Responding to Threats to Press Freedom and the Media in a Time of Crisis

AN ASSESSMENT OF TYPES AND SOURCES OF THREATS TO PRESS FREEDOM AND MITIGATION MEASURES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN UGANDA
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and its economic consequences 3
Economic meltdown, a pre-existing condition 4

METHODOLOGY

FINDINGS

Threats to journalists 7
Layoffs and salary cuts 7
Physical assault 8
Arrests and detention 10
Court charges 11
Denial of access to information/sources 12
Charges by regulatory authorities 12
Sources of threats to media freedom in Uganda 13
Some good news during the COVID-19 period 18
Journalists’ response to threats posed by COVID-19 18
Media response to COVID-19 19
Other cost-cutting measures 21

CONCLUSION 22
INTRODUCTION

World over, the current pandemic is having unprecedented effects on all sectors of the global economy including the media. The pandemic that was first detected in China in late 2019 has spread the entire world, infecting and killing millions of people. By June 5, 2021 there were a total of 171 million cases and 3.6 million deaths as a result of COVID-19. Uganda confirmed its first COVID-19 case in March 2020 and by June 5 2021, the total number of confirmed cases had risen to 51,000 with 374 deaths.

World over, the current pandemic is having unprecedented effects on all sectors of the global economy including the media. The pandemic that was first detected in China in late 2019 has spread the entire world, infecting and killing millions of people. By June 5, 2021 there were a total of 171 million cases and 3.6 million deaths as a result of COVID-19. Uganda confirmed its first COVID-19 case in March 2020 and by June 5 2021, the total number of confirmed cases had risen to 51,000 with 374 deaths.

Free and independent media that provide accurate information, facilitate public debate, and hold power to account have never been more critical than now when we are in the middle of a global pandemic. The media perform an important role of providing accurate information to citizens during health emergencies. During health crises such as the COVID-19, there is normally an unprecedented amount of information that circulates within the public necessitating extra precautions to avoid escalating the pandemic. This is especially the case during this era where digital communication has made it easy for everyone to circulate information globally. Like in war times, during health crises, the need for information within the public is understandably very high as people seek for measures to protect themselves. Yet, the media globally continue to face financial pressure to sustain their operations amidst reduced revenue streams due to...
COVID-19. Safety of journalists as well as misinformation and disinformation are also challenges that have taken on new urgency in the wake of COVID-19. All these factors have combined to give independent journalism a tenuous hold in Uganda and the East African region. Yet, without strong and credible independent media, there is also a danger that what the World Health Organisation (WHO) has called the COVID-19 infodemic (excessive information, including misinformation and disinformation, about the pandemic) would overwhelm the public.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, most countries, including Uganda instituted a lockdown and curfew to control the spread of the pandemic. As a result, most places of work were closed while those that continued operating had to change their work structure and routines in a manner that allows social distancing at work. The media in Uganda was one of the few sectors categorised as ‘essential workers’ that were allowed to continue working through the pandemic.

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO and the United Nations (UN) warned governments against using the COVID-19 response measures as a pretext to curtail the right to freedom of expression, and in particular freedom of journalists to do their work. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion, David Kaye, noted that in many countries around the world, States have exploited the prevailing circumstances to crack down on journalism, silence criticism, and punish the free flow of information in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. 7

The UN warning followed reports that independent reporting was under new threat as a result of the pandemic, with several states passing emergency laws curtailing the freedom of the media, especially in the developing countries. 8 Eastern Africa has not been an exception in this respect. For instance, journalists in Uganda and South Sudan have been jailed, harassed or intimidated for their reporting on how their governments have responded to the pandemic. In Tanzania, the government has banned or suspended media houses and passed new regulations that have adversely affected the right to free expression and access to information at a time when there are no official reports on the status of COVID-19 in the country. 9 The new regulations prohibit the publication of “content with information with regards to the outbreak of a deadly or contagious disease in the country or elsewhere without the approval of the respective authorities.” 10 The threats to independent journalism and the media do not only emanate from governments but also from members of the public. For example in March 2021, authorities at St. Joseph, Nsambya Girls School briefly detained a Daily Monitor journalist who had filed a report

indicating that the school had opened for more students than the ones the government had allowed. The journalist was dragged to a nearby police station and forced to delete the photos and notes he had taken at the school.\textsuperscript{11}

Press freedom in the East African region was already under serious limits even before the pandemic. According to the 2019 Freedom House ranking, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Burundi were all ranked as ‘not free’ while Uganda Kenya and Tanzania were only ranked as ‘partly free’.\textsuperscript{12} Before COVID-19, there were growing concerns about the phenomenon of “media capture”, which often involves control over the news media by political and business interests as well as licensing and regulatory bodies that are usually not independent of governments.

**COVID-19 and its economic consequences**

The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused unprecedented economic challenges globally across various sectors, including the media. It has ravaged the business world, leading to crushing of stock markets, closure of businesses and left the global economy at the verge of an economic depression.\textsuperscript{13} Globally, the pandemic has caused significant economic damage on all newsrooms. A report by the International Center For Journalists (ICFJ) noted that the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 was a top concern for most of the media industry employees, with three in four respondents saying that their first priority during the pandemic was the survival of their publication. The report further noted that almost four in five respondents with access to information about their newsroom’s finances reported at least a 50% decline in revenue.\textsuperscript{14}

COVID-19 poses an existential threat to a media industry that was already under stress from the disruption unleashed by the digital revolution and the rise of social media as major sources of news for millions of people. Rapidly falling newspaper circulation exacerbated by government restrictions on movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the substantial dip in advertising revenue caused by the significant slowdown in economic activity have left media houses on their knees.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, traditional media have been particularly under threat with sales of newspapers and advertising revenue for the media significantly dropping due to effects of an extended lockdown. This has forced some media houses to restructure their organisations or even close business. For instance, in the first five months of the pandemic,

\textsuperscript{11} https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/school-detains-monitor-journalist-as-schools-open-3307834
\textsuperscript{12} https://freedomhouse.org/country/tanzania/freedom-world/2019
Uganda’s biggest media group, Vision Group closed three regional newspapers, published in local languages and laid off staff who were working for these publications. These newspapers included, Orumuri, Etop, and Rupiny. Another privately owned weekly, *The Observer* was also forced to suspend its operations. Apart from closure of some media outlets, media organisations in Uganda have also had to lay off some staff as well as making salary cuts on the remaining staff. In Uganda, the Vision Group announced pay cuts of up to 60% for some employees. Its competitor, the Nation Media Group also announced salary reductions of up to 35% for its staff.

**Economic meltdown, a pre-existing condition**

It should be noted that COVID-19 found media enterprises in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa already in a fragile state with many of them struggling to financially sustain themselves. Industry analysts contend that despite the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media industry and specifically the printing sub-sector was already a sinking ship, with only the Coronavirus accelerating its demise. World-wide, COVID-19 has increased the volatility and vulnerability of the media and culture industry, which has witnessed a fall in economic returns and job losses. In Uganda for instance, less than 30% of newspapers and online publications are able to sustain themselves. In Africa, like elsewhere in the world, there was already a trend that the newspapers were declining. For instance, in Ethiopia, the media have already been financially struggling, especially after the passing of the new law banning advertising alcohol, which was a major source of income for media houses. In countries with the highest newspaper readership such as Kenya and South Africa, newspapers have for a long period been losing readership. In South Africa, data for the past ten years show a 49% drop in circulation for newspapers, while in Kenya, data shows that in 2018, the number of English daily newspapers declined to 87.1 million from 102 million in 2014. The number of Kiswahili daily newspapers, on the other hand, declined to 37 million copies in 2018 from 58 million copies in 2014. The coming of COVID-19 simply exacerbated an already volatile financial situation for most media organisations. Despite the gloomy side of the print business, the pandemic has come with some positive news for some electronic media, particularly some television stations that have recorded increased revenue in the pandemic period.

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15 https://acme-ug.org/2020/06/02/covid-19-sounds-the-death-knell-for-local-language-newspapers/
16 https://www.kas.de/documents/280229/8800435/COVID-19+and+the+Precarity+of+Uganda%E2%80%99s+Print+Media.pdf/c4a9f622-d40c-d481-afd5-e2d19c92f746?t=1592317864039
19 https://www.kas.de/documents/280229/8800435/COVID-19+and+the+Precarity+of+Uganda%E2%80%99s+Print+Media.pdf/c4a9f622-d40c-d481-afd5-e2d19c92f746?t=1592317864039
20 Proclamation No. 1112/2019- A proclamation to provide for Food and Medicine Administration
This report documents press freedom violations in 2020 in Uganda, as a basis of providing evidence-based advocacy, training and support to journalists in response to the growing threats to independent journalism and the media in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Dr Julie Posetti of the International Centre for Journalism has argued, “If journalism is to survive the pandemic, we will need quality research to help inform the recovery.”

This report attempts to inform advocacy, journalism and business reform, and media development interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative and quantitative research methods of interviews and a survey. The interviews and survey were conducted among 20 journalists and eight media managers. Half of the journalists were drawn from radio; six were taken from television, two from newspapers, while one journalist was taken from a news agency and another from online media. At least eight of the selected journalists were female while 12 were male. Four of the eight media managers were drawn from radio, two from newspapers, one from television and another one from an online media outlet. This selection was based on the most dominant media platform in Uganda. The media managers selected carried varying titles. They included two heads of news and one head of programming, a programs director, managing editor, editorial director, editor and chief news editor. Of the selected eight managers, only one was female and the rest were male. Whereas we would have liked to balance the gender of respondents, it was not possible because the selection of respondents was purposive, meaning that only respondents holding particular offices were targeted. In Uganda, few woman hold managerial positions in newsrooms.

The respondents were selected from a cross-section of media platforms including commercial, public and community media based in both rural and urban settings country-wide. The survey questionnaire was emailed to respondents who returned it after answering the survey questions. The study also used a document analysis to assess the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of journalism. The reviewed documents include reports from local and international media support civil society organisations.
The findings of this study are derived from the three main research methods described above. The findings have been presented below basing on the emerging themes that include threats to journalists such as salary cuts and layoffs, physical assault, arrest and detention, denial of access to information and court charges. The major sources of threats identified include the police, the army and Resident District Commissioners. The report further presents the health and economic threats of COVID-19 to journalists and the media response towards these threats.

Threats to journalists
The majority of journalists (85%) we surveyed reported that they had faced threats in their work as journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Layoffs and salary cuts
Some of the most common threats that journalists reported to have faced include economic threats of salary cuts (60%), suspension (10%) and layoff (5%). This finding corresponds with the study by the ICFJ that indicated that economic survival of journalists and the media houses
they work for was one of the top concerns of the respondents they studied. Other major threats perceived by respondents concerned the restriction of movement due to curfew (90%), cyber harassment (25%), denial of access to information and sources (58%) and physical assault (20%). Other threats that were reported include death threats, kidnap, and malicious damage or confiscation of tools. The table below further highlights the threats journalists faced during the 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>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest/detention</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charges by media regulators</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of access to information/sources</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of movement</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death threats</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnap</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber harassment</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malicious damage or confiscation of tools</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay off</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of salary</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Physical assault

Apart from threats to journalists and the media as a result of COVID-19, media freedom in Uganda was further violated in 2020 because of the political campaigns leading to the 2021 general elections. In Uganda, due to heightened tension, there is a tendency of escalation of incidents of media freedom violation during an election season. According to our document analysis, 12 cases of physical assault were recorded in the period under review. This number may, however, be on the lower side because some incidents of attacks against journalists that take place in the countryside go unreported.

Most of the reported cases of assault against journalists were related to the implementation of COVID-19 standard operating procedures issued by the government. For example, on March 19, 2020, Julius Ocungi, a reporter of Uganda Radio Network was assaulted by policemen

attached to Kitgum Central Police Station while covering an operation by Kitgum Resident District Commissioner (RDC) to close bars. This was part of the president’s directives to curb the spread of COVID-19. The journalist sustained injuries on the left eye, thighs and the right ankle. Efforts to open a case against the offenders were unsuccessful because the police officers who were supposed to investigate the case were at the same time the offenders. In another incident, on March 26, 2020, Richard Odongo, a reporter with Radio Wa in northern Uganda was assaulted by the defense secretary of Acini village local council. He was covering a story about the implementation of President Yoweri Museveni’s directives barring social gatherings of more than 10 people. Odongo said some people had gathered in a room at Acini village on a normal working day which sparked his interest. On reaching the venue, Odongo was punched by Opio Fidel and another Obote Patrick for fear that he was going to report them on radio.

In a related incident, on April 1, 2020 Radio Simba journalist, Dalton Iga was assaulted by the Local Defense Unit (LDU) personnel as he was reporting about the response of the people to the curfew in Mukono district, central Uganda. Although Iga presented his work Identity Card they went ahead to assault him. He also lost seventy thousand shillings (UGX 70,000) and his phone during the attack. On the same day, (April 1, 2020) Daily Monitor newspaper journalist, Perez Rumanzi based in South Western Uganda was assaulted by security officials while reporting stories about the curfew that was then running from 7:00pm to 6:30am. The same reporter was again severely beaten by joint security forces who were enforcing the curfew on October 22, 2020 in Ntungamo Municipality. He was forced to delete all the pictures on the camera. The security operatives then proceeded to hit him with a baton and sticks. He was then rushed to the Municipal Health Clinic for treatment. In the same month, Chipo Brenda Mariam, a journalist attached to Top Media was assaulted by unidentified people for allegedly moving during curfew hours.

In the following month of May attacks on journalists intensified on the pretext of violating COVID-19 guidelines, particularly the curfew. For example, on May 20 2020, two journalists, Benjamin Epeduno and Richard Onapatum working for Joshua FM in the Eastern district of Katakwi were assaulted by Okello Andrew, a police officer attached to Katakwi Central Police Station and Olore Fred, a prison warden attached to Katakwi prison while returning from work at about 7:45pm. They were assaulted on allegations of violating the presidential directive on curfew hours. Olore Fred damaged Onapatum Richard’s phone which he uses in the field to cover stories when he hit him with a gun butt. On the same day (May 20), Fortunate Katungi, a journalist working for Jubilee FM was assaulted by army officers under the command of the Kabarole District Police Commander Faustine Oese for violating curfew hours. In a related incident, on August 13, 2020, Agatha Addiouz, a journalist working for Kyoga FM in Amolatar district was assaulted by Okello James Patrick, a police officer attached to Anyangoga Police Post where she had been assigned to cover a story of alleged extortion by the Officer in Charge of the police post. The police officer was allegedly extorting money from traders to allow them
to operate on Thursdays at Anyangoga trading centre contrary to the Presidential Directive that banned “mobile markets” as part of the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Addiouz was attacked by the police officer just as she was about to start interviewing the local people. She was ordered to surrender the gadgets in her possession before they slapped and boxed her. She was later rushed to Amolatar Health Centre IV where she got medical support.

What is evident here is that although journalists, like other front line workers were permitted to work during curfew hours, the police and other security agencies did not respect this permission. On the basis of these violations, most journalists gave up on working beyond curfew hours thus leaving some news events unattended to. It is also worth noting that most of the incidents of media freedom violations took place in the early months of the lockdown possibly because the security officials who were enforcing COVID-19 rules were still overzealous in implementing COVID-19 restrictions.

Attacks and detention

Another common form of media freedom violation during the COVID-19 pandemic is arrest and detention of journalists. In 2020, at least five cases of arrest and detention of journalists were recorded in Uganda. Most of the arrests did not result into prosecution as the accused journalists were released without charge. For instance, Gwebayanga Tom, a journalist working for the New Vision was arrested and detained for two nights for a story that was published in the New Vision on 21st April 2020 related to the theft of money that was donated by the International Development Institute to fight COVID-19. The organisation gave 80 million shillings to Kamuli district COVID-19 task force in cash, but the task force leaders decided to share the money amongst themselves. The journalist was pressured to reveal his source of information to which he declined before being forced to apologise.

In another incident, on March 5, 2020, James Odongo Akia, a Soroti-based journalist working for government-owned Vision Group was arrested and briefly taken to East Kyoga Regional Police Headquarters in Soroti before being transferred to Kumi Police station, where he was charged with cyber harassment. It was alleged that Odongo attacked and defamed a one Dr. Ekure using a pseudo-Facebook account in the name of Charles Okou. Relatedly, on April 20, 2020 NBS TV news anchor, Samson Kasumba was arrested immediately after leaving his work station. The Police stated that his arrest was not in any way related to his work, but that he was subject to an investigation of alleged subversive activities. However, his arrest was linked to his critical social media posts on government response to COVID-19.24

Other cases of arrest included one in which Sanya Emmanuel Mango, Grace Namubiru, and Godwin Kaiza all of Record TV, Muyingo Joseph of Delta TV, Jaliat Namuwaya of Bukedde TV

24 https://www.hrnjuganda.org/
and Muhumuza Edward of NTV were on 12 May, arrested by police for covering a story in which foreign students who were under lockdown at Makerere University campus were appealing for help due to lack of food and other basic needs. The journalists were detained and their phones confiscated for about two hours before being released without charge. The police accused journalists of covering a press conference that had been convened without the knowledge of the police or the university administration. In another incident, on 22 July 2020, Police in the Eastern City of Jinja arrested Twahir Damulira, the programmes manager and news anchor at Baba FM. Damulira was accused of hosting presidential aspirant Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu live in studio on a political talk show, Council Yaife, contrary to their advice to host the guest scientifically. Kyagulanyi appeared on the talk show on July 18th.\textsuperscript{25}

**Court charges**

Another form of media freedom violation in 2020 was dragging journalists to courts of law on fictitious charges. As stated earlier, most of the arrests of journalists did not result into charges. As a result, only two were charged in court with media related offences. These include Kakwenza Rukirabashaija the author of a book titled *The Greedy Barbarian* (which is believed to be a mockery of President Yoweri Museveni) went missing on 13 April, 2020. It was later discovered that he had been arrested by security operatives for posting a picture on his Facebook timeline allegedly urging the public not to observe Standard Operating Procedures for the prevention of COVID-19. He was detained for 7 days and only produced before court after his lawyers had obtained a writ of a habeas corpus from the court.

In the charge sheet brought before the court, it was stated that on April 6, 2020, the accused person while at Busei A, village in Iganga district using a mini-Lenovo laptop unlawfully and negligently posted messages on his Facebook account mobilising the public against complying with the directives and public health guidelines issued to prevent the spread of COVID-19 knowing that such actions would lead to the further spread of COVID-19 which is dangerous to human life. He was charged for committing an act likely to spread an infectious disease contrary to Section 171 of the Penal Code Act. Subsequently he was remanded to Busesa Prison from where he was later released on bail.\textsuperscript{26} In another incident, James Odongo Akia, a journalist was charged with cyber harassment, defamation, and computer misuse charges, accusing him of using a pseudo account to defame the UPDF commander for land forces, Peter Elwelu, and a local medical personnel, John Okure. A court remanded Akia to prison on March 10, 2020 and granted him bail on March 13.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} REPORT ON THREATS TO MEDIA, CIVIL SOCIETY AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN UGANDA - ACME
\textsuperscript{26} https://www.hrnjuganda.org/
\textsuperscript{27} https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/uganda/
Denial of access to information/sources

As indicated earlier, at least 58% of respondents reported that they had been denied access to information. Most of these cases were perpetuated by Resident District Commissioners (RDC) and the police. For example, Arua district RDC Nahori Oya and head of the district COVID-19 task banned reporters from attending the task force’s weekly meetings in which they were soliciting for funds to support their operations to fight the spread of the pandemic. The then Arua Resident District Commissioner (RDC), Nahori Oya who was also Chairperson of the task force informed the Red Pepper publication that “We have decided that the media should not be part of our meetings because they may distort our discussions. Now what was agreed upon is that I will address the media after meetings myself.”

30 In another incident, On April 1, Henry Nsubuga a reporter with the New Vision newspaper was prevented by the police from filming and ordered to delete footage he had recorded at the office of Mukono RDC, where he had gone to secure a permit that could allow him to freely move to do his work as a journalist during the lockdown.

Charges by regulatory authorities

Apart from the RDCs, LDUs and the police, the media in Uganda have also faced threats during the COVID-19 period from the media regulatory agency, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC). For example, on March 20, 2020, UCC issued a letter to radio, television and online broadcasters warning them against publishing and disseminating false information. Two days

31 https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/uganda/
later on March 22, 2020 UCC again issued another public advisory warning the public to desist from spreading false and unverified information. A few days later, UCC issued another warning to NTV, its sister station Spark TV and another religious affiliated ABS TV. NTV was accused of hosting on its morning programme of March 26, 2020 a one Simon Senyonga who made questionable statements in relation to COVID-19. Similarly, a Spark TV warning came after hosting the late Pastor Augustine Iga of the Revival Church Kawaala on its Live Wire Programme on March 27, 2020, where he made statements questioning the existence of COVID-19 in Uganda. ABS TV was accused of broadcasting misleading statements made by the same late Pastor Augustine Iga on COVID-19 on its Programme “Ebyokya Ku Wiikendi” which was broadcast on March 28, 2020. UCC alleged that these programmes were undermining the efforts by the government of Uganda to fight the rampant spread of COVID-19. The Acting Executive Director of UCC, Eng. Irene Kaggwa Sewankambo, accused the broadcasters of airing material that had the potential “to confuse, divert and mislead unsuspecting members of the public against complying with the guidelines issued by the relevant government authorities on the Coronavirus.”

Sources of threats to media freedom in Uganda

The police

As evident from the above accounts, the police, Resident District Commissioners and sometimes the army are the leading perpetuators of media freedom violations in Uganda. According to the Human Rights Network of Journalists – Uganda, a media support organisation, for 10 consecutive years, the Uganda police has been the leading perpetrator of media freedom violations, accounting for more than 50% of all incidents of press freedom violations. Despite their constitutional mandate to protect people and their property, the force has over the years built a reputation of brutally assaulting and harassing journalists while on duty. One of such attacks happened on December 27 2020, when a Ghetto TV journalist, Kasirye Ashraf was shot at by police causing him serious head injuries that took months to heal. During the same attack, Ali Mivule a journalist with NTV and Daniel Lutaaya of NBS TV were also hit with tear gas canisters as police tried to disperse a crowd in Masaka on presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi’s campaign trail. Despite calls by journalists demanding an apology from the police over this and other incidents, the Inspector General of Police, Martin Okoth Ochola, responded by saying that the police would continue to beat journalists “for their own safety” as further quoted by Daily Monitor:

“We have heard complaints that security is targeting the media. On the contrary, it is the media targeting security. It is portraying security as brutal and siding with government. When we tell a journalist, don’t go there and you insist on going where there is danger, we shall beat you for your own safety. I have no apology. We shall not apologise but we shall continue helping you not to go where there is danger.”

Disparaging comments such as the above have emboldened junior police officers to continue targeting journalists in line of duty. In the context of COVID-19, the police was at the forefront of enforcing COVID-19 guidelines, which they used as a pretext to attack journalists on duty. Sometimes, police has claimed that the police attacks on journalists are isolated individual mistakes but their continued perpetuation suggests that it is an institutionalised attempt to silence the media that is keen on exposing wrongs in public affairs management.

**The Army**

Like the Police, the army is one of the leading state institutions in abusing the freedom of the media. According to Human Rights Network for journalists, in 2020, the army was involved in 31 incidents of media freedom violation. The majority of these incidents were in connection to prevention of violation of COVID-19 guidelines, particularly moving during curfew hours. Other incidents in which the army violated the freedom of the media include blocking journalists from filming people who were ferrying logs from Bugoma Forest Reserve; and arrest of journalists who were covering the arrest of presidential candidate Kyagulanyi Ssentamu Robert and his campaign team in Kalangala on December 30, 2020. More recently, in February 2021, the army beat eight journalists at a UN Human Rights office. The journalists were there to cover former Presidential Candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi who was delivering a petition to the body to take action against security agencies for violating the rights of some Ugandans through illegal arrests or abductions and detention as well as torture.

**Resident District Commissioners (RDCs)**

Apart from the Police and the army, other common perpetrators of press freedom violations are the RDCs. Sometimes working with the police and the army, RDCs are known for harassing journalists and preventing opposition politicians from accessing the media. For example, in 2019 working with the police, the RDC of Mubende stormed Mubende FM and switched it off to prevent opposition politician from being on air. In the same way in February 2018, Gulu

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RDC Capt. Santos Okot Lapolo ordered the closure of Radio Maria, a Catholic owned media house on allegations that it was causing disunity among the people. The RDCs are the heads of security in every district. They are however alleged to be notorious for harassing and detaining opposition political actors, profiling alleged opposition supporters and their business links, directing the activities of the security agents at the district level and issuing orders to prevent opposition politicians from appearing on radio talk shows.39

The health threat of COVID-19 to journalists
Apart from the physical threats journalists are facing during the raging COVID-19 pandemic another threat that journalists face is the fear of catching COVID-19. Like all other frontline workers, journalists face the risk of catching the deadly virus in the course of their work. At least 15% of the surveyed journalists were afraid of catching COVID-19. In fact this figure could have been higher if the survey had been carried out in mid-2021 when the number of COVID-19 cases was very high. The fear of these journalists is indeed not far-fetched. According to the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) “Journalists are at great risk in this health crisis because they must continue to inform, by going to hospitals, interviewing doctors, nurses, political leaders, specialists, scientists, patients.”40 By June 7th, 2021, The Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) announced that the pandemic had claimed the lives of more than 1,500 journalists in 77 countries around the world.41 According to the PEC figures, media in India had registered the highest number of COVID-19 causalities, with at least 246 deaths since March 2020. India is closely followed by Brazil with 239 journalists who died from the corona virus, ahead of Peru 163 and Mexico 112. By the time of writing this report, two journalists in Uganda had so far succumbed to COVID-19. These include Daily Monitor’s Pauline Bangirana and Vision Group’s Monica Okot who passed away in early June 2021.42 By October 2020, the Ministry of Health reported that at least 50 journalists had tested positive of COVID-19. Although there was no updated figure of journalists who had tested positive of COVID-19, information from newsrooms suggests that the number could be in hundreds.

The threat of Mental Health
According to our survey, many journalists are struggling with the psychological effects of reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic. At least eight out of every ten respondents reported that they experience depression, anxiety and burnout, while 65% of the respondents have experienced loss of sleep as the table below further indicates.

39 https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-11-11-maintaining-musevenis-securitised-state/
41 https://www.pressemblem.ch/
PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS SUFFERED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<td>Depression</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustion or burnout</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of sleep</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting negative thoughts</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling helpless</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The situation in Uganda corresponds to the report by the International Center of Journalists that reported in 2020 of the widespread extent of mental health challenges with 70% of the 1,406 journalists surveyed rating the psychological toll as their biggest challenge during the pandemic. The same report further noted that “more than 80% of respondents noted at least one negative psychological effect, including anxiety, burnout, difficulty sleeping and a sense of helplessness.”

**Change of work routines**

Most of the respondents surveyed (85%) reported that COVID-19 had changed the way they work as the table below indicates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HAVE COVID-19 AFFECTED THE WAY YOU WORK?</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The changes that were reported by respondents were both positive and negative. Some of the positive changes that respondents reported included saving of time and money due to the use of online platforms like zoom to contact sources as opposed to meeting them physically. Some respondents reported that they had become more efficient at work due to fear of being laid off in the restructuring process.

Despite the above positive changes brought by COVID-19, several respondents reported a number of negative ways through which COVID-19 had affected the way they work. For example, some respondents noted that COVID-19 had affected their morale to work, while others reported that their workload increased due to the restructuring at their media houses. Some journalists

said they found difficulty in accessing some information while others said that they were affected by the high transport fares, which restricted their movement. Some respondents acknowledged that most of the stories they wrote revolved around COVID-19 rather than other public affairs issues because of the closing down of other institutions. Although journalists were declared as part of the ‘essential workers’ that can work past curfew time, some journalists noted that news that occurred later than 8pm would not be covered due to curfew restrictions. It should be noted that in Uganda, most of the small media houses especially radio stations lack private transport for their staff. To overcome this challenge, some journalists said that they had to get a ride from fellow journalists from the more resourced media houses who had car stickers allowing them to move freely during curfew hours.

The Economic toll of COVID-19 on media houses

All managers interviewed answered in the affirmative that COVID-19 had economically affected their media houses. Most of them reported that their revenue streams had reduced. At least 85% of managers interviewed reported a slump in advertisement. One manager noted that “advertising went down because some companies we relied on to advertise closed.” Indeed, 75% of media managers surveyed reported failure to collect money from debtors. Moreover the decline in advertisement revenue could not be offset by increased sales of newspapers because circulation was also affected. While decrying the loss in revenue due to COVID-19, one Ugandan media manager noted:

“We saw our revenue dwindle from about 500 million ($139,000) a month to around about 100 million ($28,000) a month and that was much later probably towards the fourth to seventh month of lockdown. We almost had zero revenue in the first three months of COVID-19. So, it really dwindled our accounts but also, our costs of operations went up because we had to operate a little differently, we literary were picking and dropping some staff home. We had also to provide accommodation to some of our technical staff at the beginning of COVID-19 because we didn’t know how to take them home and back during this period.”

Some managers observed that “we put a hold on our recruitment drive for new staff due to the reduction of funds.” In addition to stopping new recruitment, at least 62.5% managers also reported loss of staff after layoffs, and reduction of staff salaries.

It should be noted that majority of journalists in Uganda are freelancers who have no salary to talk about. Many of this type of journalists struggled to remain working as journalists due to difficulty in movement due to closing down of public transport. It is possible that some of the journalists belonging to this category may have quit journalism. One manager narrated how they struggled to transport journalists in a situation where there was no public transport: “It was difficult to transport journalists back from the field and home; it was an additional cost. We ended up buying motorbikes which were unplanned for.”
Some good news during the COVID-19 period

Despite the negativity surrounding COVID-19, there was some good news that came as a result of the pandemic. Some media houses reported growth in revenue during the pandemic. One manager noted; “When the COVID-19 first broke out, it gave us a boost because there were more messages and talk shows that were paid for.” Another manager further reported that:

“Without a doubt, this has been our best year in terms of revenues. Our revenues have grown by 50%. The reason [for growth] is not because of the traditional spenders, the traditional advertisers. It is because we have been very creative in the way we adapted. So, once COVID-19 struck, we had to go back to the drawing board and re-evaluate our strategies on how we are going to: one, sell products that are related to COVID-19. So we have gone into companies and organisations as a media platform to help them communicate their responses. So this has been a very good revenue stream for us, which is outside the traditional way of advertising.”

The growth in revenue was more associated with television channels as opposed to other types of media. This is mainly because during the pandemic many government and non-government agencies have been holding their organisation’s conferences on television. Additionally, television and radio channels sold airtime to government and non-government agencies to teach school going children via television, which increased on the TV and radio revenue. This situation in Uganda is comparable to the global picture where TV viewership was reported to be rising due to lockdowns in different countries. The International Telecommunications Union, for example notes that television viewing had skyrocketed with an average consumer in North America watching seven hours of television daily, up one hour from the pre-pandemic period.

Journalists’ response to threats posed by COVID-19

Journalists have responded in various ways to overcome the threats and challenges they have faced during the current COVID-19 period. Some journalists reported that they have resorted to strict observance of standard operating procedures such as wearing masks as well as paying attention to expert advice on how to combat COVID-19. Some journalists have responded by being innovative in the way they do their work for example, working from home, conducting interviews with sources using WhatsApp and telephone calls.

Other journalists have resorted to handouts from well-wishers while others decided to venture in other businesses to earn a living as one journalist stated:

“I used my savings to start up a small business to support myself financially after being put on forced leave and reduction of my salary.” Another journalist said;

“On the issue of salary cuts, I applied for grants and I happened to get one. This is what kept me busy during the time I was on forced leave.”

Some journalists sought emotional support from their work colleagues as one journalist stated:

“[I resorted to] connecting with people at work for emotional support because we were facing the same situation and fears.”

Other journalists responded by ensuring that they clearly identify themselves in case authorities intercepted them moving past curfew time. As one journalist explains; “I carry my work and National IDs at all times in case I move past curfew hours for work. I also try to avoid moving very late at night.” Another journalist added; “On the issue of curfew, I talked to my editor and we were given letters from Media Council of Uganda allowing us to move past curfew time.”

**Media response to COVID-19**

Media houses reacted to the pandemic in different ways as the table below suggests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSE FROM MEDIA HOUSE TO COVID-19</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Layoff of staff</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of staff salaries</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing formats e.g. print to online</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-house production of previously outsourced programmes</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing some outlets</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reduction of staff salaries**

When COVID-19 struck, the first response of most media houses in Uganda was reduction of staff salaries. Most of the media managers and journalists we interviewed acknowledged that staff salaries were significantly reduced to lighten the economic burden of media houses during the pandemic. In a Labour Day message to staff in May 2020, Mr. Tony Glencross, Managing Director of Nation Media Group Uganda, reassured employees of job security but hinted at possible cost cutting measures. This, he disclosed was due to business suffering a significant drop in advertising revenue from March 2020, which greatly impacted operations in the foreseeable future. In less than two months after issuing this warning, salary cuts were effected across all NGM platforms as one NMG editor noted:

“Salaries were also affected and the staff were affected by different percentages [of salary cuts] per category from 5% to 30%. I think ours was not as bad as some
media houses, where it was up to 60% or 40% for everybody. That was the immediate effect. After two months of the lockdown, we had the salary cuts implemented.”

The situation was not any different at Vision Group where salary cuts of up to 60% were announced at the end of April 2020. In a message to staff, Mr. Robert Kabushenga, the then Vision Group CEO announced that “for the first time in sixteen years, management has taken drastic measures to reduce the wage bill.” This is because, the note from the CEO said, “the recent downturn requires even more stiff measures to keep the business viable.” Reduction of salaries became a norm across all other media houses, although most of these salary cuts were not publicly announced. For example, Radio Sanyu slashed staff salaries by half, prompting a general strike of staff. Management immediately dismissed all staff, including those that had served for over 20 years.

Ironically, some media managers reported that they recruited and trained new staff as well as raising salaries of staff who had not been laid off. This was probably aimed at closing gaps left by laid off workers and motivating staff to continue working in the current tough times.

**Closure of media houses**

When it became evident that pay cuts would be inadequate, some media houses resorted to laying off of staff and closing some media outlets. This was the case with Vision Group, the biggest media group in Uganda which closed down three of its local languages newspapers in a bid to stay afloat. The closed newspapers were Orumuri, Etop and Rupiny. Ms. Barbra Kaija, the Vision Group Editor-in Chief, said the closure of the weekly newspapers was long overdue as it was no longer sustainable to keep them on the market. Two newspapers namely, *The Observer* and *The Independent* stopped printing newspapers, resorting to only staying online. Even the newspapers that did not close, the size of the paper reduced to at least 50% due to lack of news content as a result of restricted movement of reporters and lack of advertisements.

Other measures that media managers reported to have adopted include introducing new products on the advertising market, intensifying debt collection, offering discounted advertising rates to attract business, restructuring their organisations in order to try and live with the new reality, and encouraging and supporting staff through counseling. Some managers reported that they made new partnerships and ventures in media such as content advertising for organisations and strengthening digital platforms and monetise them so that people start paying for content. *Daily Monitor* for example made their e-paper free in a bid to attract more online readers before reinstating the paywall. *New Vision* on the other hand strengthened its printing business, mainly hinged on a deal from government to print education materials for school going children who

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46 https://www.hrnjuganda.org/
47 https://acme-ug.org/2020/06/02/covid-19-sounds-the-death-knell-for-local-language-newspapers/
were at home during the lockdown. Televisions and radios resorted to airing lessons for school children and church services to earn some extra income.

**Other cost-cutting measures**

Another way that has helped media houses to stay afloat is the reduction of operation costs through avoiding unnecessary spending. Organisations introduced shifts to reduce on the number of staff coming to work and also reduced on the number of services they were outsourcing as one private TV and radio manager explains:

“We had to do a cost cutting across our operations to channel all that money to human resource. For example if you are going to report and you are spending X amount of money and you have been sending two reporters, send one reporter, if you have been deploying two cameras, if you have been doing more pre-produced products, if you have been buying content, you reduce on buying content and produce it internally. So all these external costs that seemed like a luxury, in this time we had to reduce on them. Also, because COVID-19 required us to social distance, we had different teams working in different shifts but also people working remotely from home. Working from home also reduced on our costs because most of the 300 staff we have would consume food, water, electricity bills.”

On the basis of all the above mentioned measures, some of the media houses have been able to reverse the staff salary cuts that had been effected in the first year of the pandemic.
CONCLUSION

As we have demonstrated in this report, Ugandan journalism has faced momentous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The extraordinary magnitude of the pandemic turned everything upside down, changing century old industry practices and norms within no time. Consequently, journalists and the media industry have generally had to quickly study the situation and adapt to new ways of dealing with an unprecedented pandemic they had never experienced before. In doing so, they have encountered numerous challenges and barriers ranging from loss of jobs, salary cuts, physical attacks, trauma, and lack of access to information and sources.

Despite these challenges, we have noted that journalists and media houses have come up with innovative mechanisms that combine traditional journalism ideals with new technologically supported means to continue serving the information needs of audiences. We have noted that these efforts have taken place amidst challenges of shrinking freedom of the media and increased economic uncertainty resulting from a delicate financial backdrop that has led to several job losses and salary cuts. In Uganda, like in many other countries, challenges of declining media freedom and a financial meltdown have been an ongoing concern. However, the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the rate at which they were happening.

In the pandemic period, the need for a vibrant journalism sector to counter online and offline false news has been emphasised. As we noted in this report, free and independent media that provide accurate information have never been more critical than now when we are in the middle of a global pandemic. This is because good journalism can save lives by providing accurate information, facilitate public debate, and hold power to account. The government, journalists and other media support organisations must continue to highlight the invaluable work of the press and work together to pushback against threats to weaken journalism. Unless this is done, there is a real possibility that the current deteriorating economic and press freedom trends may persist. This may in turn have serious repercussions on the society information needs and the long term economic and press freedom trajectory. Promotion and protection of press freedom is more important than ever before. Yet we have noted that these fundamental freedoms are being undermined by the very people and institutions that are supposed to be their guardians on the pretext of preventing the spread of COVID-19.
Amidst these challenges, the media needs to continue producing cutting edge journalism that can further demonstrate the relevance of the profession to society. COVID-19 has given the media an opportunity to do some soul searching as well as adopt and adapt to new tools and ways of doing journalism in what has been increasingly described as the “new normal” to ensure sustainability and relevancy.