow media practitioners to move freely during lockdowns.
8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 To Media Houses
- Given the huge economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media sector, media managers should innovate to find other sources of revenues by tapping into sectors that might have been ignored and create new products that could be affordable to their customers during the difficult economic times.
- Where media houses must lay off staff owing to the impact of a crises such as COVID-19 this should be done in accordance with the country’s labour laws to ensure that the rights of employees are protected.
- Media managers should also endeavor to support their employees during crises through material, legal, medical, and psycho-social support.

8.2 To Journalists
- Journalists and media workers should cultivate the practice of reporting any threats they face during the course of their work. This helps in the documentation and consequent follow up of the cases and advocacy for change.
- Journalists should make themselves conversant with the labour laws in their countries and make use of labour rights agencies when and if they are laid off outside due process.
- Following the impact of journalists on their work and livelihoods, journalists should be creative and versatile in establishing alternative incomes, alternative platforms to disseminate content and adapt non-traditional forms of gathering news.

8.3 Media regulators
- Rwanda Media Commission, the country’s media self-regulatory body is supposed to play a key role in promoting press freedom and the safety of journalists. RMC should actively monitor press freedom violation during any crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic.
- Given the essential role the press plays in information dissemination, RMC should advocate for the inclusion of media in essential services especially during lockdowns.
- Considering the impact of COVID-19 on media business, the advocacy efforts of RMC and other regulatory bodies for the inclusion of the media in the economic recovery plans is commendable and should be sustained to support media businesses’ recovery.
- The RMC initiate the amendment of the media law to include new media players and online content producers.
8.4 **Security organs**

Security organs have played an important role in fighting COVID-19 disease by ensuring adopted measures are followed. They should, however, work with media regulators and journalists’ associations to understand their needs during the crisis as they play an essential role of informing policymakers and the public. This cooperation will improve media-state relations and allow security agencies to learn how the media works in times of crisis.

8.5 **Government authorities**

Government authorities have been involved in public health governance and other initiatives to control COVID-19 pandemic. Given the importance of the press, authorities should facilitate journalists to access information and sources. If there is any unprofessional conduct by journalists, they should engage media regulators to resolve the problem.

8.6 **Civil Society**

Civil Society promotes good governance and rule of law, therefore civil society organisations should work with the media to promote press freedom and a good working environment for the fourth estate. Those involved in mental health issues should assist journalists as they experience psychological effects of their work during difficult times. Advocacy will also contribute to a favorable environment for journalists during crisis.