

RESEARCH REPORT ON

UGANDAN
NEWSPAPER
COVERAGE of the

**COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

JUNE
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INTRODUCTION

This study looks at Ugandan news media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing mainly on five influential publications. The study explores the attention these newspapers and a magazine paid coronavirus from 1 January to 30 April 2020, and the nature of coverage. The publications are *Bukedde* (a Luganda-language daily), *Daily Monitor*, *New Vision*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent* magazine.

Relying mainly on quantitative content analysis, the study explores the attention that these publications paid to the pandemic, the types of articles published (news, analysis, opinion, features, etc.), the reporting formats

employed, the subjects covered, and the tone of coverage. The analysis also covers the voices in the coverage, including the occupation and gender of sources.

The study relies on responses from key informant interviews with journalists and civil society officials to explain some of the findings.

Finally, conclusions and recommendations are shared.

BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

By the time Uganda announced its first confirmed positive case of Covid-19 on 21 March 2020¹, the World Health Organisation had already declared the coronavirus a global pandemic. In line with WHO advice, the government had on 18 March joined many others around the region and the world to announce measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus, including closing schools and the international airport.

The novel coronavirus had first been reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and was the subject of growing international media coverage in January 2020. By the time WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a “**Public Health Emergency** of International Concern” on 30 January, the story had not yet received that much attention in Uganda and most of Africa.

In the wake of epidemics and such emergencies the media’s role of providing the public with accurate information takes centre-stage.² Accurate information will help

the public evaluate the risks and understand the necessary protective and safety measures or precautions. During times of crisis and uncertainty, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the media play an important role in informing society and “are critical in contributing objectively to the discussion over how to respond, and ensuring communities have access to life-saving information.”³ According to Hilton and Hunt (2010), “Newspaper coverage of public health issues ... has been an important source of public understanding of disease outbreaks and other public health issues.”⁴ Kato et al. (2016) argue that “Media coverage is a powerful factor in determining reaction to a perceived health crisis.”⁵ The

1 (2020, March 22). Uganda confirms first coronavirus case and seals off borders Retrieved June 5, 2020, from <https://ugbusiness.com/8704/uganda-confirms-first-coronavirus-case>

2 See: Claudia Mellado (2014): Professional Roles in News Content, Journalism Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2014.922276; Mwesige, P.G.

(2020, 21 March). “The role of journalists in the midst of COVID-19 – Inform. Explain. Educate.” Retrieved from <https://acme-ug.org/2020/03/21/journalism-in-the-midst-of-covid-19-inform-explain-educate/> on 15 June 2020; Meißner, F. (2020, 7 April). Covering a pandemic: the challenge for journalists. Retrieved from European Journalism Observatory: <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/covering-a-pandemic-the-challenge-for-journalists>

3 (n.d.). Media in Crisis and Disaster Situations - Unesco. Retrieved June 5, 2020, from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/media-crisis-and-disaster-situations>

4 Hilton, S. & Hunt, K. (2010). UK newspaper representations of the 2009-10 outbreak of swine flu: one health scare not over-hyped by the media?” Research Report, J Epidemiol, Community Health.

5 Kato, M. (2016). “Media coverage of a global pandemic in Japan: content analysis of a H1N1 influenza

media also provide a platform for debate on the policy options that governments should take in response to the emergency. Hilton and Hunt (2010) add: “The priorities and decisions of policy-makers may also be influenced and altered, at least partly, as a result of news representations.”⁶ In addition, the media continue to act as watchdogs during the crisis by holding the government and other powerful interests to account.

However, many have also documented shortcomings in media coverage of emergencies. Shih and others (2008) point out that media “tend to focus on events (i.e. specific instances of short-term consequences) rather than on issues when reporting on risk issues.”⁷

The media have been accused also of “exaggerating the risks” and “raising public anxieties and contributing to greater public misunderstandings of the issues.”⁸ In the UK, research on the coverage of the 2009-10 swine flu outbreak showed that contrary to public perceptions that the media were hyping the threat, headlines and overall content were on average “neither alarmist nor reassuring”. According to Hilton and Hunt (2010), the

vast majority of newspaper articles (86.2%) were neutral. On the whole, “news coverage reflected genuine scientific uncertainties about the future course of the pandemic”.⁹ Duncan (2009) conducted an EU-wide media analysis, which showed that “94% of media articles from 31 European countries were neutral, relaying factual information”.¹⁰

Others have found that media tend to concentrate more on “social stories” than scientific aspects of epidemics. Yotam Ophir, who analysed 5,000 articles published in American newspapers about epidemics such as Ebola, swine flu and Zika over a 10-year period, found that “Almost half of the coverage focused on the social consequences of diseases, such as their effect on the economy, politicians or athletes.”¹¹ Of particular concern to him was that very few articles included “any practical information about steps individuals could take to avoid infection”.

Research from elsewhere on how the news media have covered the Covid-19 pandemic shows, among others, that officialdom has dominated the story while “very little was heard from experts and ordinary citizens

newspaper articles.” *Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism*, 6 (1).

- 6 Hilton, S. & Hunt, K. (2010). UK newspaper representations of the 2009-10 outbreak of swine flu: one health scare not over-hyped by the media? Research Report, *J Epidemiol, Community Health*.
- 7 Shih, J., Wijaya, R., & Brossard, D. (2008). Media Coverage of Public Health Epidemics: Linking Framing and Issue Attention Cycle Toward an Integrated theory of print news coverage of epidemics.” *Mass Communication & Society*, 11: 141-160.
- 8 Duncan, B. (2009). How the media reported the first days of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009: results of EU-wide media analysis. *EuroSurveillance*, Vol. 14

- 9 Hilton, S. & Hunt, K. (2010). UK newspaper representations of the 2009-10 outbreak of swine flu: one health scare not over-hyped by the media? Research Report, *J Epidemiol, Community Health*
- 10 Duncan, B. (2009). How the media reported the first days of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009: results of EU-wide media analysis. *EuroSurveillance*, Vol. 14.
- 11 Ophir, Y. (2018). “How the media falls short in reporting epidemics,” *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-the-media-falls-short-in-reporting-epidemics-101216>

on the ground who are most affected by the pandemic and lockdown”.¹²

In South Africa, Media Monitoring Africa has found that President Cyril Ramaphosa and his ministers of health, finance, education, police, and trade and industry were the dominant voices on Covid-19 between mid-April and early May 2020.¹³ Scientists, academics, and other health experts did not feature as much. The media also overwhelmingly relied on men (86%) to tell the story of the pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What was the volume or quantity of Covid-19 stories over the research period?
2. How did the media treat the “East African project” in their coverage of the pandemic?
3. What was the prominence of the Covid-19 stories within the publications under study?
4. What types of articles were used to tell the Covid-19 story?
5. What reporting formats were employed to cover the Covid-19 story?
6. What prompted the Covid-19 stories? What was the origin of the articles?
7. What topics or themes did stories about the coronavirus pandemic focus on?
8. How was human sourcing used in the Covid-19 coverage?
9. Which voices (categories of human sources and their gender) dominated the coverage?
10. What was the tone of the coverage?
11. How, if at all, did the coverage change over time?
12. What explains the nature of coverage?

12 Media Monitoring Africa (2020). Analysis of Covid-19 Media Coverage. Brief Number Two. See also Brief Number One.

13 Media Monitoring Africa (2020). Analysis of Covid-19 Media Coverage. Brief Number Two. See also Brief Number One.

METHODOLOGY

Scope of the study

The study focuses on Ugandan print media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. All articles on different aspects of Covid-19 (including the epidemiology, case management, government response, and impact) were evaluated regardless of the country or region they focused on. In other words, the study was designed to cover all stories related to the Covid-19 pandemic published in *Bukedde*, *Daily Monitor*, *New Vision*, *The Observer* and *The Independent* from 1 January to 30 April 2020. A total of 2,620 stories were analysed.¹⁴

Bukedde, *Daily Monitor*, and *New Vision* were selected because they are Uganda's major dailies and they are considered to have significant influence on the national conversation. *The Independent*, a weekly news magazine, and *The Observer*, a weekly newspaper, were selected because of their major focus on public affairs reporting. It is expected that their publication frequency would force them to offer more depth and investigation than the dailies.

14 The study focused on print media because we could not easily access archived copies of TV and radio news.

Methods of data collection

The study relied mainly on quantitative content analysis of coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic by the selected publications. Key informant interviews with selected reporters and editors, government and civil society officials as well as members of parliament provided context for the findings.

Content analysis

For the most part we analysed *manifest* content. As Hilton and Hunt (2010) have noted, "Manifest content refers to what is explicitly stated and draws on the objective and replicable qualities of quantitative methods."¹⁵ However, where appropriate and necessary, we also undertook qualitative analysis of *latent* content.¹⁶

Content analysis was used to get an all-round sense of the nature of coverage in terms of both quantity and quality. Stories were coded and analysed based on a detailed coding sheet that contained a number of

- 15 Hilton, S. & Hunt, K. (2010). UK newspaper representations of the 2009-10 outbreak of swine flue: one health scare not over-hyped by the media?" Research Report, *J Epidemiol, Community Health*
- 16 See, Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

variables that were necessary to answer the research questions. The variables included the following¹⁷:

1. Publication [name, type, etc]
2. Volume of Covid-19 articles or stories
3. Prominence of Covid-19 stories
4. Type of Covid-19 articles published
5. Reporting formats employed
6. Topics or themes in the coverage
7. Nature of impact of Covid-19 crisis
8. Number of sources
9. Occupation of sources
10. Gender of sources
11. Tone of coverage
12. Coverage prompt or origin

The content analysis was conducted by seven research assistants who coded the data following a short training. Samples of the preliminary data entered were analysed at different points to test intercoder reliability (or the level of agreement between the different assistants doing the coding). Two reliability tests were conducted and the results suggested a high degree of agreement on the way different variables were coded.

Key informant interviews

Nearly three dozen key informant interviews with reporters and editors were conducted to further analyse the findings and to provide context. The interviews in particular helped to make sense of the nature of coverage and what informed it as well as the environment under which the reporting was done.

17 A full list of the variables and their definitions is detailed in the coding sheet.

FINDINGS

Volume of coverage: Thousands of stories

A total of 2,620 articles related to Covid-9 were published in the five publications monitored from 1 January to 30 April 2020 with the coverage peaking in the last month.

TABLE 1A: VOLUME OF ALL STORIES

Subject of stories	Frequency	Percent
Covid-19	2,620	22.1
Non-Covid-19	9,213	77.9
Total	11,833	100.0

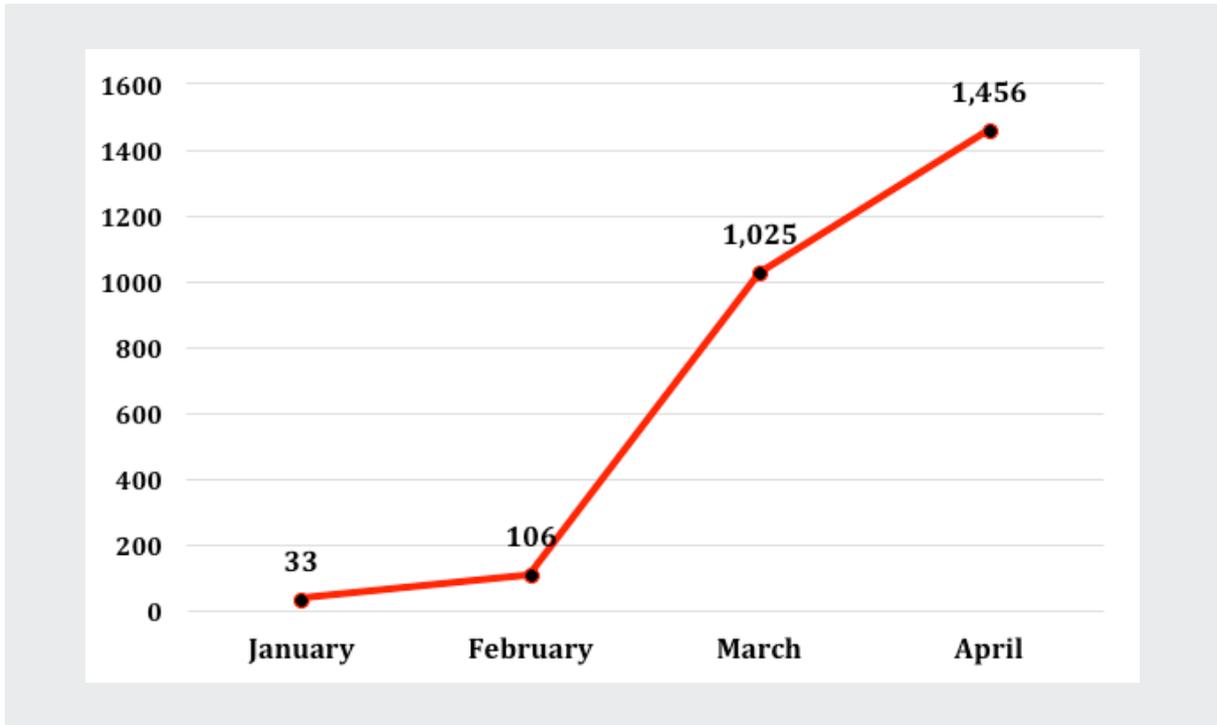
TABLE 1B: VOLUME OF ALL STORIES BY MONTH

Subject	January		February		March		April	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Covid-19	33	1.1	106	3.6	1,025	29.9	1,456	59.2
Non-Covid-19	2,997	98.9	2,810	96.4	2,402	70.1	1,004	40.8
Total	3,030	100.0	2,916	100.0	3,427	100.0	2,460	100.0

As Table 1b and Fig 1 show, Ugandan newspapers did not give that much attention to Covid-19 in January, publishing only 33 articles (an average of just one article per day from all five publications). This

could be explained in part by the fact that neither Uganda nor her neighbours had any confirmed cases of Covid-19 in January.

FIG. 1: Volume of coverage (by month) over time



Reporters and editors said in informant interviews that Covid-19 was still considered a foreign story with low proximity. In January, what later came to be known as the novel coronavirus was still a new respiratory virus largely limited to the Chinese city of Wuhan, although by the end of the month it had spread to neighbouring countries and the World Health Organisation had declared it a public health emergency of international concern.

Only seven (21.2%) of the 33 articles published in January were about Uganda. The percentage had grown to 82.7% by the end of April. Of the 29 news stories related to Covid-19 published in January, 72.4%

were from international news media or agencies. The share of Covid-19 news stories from international news media or agencies decreased to 60.8% in February and it had dramatically dropped to 16.7% by April.

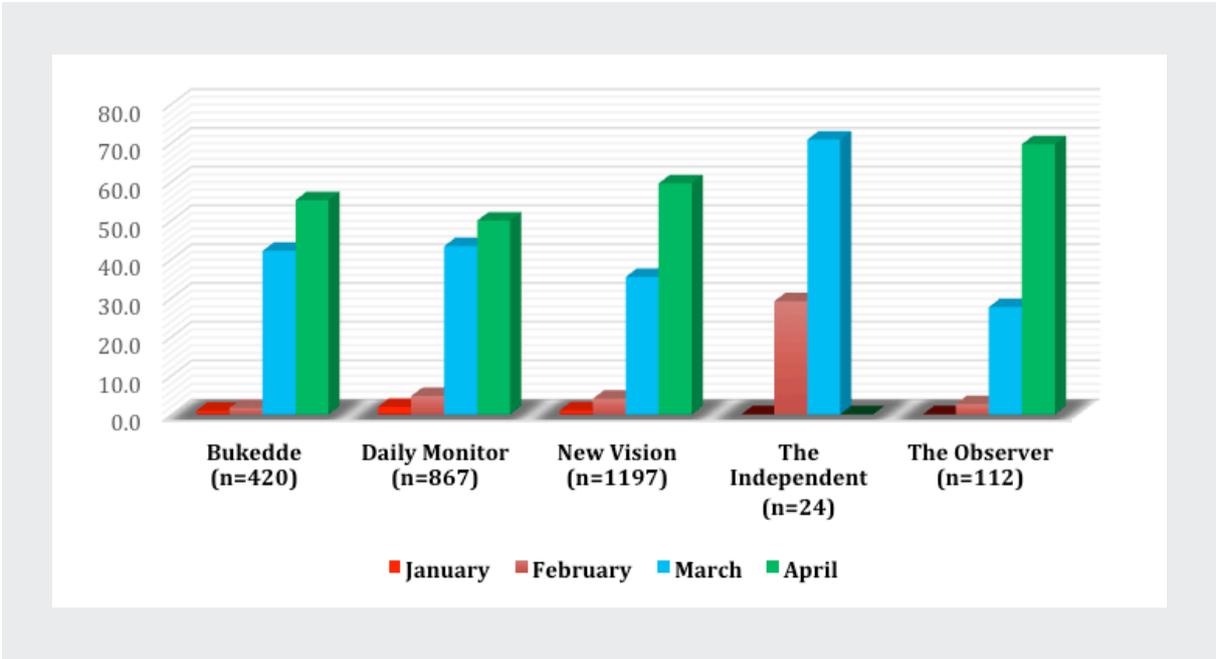
The data show that local coverage grew exponentially after February. By the time Uganda registered her first case on 21 March, the number of stories about the coronavirus had risen dramatically. The government had finally put in place a Covid-19 task force to coordinate the country's response to the pandemic. Also, debate was raging about how the government should respond (e.g. with a partial or full lockdown?).

In terms of publications, as Table 1c shows, *New Vision* had the highest share of Covid-19 stories (45.7%), followed by *Daily Monitor* (33.1%), and *Bukedde* (16%).

TABLE 1C: VOLUME OF COVERAGE BY PUBLICATION		
Publication	Frequency	Percent
New Vision	1,197	45.7
Daily Monitor	867	33.1
Bukedde	420	16.0
The Observer	112	4.3
The Independent	24	0.9
Total	2,620	100.0

The Observer had only 4.3% share of the coverage but in proportional terms (given its weekly frequency) that was higher than *Bukedde* and not far from *Daily Monitor*. *The Independent* predictably had the least number of Covid-19 stories. It didn't help that the print edition was not published in April.¹⁸

FIG. 2: Volume of coverage by publication by month



18 We were unable to access the online editions published in April.

It should be noted that even as the level of Covid-19 coverage continued to grow, newspaper sizes (number of pages) dropped significantly as the economic effects of the pandemic, including reduced circulation and

advertising, began to bite. Table 2 shows that *New Vision* dropped from an average of 53 pages in January to 38 in April, while *Daily Monitor* went from 48 to 35.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PAGES BY PUBLICATION PER MONTH

Publication	January	February	March	April
New Vision	53	48	43.4	38
Daily Monitor	48	46	46	34.9
Bukedde	28	28	28	22
The Independent	40	40	40	-
The Observer	34	32	32	32

Bukedde reduced the number of pages from 28 in January to 22 in April, while *The Independent* suspended its print edition altogether in April.

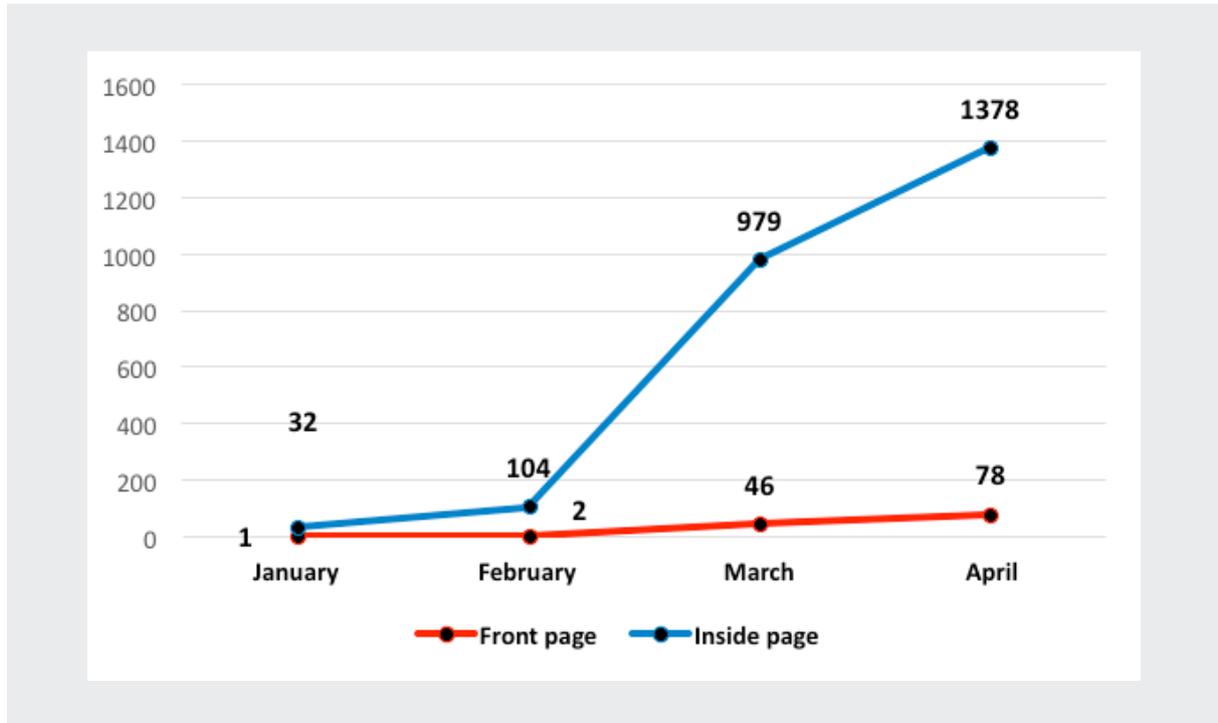
Prominence: You can't miss the Covid-19 story

Not surprisingly, Covid-19 dominated the front pages in March and April as the outbreak got closer to home and finally reached the country. As Fig. 3 shows, there were only three front page Covid-19 stories in January and February. The number rapidly grew to 46 in March and 78 in April. For most reporters and editors, this was “the biggest story of our time”. The lockdown-related developments in March and April were simply unprecedented. “When is the last time Uganda almost entirely closed its airspace, land borders, ordered everyone except a few to stay indoors, and declared a dusk-to-dawn curfew all at once?”

asked a columnist and media trainer. Covid-19 was massive and touched the things people care most about – family, health, wealth, he added. “So the media had to blanket it with coverage as a reflection of the fear and uncertainty that obtained amongst the people.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

FIG. 3: Number of Covid-19 stories on the front page vs other pages



Overall, by April Covid-19 accounted for 61.4% of all front page stories, up from 1.3% in January and 3.4% in February (See Table 3).

TABLE 3: STORIES ON THE FRONT PAGE BY MONTH								
Subject	January		February		March		April	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Covid-19	1	1.3	2	3.4	46	46	78	61.4
Non-Covid-19	78	98.7	56	96.6	54	54	49	38.6
Total	79	100.0	58	100.0	100	100	127	100.0

Another example of the importance attached to the Covid-19 story was the number of times it was the first lead (57.6%) or second lead (31.3%) on whatever page it was placed. The prominence of a story on a page generally

shows the relative importance that editors attach to it. Clearly, Covid-19 was “the big story”.

Covid-19 and the 'East African project'

Like the region's governments, Ugandan newspapers did not appear to prioritise the idea of Covid-19 through the lens of the

East African Community. An overwhelming majority of the stories that focused on East African countries were about Uganda (97.5%), with Kenya taking only 1.2%, Rwanda 0.2% while Tanzania and South Sudan were each at 0.1%.

TABLE 4: NUMBER OF STORIES FOCUSING ON EAST AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Country	Number of stories	Percent
Uganda	1,951	97.5
Kenya	25	1.2
East Africa (as a region)	16	0.8
Rwanda	5	0.2
Tanzania	3	0.1
South Sudan	2	0.1
Total	2,002	100.0

There was no single story focused exclusively on the neighbouring Burundi, a country which was later to lose its president in what is widely considered as the first case of a world leader succumbing to Covid-19.²⁰ Before President Pierre Nkurunziza's death, Burundi had chased WHO officials from the country.

Tanzania was also particularly baffling. Social media was awash with rumours of a growing body count and secret burials as Covid-19 cases grew exponentially while President John Pombe Magufuli was urging his compatriots to pray and go about their normal business. Reporters and editors said telling the Tanzania

story was difficult because of the media censorship in the country. "Maybe this shows a lack of capacity to marshal resources, financial and human, to throw at such a big story," added a media trainer.²¹ Vision Group public editor Paul Busharizi agreed that the financial strain under which media houses were operating as well as safety challenges were part of the problem. But he added that "in this world of connectivity...probably our lack of initiative also contributed."²²

Daily Monitor, which is part of the East African conglomerate Nation Media Group, carried the highest number of articles on both East Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania.

20 Burke, J. (2020). "Burundi president dies of illness suspected to be coronavirus." 9 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/burundi-president-dies-illness-suspected-coronavirus-pierre-nkurunziza>

21 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

22 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

Overall, however, Covid-19 confirmed that Ugandan journalism remains local or even parochial.

Type of article: News everywhere

News was the most frequent type of Covid-19 article, followed by commentary or opinion, and letters to the editor. Editors said coverage was influenced by fast-moving events, hence the predominance of news articles, which focused mainly on government updates on new infections and deaths as well as measures to contain the pandemic.

Type of article	Frequency	Percent
News	2005	76.5
General commentary or opinion	296	11.3
Letter to the Editor	136	5.2
News analysis	82	3.1
Editorial	41	1.6
Feature	29	1.1
Q&A interviews	25	1.0
Profile	6	0.2
Total	2,620	100.0

Considering the number of people who are involved in the national Covid-19 response, one would have expected a higher number of profiles than the six²³ that were carried. In

23 One story in April, “Women in fight against coronavirus,” carried mini profiles of seven women including the Health Minister, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, the Minister of State of Health, Dr Moriku Kaducu, and

most of the cases, the profiles did not provide windows into Uganda’s Covid-19 response and what the subjects were bringing to the table besides their qualifications and experience. Editors pointed out that this was the first time the Ugandan media were covering an epidemic of that scale, so they were caught unawares and unprepared. Reporters, on the other hand, said that it was hard to determine who was in charge of the Covid-19 response and the roles of the different players, especially in the early days of the crisis. One reporter said that some of the main players were unwilling to be featured because they did not want to contradict or outshine their superiors.²⁴

Given the different ways in which Covid-19 has affected individuals, businesses and communities, the number of features too would have been expected to be higher than the 29 published (1.1%). Some editors blamed the limited number on the cutback in pages as well as personnel challenges during the lockdown. “Journalists faced challenges on gathering information when the lockdown was imposed,” said a Vision Group reporter. “Some were asked to work from home while those who came to office could not be transported to the field as often as would have been desired due to limited transport resources. Some of our colleagues were sent on forced leave, which reduced the workforce.”²⁵

Dr Rosemary Byanyima who was then Ag. Deputy Executive Director of Mulago National Referral Hospital.
 24 Key informant interviews, June 2020, Kampala.
 25 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

TABLE 6: TYPE OF ARTICLE BY PUBLICATION

Type of article	Bukedde (n=420)	Daily Monitor (n=867)	New Vision (n=1,197)	The Independent (n=24)	The Observer (n=112)
News	93.3	75.8	73.9	45.8	54.5
General commentary or opinion	1.2	9.9	14.9	16.7	20.5
Letter to the Editor	2.6	5.9	5.2	0.0	10.7
News analysis	0.5	2.9	3.3	33.3	7.1
Editorial	0.2	2.9	0.9	0.0	3.6
Feature	2.1	1.8	0.3	0.0	0.0
Q&A interviews	0.0	0.6	1.3	0.0	3.6
Profile	0.0	0.2	0.3	4.2	0.0

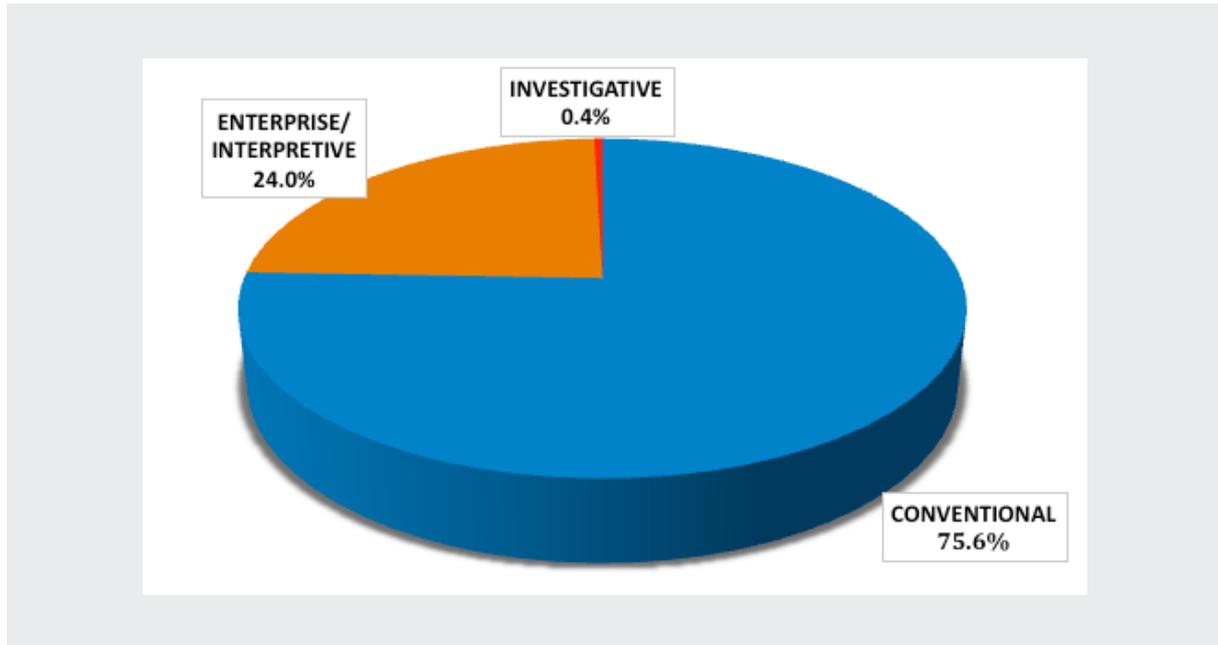
As Table 6 shows, *Bukedde* had the highest proportion of news articles (93.3%), and the lowest number of articles in the opinion and comment categories. *The Observer* had the highest percentage of commentary or opinion, editorials, and Q&A interviews, while *The Independent* had more news analyses than all the other publications combined.

Reporting formats: He-said-she said

The *conventional* reporting format remained dominant, with a share of 75% of news stories, but the proportion of stories that employed the enterprise and interpretive approach was also quite significant at 24%, especially when compared to our previous studies on media coverage of public affairs.²⁶

²⁶ See African Centre for Media Excellence (2017). Press Coverage of public affairs in Uganda: 2013-2017.

FIG. 4: Reporting formats



Fact-finding is the dominant posture under conventional reporting with common characteristics such as the following: spot or hard news that tends to focus on events; neutral and often uncritical transmission of facts; tendency to assign equal weight to all positions; faithful recording of the observed event or issue; suppression of the journalist's prior knowledge of the subject; depends largely or entirely on material provided by others; and tends to be event-centred.

Indeed, a closer look at the origin of articles (See Table 7) suggests that for coverage that originated from within Uganda, event-based stories were the overwhelming majority. Two thirds of all the stories (excluding those from international media or agencies) were event-

based.²⁷ There were very few stories based on research reports at a time when the whole world was looking at science for a solution. One editor blamed it on reporters wanting “the easy way out” while another pointed at the lack of skills.²⁸

²⁷ This includes those that came from newsworthy occurrence, government activity, news conference, news release, parliament or legislative process, court or judicial process, business, religious, or NGO activity.

²⁸ Key informant interviews, June 2020, Kampala.

TABLE 7: ORIGIN OF ARTICLE

Origin of the article	Frequency	Percent
Story in international media	489	23.4
Independent reporting, research or investigation by the journalist/outlet	419	20.1
Newsworthy occurrence	409	19.6
Government activity	224	10.7
News conference	193	9.2
News release	65	3.1
Parliament or legislative process	64	3.1
Court or judicial process	40	1.9
Expert/Specialist	37	1.8
Social media	36	1.7
Business activity	31	1.5
Religious activity	30	1.4
Story from local media	16	0.8
NGO/civil society activity	11	0.5
Generally interested individual	10	0.5
Document e.g. report, study/research	7	0.3
Other	6	0.3
Total	2,087	100.0

The percentage of stories reported in the conventional hard news format had decreased to 72.6% in April, from a high of 93.1% in January. It appears that as the developments

related to Covid-19 started becoming routine, journalists began venturing more into other ways of telling the story.

TABLE 8: REPORTING FORMATS OVER TIME

Format	January (n=29)	February (n=79)	March (n=829)	April (n=1150)
Conventional	93.1	74.7	79.1	72.6
Enterprise and interpretive	6.9	25.3	20.6	26.8
Investigative	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.6

The Observer (52%) and *Independent* (42%), perhaps predictably given their frequency, had a far higher percentage of stories employing

the enterprise and interpretive format than the daily newspapers.

TABLE 9: REPORTING FORMATS BY PUBLICATION

Publication	Conventional	Enterprise and interpretive	Investigative
Bukedde % (n=394)	85.0	14.2	0.8
Daily Monitor % (n=682)	76.0	23.5	0.6
New Vision % (n=923)	73.7	26.1	0.2
The Independent % (n=19)	57.9	42.1	0.0
The Observer % (n=69)	47.8	52.2	0.0

Under the enterprise reporting format, the story is usually of the journalist's own initiative and effort. The coverage follows more leads than the usual straight news story and depends on material gathered or generated through the reporter's independent efforts. Enterprise stories tend to explore issues in greater depth usually with the aid of narrative or literary techniques. These stories are traditionally presented as features. Instead of focusing on breaking news, enterprise stories focus on the forces that shape the events that may or may not be in the news.

The investigative format has been the least common of all three. In the four months under study, the five publications monitored published only nine stories that employed the investigative format. That is 0.4% of all Covid-19 stories.

Exposition is the dominant posture under the investigative reporting format with common characteristics such as the following: the story is the journalist's original initiative; depends

on material gathered or generated through the reporter's own effort; reporting uncovers information that an individual or entity may have tried to conceal from public scrutiny or information that an individual or entity may have had an interest in keeping out of the public domain; resources and evidence used by the journalist are clearly discernible; evidence of strong documentation (the paper trail) and sourcing.

Although there are some overlaps between investigative and enterprise and interpretive formats, they would not account for the dismal numbers of the former. A number of factors contributed to the dearth of investigative reporting in the coverage of Covid-19.

- The enormity of the developing story
- Reluctance of and fear by sources to contradict the official narrative
- Human resource challenges
- Poor investment in journalism
- The lockdown restrictions
- Time

A number of editors said it was too early to draw conclusions on investigative reporting on Covid-19. “Events are still unfolding,” said *Bukedde* editor Geoffrey Kulubya. “The best investigations will come out months later. We shall need to question how the money was spent; how much was stolen...”²⁹ Data journalist Lydia Namubiru was sympathetic to this view. “I assume any investigative journalism being done is still a work in progress,” she said. “Four months may be a short time to judge whether or not there will be investigative journalism on the subject.”³⁰

Story focus: Impact above all else

Stories about the impact of Covid-19 on people, households, businesses, and the economy dominated much of the coverage of the pandemic, accounting for 27.1% of overall news coverage. A closer examination of the data shows that this dominance came later in March and April once it was clear that the global outbreak would affect Ugandans regardless. The second most common theme was around “regional and/or global developments and implications”, accounting for 20.9% of the coverage. Government action, including new policies and directives or measures, accounted for 14.7% of the total number of stories on Covid-19. These findings are consistent with what Singer and Endreny (1994) found—“action and consequence were the dominant frames” in the coverage of three epidemics they studied.³¹

29 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

30 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

31 Singer, E. & Endreny, P.M. (1994). “Reporting on risk: How the mass media portray accidents, diseases, disasters and other hazards.” *Risk: Health, Safety and Environment* 5(3).

The top topics suggest an interesting balance that saw the media extensively cover the effects of the pandemic on people and different sectors even as they continued privileging the government’s response.

TABLE 10: MAIN FOCUS OF STORY

Story focus	Frequency	Percent
Impact (on people, business, economy, etc)	711	27.1
Regional and/or global developments and implications	547	20.9
Government action (policy, directive, etc.)	385	14.7
Prevention	246	9.4
Funding/donations	216	8.2
Risk/threat	70	2.7
Preparedness	64	2.4
Treatment	54	2.1
Law and order	50	1.9
Testing	48	1.8
Health infrastructure and systems	46	1.8
Other disease statistics / epidemiology	37	1.4
Health workers	30	1.1
Quarantine	30	1.1
Number of confirmed cases	22	0.8
Transmission	19	0.7
Number of deaths	9	0.3
Signs and symptoms	6	0.2
Other	30	1.1
Total	2,620	100.0

Prevention of the spread of coronavirus commanded a good deal of attention (9.4%). Funding or donations accounted for 8.2% of the coverage. Most of these stories were in April when the government launched a fundraising drive for Uganda's Covid-19 national response.

Ugandan newspapers did not focus as much on health workers as one would have expected, given their frontline status in the Covid-19 response. Only 30 stories, or 1.1% of Covid-19 coverage, was about these workers.

Also, there was not as much focus on practical health information such as transmission of the coronavirus and signs and symptoms of Covid-19. It appears this information was published mostly in public service ads sponsored by the newspapers or government agencies. Ugandan newspapers rarely have practical/user information at the end of news stories.

Further analysis of the stories on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic showed that the economy and finance were the most frequent subjects covered (22.8%), followed by sports, arts and entertainment (21.7%). The impact of the coronavirus on people also received significant attention (20.8%).

TABLE 11: FOCUS OF STORIES ON CORONAVIRUS IMPACT

Impact	Frequency	Percent
Economy and finance	162	22.8
Sports, arts and entertainment	154	21.7
People	148	20.8
Livelihood	61	8.6
Healthcare	43	6.0
Religion	38	5.3
Agriculture and food	26	3.7
Labour	19	2.7
Education	18	2.5
Governance	12	1.7
Justice, law and order	11	1.5
Public works and infrastructure	11	1.5
Environment and natural resources	2	0.3
Other	6	0.8
Total	711	100.0

On the other hand, stories focusing on the impact of the coronavirus crisis on governance as well as justice, law and order were generally limited.

Sources: Whose voices did we hear?

We analysed the human sources cited in the stories to provide insight into which perspectives were most shared by journalists and drove Uganda's Covid-19 narrative. The analysis of human sources was done at two

levels. The first was by categorising and aggregating the sources by their occupation or position in society, while the second was by identifying the actual individuals who dominated coverage (whom we have called unique sources).

Occupation of sources

Ordinary people (quoted in their individual capacity) were the most frequently used voices, accounting for 21.3% of the sources in the coverage of Covid-19. However, this ranking is largely because this categorisation of sources included very many sub-categories of official sources. When aggregated, government and public officials (such as the president, ministers, central government representatives, police/security, judicial personnel, etc.) actually accounted for a third (or 33.4%) of the sources. This is consistent with findings of previous research that has showed government or public officials dominating media coverage of public affairs in Uganda.³² Experts were also high on the list of sources, taking a share of 8.3%.

TABLE 12: HUMAN SOURCES

Human sources	Frequency	Percent
Ordinary person quoted in their individual capacity	992	21.3
Expert	385	8.3
Prime Minister and ministers	378	8.1
Central government representative	329	7.1
Business representative	320	6.9
Foreign politician	302	6.5
Police/military/security	231	5.0
Medical official/practitioner	229	4.4
Member of Parliament	183	3.9
Local government leader/official	159	3.4
Sports personality or administrator	156	3.3
Religious representative	154	3.3
President	124	2.7
Civil Society/Local NGO representative	78	1.7
WHO Director-General and other WHO officials	74	1.6
Politician or political operative	68	1.5
Judicial personnel	64	1.4
Diplomatic representative	60	1.3
Speaker of Parliament	45	1.0
Cultural representative	32	0.7
International NGO representative	30	0.6
Central bank official	8	0.2
Other	52	1.1
Total	4,658	100

32 African Centre for Media Excellence (2018). Press Coverage of Public Affairs in Uganda: 2013-2017. Kampala.

Table 13 shows that the President, the Speaker and Members of Parliament, and other local politicians (excluding selected ministers) did not speak out about Covid-19 in January, or if they did, none of the newspapers studied

covered them. Security officials, religious leaders and representatives of cultural institutions did not also speak out, at least in the newspapers, about coronavirus in January.

TABLE 13: HUMAN SOURCES BY MONTH

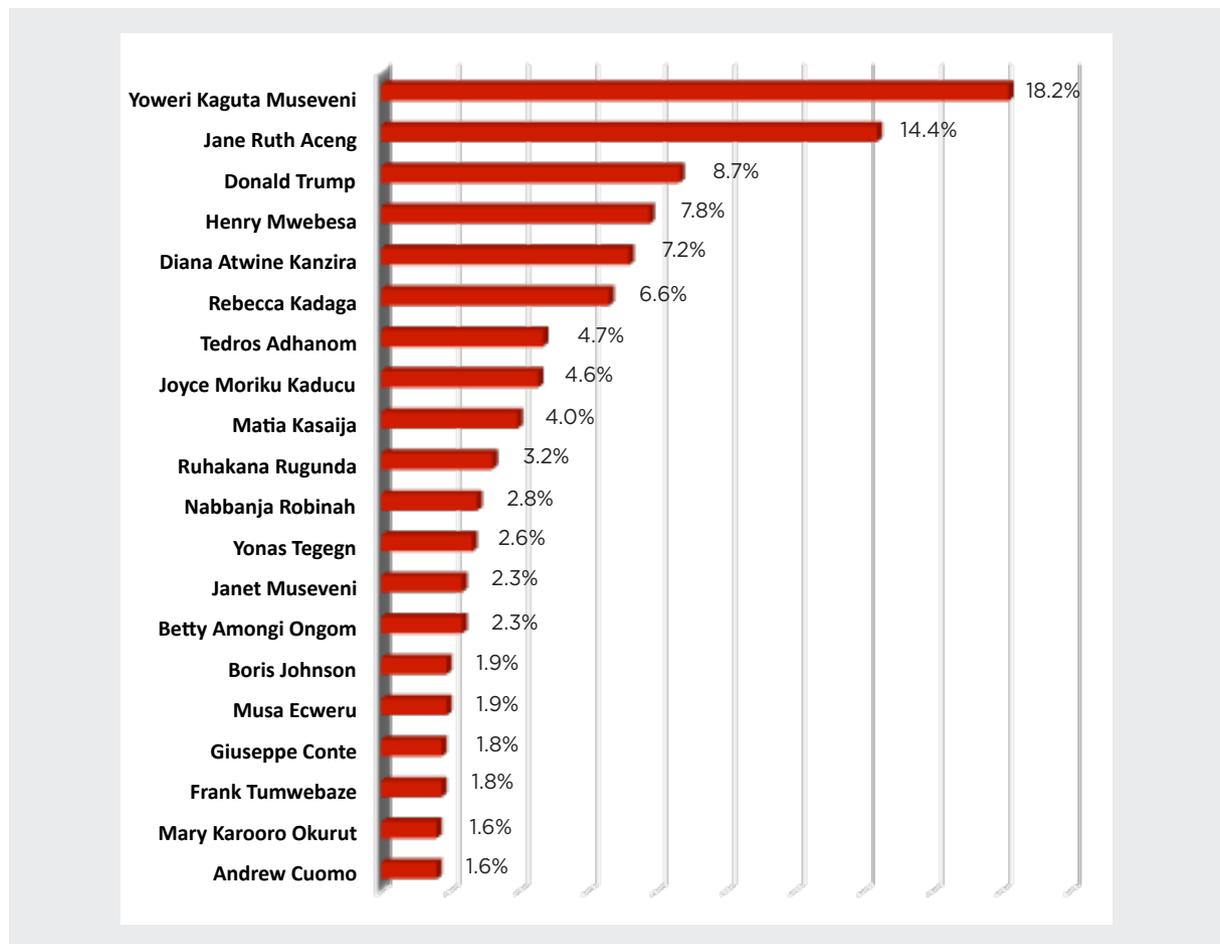
Human sources	January (n=38)	February (n=130)	March (n=1839)	April (n=2651)
Ordinary person quoted in their individual capacity	26.3	12.3	22.8	20.6
Expert	10.5	18.5	7.6	8.2
Prime Minister and ministers	10.5	11.5	6.3	9.2
Central government representative	2.6	2.3	7.4	7.1
Business representative	0.0	6.2	9.0	5.5
Foreign politician	10.5	16.9	7.7	5.1
Police/military/security	0.0	0.0	4.6	5.5
Medical official/practitioner	0.0	0.0	4.7	5.4
Ministry of Health official	23.7	5.4	4.8	3.8
Member of Parliament	0.0	3.1	2.3	5.1
Local government leader/official	0.0	0.0	3.0	3.9
Sports administrator or personality	0.0	0.0	3.2	3.7
Religious representative	0.0	3.1	5.4	1.9
President	0.0	0.8	1.9	3.3
Civil Society/Local NGO representative	2.6	0.0	1.2	2.1
WHO Director-General and other officials	10.5	9.2	1.8	0.9
Politician or political operative	0.0	0.0	1.1	1.8
Judicial personnel	0.0	0.0	0.6	2.0
Diplomatic representative	0.0	6.2	1.0	1.2
Speaker of Parliament	0.0	2.3	0.8	1.1
Cultural representative	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.8
International NGO representative	0.0	0.8	0.7	0.6
Central bank official	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.1
Other	2.6	1.5	1.1	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Unique sources

President Yoweri Museveni was the most frequently cited unique source, at 18.2%. He was followed closely by Health Minister Jane Ruth Aceng (14.4%), U.S. President Donald Trump (8.7%), the Director General of Health Services Henry Mwebesa (7.8%) and the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, Dr Diana Atwine Kanzira (7.2%). The rest of the top 20 sources mentioned in

news stories include Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom, the prime minister and the ministers leading the country's response to Covid-19, including Finance Minister Matia Kasaija and Education Minister and First Lady Janet Museveni. These results look similar to what Media Monitoring Africa has found in similar research in South Africa.³³

FIG 5: Unique human sources cited



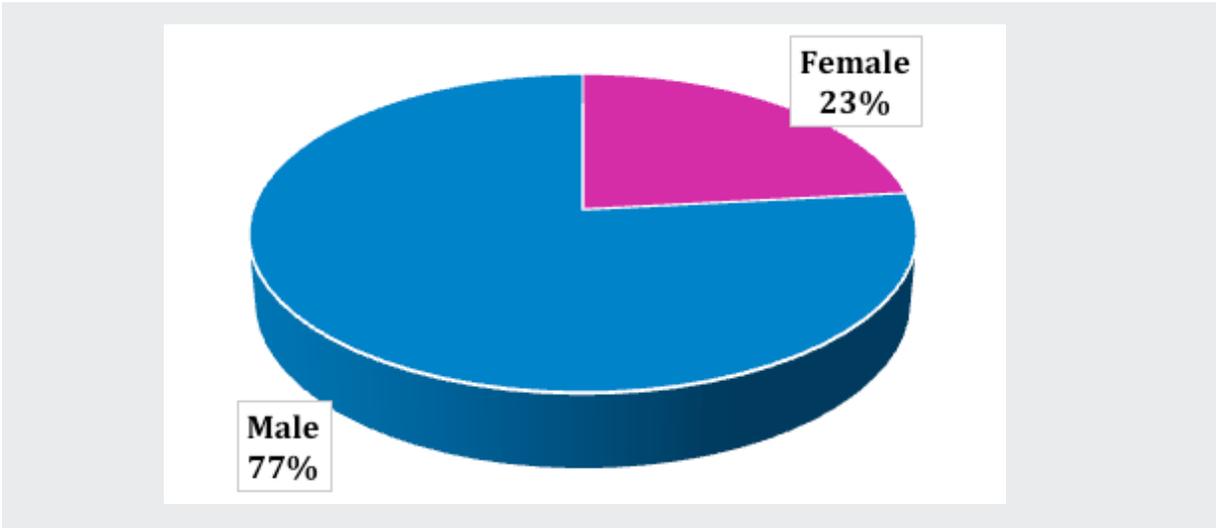
³³ Media Monitoring Africa (2020). Analysis of Covid-19 Media Coverage. Brief Number Two. See also Brief Number One.

Three other non-Uganda based personalities made it to the top 20. These are UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, his Italian counterpart Giuseppe Conte and the Governor of New York State in the United States, Andrew Cuomo. Mr Johnson was hospitalised after getting infected with Covid-19, while Mr Conte and Mr Cuomo were the face of the response in two territories that were hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic. We see little in the coverage of African leaders like John Pombe Magufuli in neighbouring Tanzania and Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa.

Gender of sources

Although women were well represented among the unique sources (at 42%) it was the same old story of underrepresentation overall. Men constituted 77% of the total sources cited in the Covid-19 coverage. Some journalists attributed this to the ease of access to male sources, and their willingness to speak out. However, others blamed it on a newsroom culture that does not privilege inclusion and diversity. “Journalists are blind to their own sexism and resistant to feedback on it,” said journalist and feminist Lydia Namubiru, Africa editor of 50.50, a section of Open Democracy.

FIG 6: Gender of sources



In my experience, Ugandan journalists also tend to see sourcing as a favour they do for the source (giving their voice a platform) and so are not interested in making accommodations for sources who are anxious or indifferent about being in the media and therefore need convincing, or are busy (like women who typically have a disproportionate amount of care work outside their official jobs). – Lydia Namubiru

The only category of sources (other than Speaker of Parliament—for obvious reasons³⁴) where there were more women than men was that of ministers, with 64.5% of the former against 35.5%. This is undoubtedly driven by the fact that a number of key ministers who are involved in the country's Covid-19 response are women. These are Health Minister Jane Ruth Aceng, her deputies

Joyce Moriku Kaducu and Robinah Nabbanja, Education Minister and First Lady Janet Museveni, Minister for General Duties in the Office of the Prime Minister Mary Karoro Okurut, Minister of Trade and Industry Amelia Kyambadde, Information and National Guidance Minister Judith Nabakooba, and Minister for Kampala Betty Amongi.

TABLE 14: GENDER OF SOURCES

Human sources	Female (%)	Male (%)	N
Ordinary person quoted in their individual capacity	31.6	68.4	959
Prime minister and ministers	64.5	35.5	377
Expert	17.0	83.0	364
Central government representative	17.4	82.6	327
Business representative	12.1	87.9	314
Foreign politician	9.4	90.6	297
Police/military/security	8.4	91.6	226
Medical official/practitioner	14.8	85.2	223
Ministry of Health official	28.8	71.2	205
Member of Parliament	23.5	76.5	183
Local government leader/official	8.9	91.1	158
Religious representative	3.9	96.1	153
Sports administrator or personality	7.2	92.8	152
President	0.0	100.0	124
Civil Society/Local NGO representative	35.9	64.1	78
WHO Director-General and other officials	9.9	90.1	71
Politician or political operative	14.7	85.3	68
Judicial personnel	36.7	63.3	60
Diplomatic representative	8.6	91.4	58
Speaker of Parliament	100.0	0.0	45
Cultural representative	0.0	100.0	31
International NGO representative	36.7	63.3	30
Central bank official	12.5	87.5	8
Other	21.7	78.3	46

34 Speaker Rebecca Kadaga is a woman.

The other categories where the representation of women was well above the average were judicial personnel (36.7%), international NGOs (36.7%), civil society/local NGOs (35.9%) and ordinary people (31.6%). Although women are well represented on Uganda's "Committee of Scientists" working on the Covid-19 response, men constituted 83% of expert sources. As American science journalist Tara Haelle has argued, this kind of imbalance can easily deny the public all the relevant perspectives.³⁵



It's not just seeking out diverse sources and ensuring that you're quoting people of color and men and women, and other genders – it's not just an academic issue. It's not just a ticking-the-box issue. It's not just a social justice issue. It's a journalistic responsibility to ensure that you are truly capturing all the perspectives that are relevant to the topic you're covering." – Tara Haelle.

American journalist Teresa Carr cites **Caroline Buckee**, an associate professor of epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who decries what she sees as sexism in the Covid-19 response. "Of course, there are inequalities, but there are plenty of really good women scientists," Buckee is quoted as saying. "And without reflecting that adequately

35 Carr, T. (2020). "In Covid-19 coverage, female experts are missing," downloaded from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/06/in-covid-19-coverage-female-experts-are-missing/>

during a crisis – and in the press – you are doing a disservice to science overall."³⁶

Multiplicity of voices

We would expect coverage to contain a multiplicity of sources, especially given the complexity of the crisis and its multi-sectoral impact. Unfortunately, a significant number of stories had either only one source (35.3%) or none at all (10.2%). In some cases, this was not unusual because the stories in question were either commentaries or analytical pieces from both international media and local sources. However, there were also a significant number of single-sourced news stories. Reporters and editors blamed it on the prevailing restrictions during the lockdown as well as an unwillingness of sources to speak, at least initially. "In fact, in one of our online meetings with reporters, concerns were raised about why stories were single-sourced," said Ms Carol Beyanga, managing editor for digital content at *Daily Monitor*. "But reporters said people are not willing to speak. The pandemic was a new thing so health workers, government officials did not want to be quoted."³⁷

Table 15 shows that among the dailies, *Bukedde* had the highest number of stories with one or no source (52.3%).

36 Carr, T. (2020). "In Covid-19 coverage, female experts are missing," downloaded from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/06/in-covid-19-coverage-female-experts-are-missing/>

37 Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala.

TABLE 15: NUMBER SOURCES BY PUBLICATION

Number of sources per story	Bukedde (n=394)	Daily Monitor (n=682)	New Vision (n=915)	The Independent (n=27)	The Observer (n=69)
No source	10.9	7.3	11.4	18.5	15.9
1 source	41.4	34.3	32.8	48.1	37.7
2 sources	19.5	25.7	19.5	11.1	14.5
3 sources	8.4	16.0	15.7	11.1	8.7
4 sources	6.6	8.1	8.6	7.4	5.8
5 or more sources	13.2	8.7	12.0	3.7	17.4

Tone of coverage: Neither alarmist nor reassuring

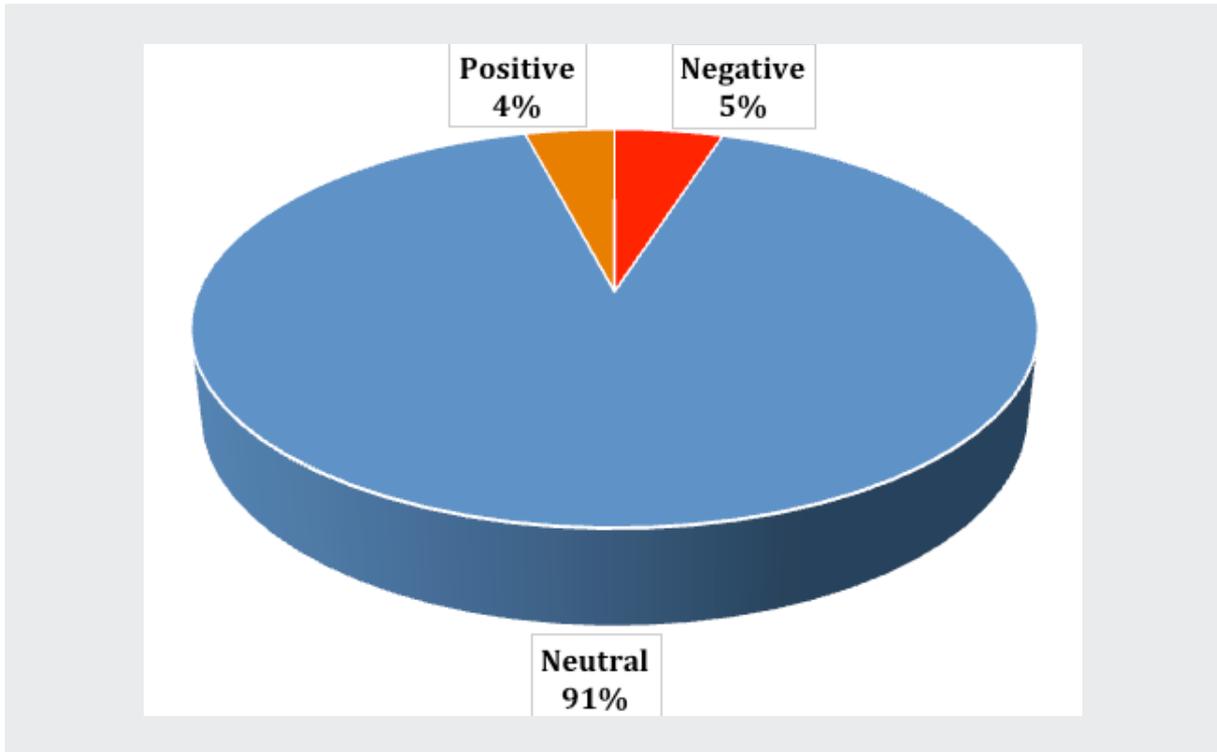
In this study, the tone is “negative” when the article in general is critical of or questions a particular development or issue or the actors involved. The tone is “positive” when the article in general expresses promise or optimism about or celebrates a particular development or issue or the actors involved. The tone is “neutral” when the article is neither negative nor positive. The results in Fig. 7 shows that 91% of the stories did not have a slant. The small number of stories with a positive or negative tone can be a sign of both good and bad reporting practices. It can be good in the sense that the media did not always embrace officialdom, but were rather sometimes critical of the response or expressed alarm at new developments. It can be bad in that there were moments where, rather than telling the story as neutral observers, the media turned into praise-singers or hope-givers.³⁸ One reporter explained the neutral

tone this way: “You want to sensitise, not to cause panic.” However, others said a neutral tone was sometimes the result of reporters self-censoring in order to get on the wrong side of authorities. A ruling party MP who is a former minister of finance said that “the media have never been as patriotic as they have been this time”.³⁹ Most journalists, however, attributed the neutral tone to the fact that a lot of the coverage was driven by event-based hard news reporting. Such events included the many live updates via media by the president and health officials.

³⁸ Some have argued that in times of crisis providing hope to citizens is a major role of the media.

³⁹ Key informant interview, June 2020, Kampala

FIG 7: Tone of coverage



CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon in our time with far reaching impacts on nearly all facets of life. In the media's case, it has presented – to borrow from medical terminology – as a fast-changing story with multiple storylines or angles for reporting. The restrictions implemented by national and global authorities in response to the pandemic as well as the economic disruption that the coronavirus unleashed presented major challenges for the journalists covering the story. In fact, the very survival of the media in the wake of this crisis has become part of the story.⁴⁰

The media, particularly newspapers, which were the focus of this study, have gone to great lengths to bring the public the story of Covid-19, paying particular attention to

its impact on different sectors. They have extensively covered government measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus as well as the epidemiology of Covid-19.

Key Takeaways

- The high volume of reporting on the Covid-19 crisis was appropriate once it became clear the outbreak would not spare Uganda.
- Similarly, the prominence accorded the Covid-19 story was expected and desired.
- Ugandan newspapers remained rather inward looking. Events in neighbouring countries such as Burundi, South Sudan, and Tanzania deserved far more attention and prominence that they were given in the Ugandan media. As one trainer said, the bigger media houses in Uganda should consider finding counterparts to collaborate with across the borders.
- The media could have done more to tell the Covid-19 story through other types of articles. Besides news, which was understandably the dominant type, more stories could have been told as features, profiles, or even Q&A interviews.
- While it is understandable that April was still early days, more investigative reporting would have served the public

40 This is an issue that warrants further and separate investigation. We have seen major publications cut back on staffing and implement pay cuts to stay afloat in response to the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus crisis. See: Muhindo, C. (2020, May 2). "Covid-19 fallout: Vision Group, Nation Media Group cut salaries." Retrieved from African Centre for Media Excellence: <https://acme-ug.org/2020/05/02/covid-19-fallout-vision-group-nation-media-group-cut-salaries/>. Some have argued that these cost-cutting measures are not entirely a result of the pandemic. Rather, the Covid-19 crisis has acted as a catalyst, accelerating "the pre-existing and long-term structural decline in print media" (See: Ellis M. (2020, July7). "Media24 announces plans for major print closures and layoffs." Retrieved from Memeburn: <https://memeburn.com/2020/07/media24-announces-plans-for-major-print-closures-and-layoffs/>

well in the circumstances. The quantity of investigative reports remained low by any standards, although the number of stories using the enterprise or interpretive format was higher than usual. The shortage of investigative skills and lack of resources in newsrooms remains a challenge.

- In addition, journalists did not do enough to question official narratives in their reporting. The president, the minister of health, and many government officials were more often than not given a free pass to frame the story.
- The media recognised and gave significant attention to the impact of Covid-19 as well as the ordinary people who bore the brunt of the pandemic.
- Although ordinary people comprised a significant part of the voices that the media used to tell the Covid-19 story, official sources still remained dominant.
- Overall, women continued to be marginalised in newspaper sourcing on Covid-19. Ugandan media need to work on practical strategies to improve diversity in reporting.
- The newspapers by and large used a neutral tone. They were neither ‘alarmist’ nor ‘reassuring’.
- Challenges that got in the way of the coverage included the viability/sustainability crisis that media houses are grappling with, the inexperience and ill-preparedness of many journalists, concerns about journalists’ safety, and poor investment in newsrooms.
- The public health angle of the Covid-19 crisis was affected by the lack of specialisation by a good number of reporters who covered the story. Newsrooms don’t have fully developed health reporting desks, and many have lost experienced health reporters who have moved on to NGOs or government agencies.
- As one editor pointed out, media houses should consider developing in-house guidelines for covering such emergencies, the same way they have guidelines for covering major events/processes such as elections.
- Journalists should be trained on covering pandemics and emergencies.
- Challenges notwithstanding, journalists have to be willing to go the extra mile to do the story. Newsrooms should encourage more initiative and enterprise.

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The African Centre for Media Excellence was incorporated in Kampala in August 2009 under the Companies Act, Cap 110, as a company limited by guarantee and not having share capital. This means that ACME is a non-profit organisation. Strategically, ACME occupies the space between the media industry and academic institutions that train journalists. The centre is committed to excellence in journalism and mass communication in Africa, starting at home in Uganda. Our main goal is to make the media a more effective platform for the provision of information on public affairs, a tool for monitoring official power, and a forum for vibrant public debate. ACME is a media support organisation that delivers quick turn-around time without compromising quality. Our work revolves around:

- mid-career training for journalists;
- media literacy training and communication support for civil society and private sector groups, and the youth;
- media research;
- media monitoring;
- public dialogues, workshops and symposia; and
- freedom of expression advocacy.

A bulk of the centre's work has involved training. Our approach is unique. Instead of one-off workshops, which are common in Uganda, and indeed the East African region, ACME employs a long-term approach in which practical training workshops are complemented with mentoring and coaching over several months.

ACME directly employs more than a dozen staff and works with a growing network of external trainers and researchers. It is governed by a general assembly made up of subscribers as the highest body, a board of directors as the policy-making organ, and a management team that carries out day-to-day activities.

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To become Africa's leading independent media and communication support organisation.

MISSION

- To inspire journalists to seek and achieve professional excellence.
- To help make our news media more reliable and credible sources of information, effective watchdogs and vibrant forums for public debate.
- To equip members of the private sector, civil society, academia and the government with skills to engage more effectively with the media.
- To educate the public on how to better appreciate the forces that shape the news.
- To advocate, promote and defend press freedom and freedom of expression.

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In pursuit of excellence, ACME is guided by the values and operating principles of honesty and integrity, quality, persistence and determination, timeliness, creativity and innovativeness, and independence.



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