

**COVID-19 and the Media in
Sub-Saharan Africa**

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COVID-19 and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa: Media Viability, Framing and Health Communication

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*We dedicate this volume to all frontline workers particularly journalists whose lives
have been impacted by the pandemic.*

*Special dedications to: Ama'ata buari, Amani, Aleni and Anders as well as Cyprian
Okirigi and Francis Ejobi.*

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Foreword

COVID-19 and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa is among the first books uniting scholars to examine media viability, framing and health crisis communication connected to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. The findings may be applicable also to other global crises, both in and outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, and may help practitioners and scholars alike to understand the complexity of preconditions and structures of media ecologies.

The highly diverse cases are characterised by the authors' first-hand knowledge of the media in the Sub-Saharan African context. Focussing on newly collected cases from a broad number of countries, the authors study whether the pandemic changed the conditions for media viability, framing, and outreach. It also covers concrete examples of how the specific health communication led to changes in social behaviour and mental health. Last, but not least, it provides gendered and marginalisation lenses to understand barriers for media users and media producers.

Throughout the pandemic, publishing houses in Sub-Saharan Africa and around the world faced severe obstacles. In different ways, the pandemic influenced the room for manoeuvres. Different conditions were involved and influenced whether media content was published, and with what quality. Three factors were key: political conditions, financial resources, and the level of journalistic expertise. If there was political room for manoeuvre, if there were sufficient financial resources, and if there was a high level of competence, the media was often found to disseminate independent, critical, and research-based information, monitor public institutions, and provide a platform for public debate and dialogue.

The authors connect these factors with media viability and media framing. Based on empirical data and theoretical perspectives, they challenge traditional understandings of media. To understand factors preventing and promoting a critical and fact-based media during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers looked at both the media's finances and priorities, the individual journalist's competence and resilience, and the political influence that publishing houses and journalists were exposed to through propaganda and restrictions on media freedom.

How Did the Political Context Shape the Media During the Pandemic?

A free and responsible media can strengthen democratic and economic development by giving public access to verified information about issues of importance

to the society. The conditions for journalism vary from country to country. In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the conditions under which journalism operates are challenging. The pandemic led to further limitations. Several African countries launched restrictive media laws curbing the freedom of expression, including the media freedom and the right to information. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities in several countries further tightened the grip on the media, with economic sanctions, threats, and violence. Journalists and media personnel were at higher risks of being attacked physically and psychologically than prior to the pandemic.

Media's ability to publish COVID-related articles was restricted by governments at various levels. Strict media guidelines and restrictions were imposed and political propaganda and disinformation were circulated, at the expense of evidence-based journalism.

This book examines how contextual conditions hindered journalists from doing their job during a pandemic. The scholars document a broad number of conditions and confirm that the pandemic made the profession of journalism much more challenging. The book sheds light on how state monopoly over media institutions can hinder the migration from analogue to digital broadcasting. Interestingly, it also documents how the pandemic facilitated a gearshift towards a more digital and more free broadcasting environment in some places. The shift led to pockets of strengthened political participation and freedom of expression, at the expense of the governments' control of major publishing houses. Examples of these dynamics were cited in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.

How Did the Publishing Houses' Financial Situation Influence Media Coverage During the Pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when the media in Sub-Saharan Africa was on the verge of financial collapse. The older economic models were breaking down, sales were collapsing, and technologies were outdated. Audiences moved online and anybody that could write a journalistic piece gained ground. With social media's emergence, people's willingness to pay for journalistic products also diminished. Tech companies and advertising agencies were taking the lion's share of adverts. On top of this crisis, the coronavirus spread, changing everything.

With the emergence of social media and with the flight of advertisers from classic publishing houses to social media, the income base shrunk. The media in Sub-Saharan Africa had, in general, limited revenues from newspaper sales or advertising sales, compared to the media in other continents. The newspapers often made losses and survived on funds from politicians or business actors, often with specific agendas. Many publishing houses failed to give their journalists employment contracts. Some did not even pay salaries; instead, they expected journalists to collect salaries by writing promotional articles, or by coupage (e.g., blackmailing). The economic situation of publishing houses in Sub-Saharan Africa was already demanding before COVID-19 as a result of scarce resources and down-prioritisation of research dissemination. The pandemic made the financial situation more pressing.

This book has a unique approach to how media institutions fared during challenging financial situations. It shows how casual sales of newspapers were affected by the lockdown, which consequently affected the advertising incomes and staff compensation. It provides insight into the multifaceted challenges female-owned community media face, compared to the mainstream male-owned media. It compares the effects of the pandemic in privately owned newspaper companies and government-controlled ones. It enlightens the reader about possibilities and limitations of different financial pull-factors. It assesses barriers to subscription-uptake and paywalls and possible enablers that make media users willing to pay for media content. It compares freemium and metered paywalls to other payment arrangements. Examples are given from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

Did the Working Conditions of the Journalists Changed During the Pandemic?

Many media houses in Sub-Saharan Africa prioritised political, financial, and sports news and had few (or no) health and science journalists on their payrolls. With the pandemic, these limitations became more precarious. The coronavirus was still new, and there was great uncertainty about spread, mutations, and effective treatment, in the media corps as in the society. At the same time, journalists' role of informing people accurately, timely, and evidence-based, had hardly been greater.

During the pandemic, many journalists from Sub-Saharan Africa lost their jobs, or their work conditions weakened and stress levels increased. With budget cuts in the publishing houses, there were less resources and fewer journalists to cover corona-related questions. The paradox was that while the media had less resources, journalism was even more needed.

The authors investigate how the pandemic made a difference among journalists and other staff working in the media and the communication business. Several complex issues shape the contexts of the journalists' work situation. Empirical examples document how the pandemic added health risks to the journalists' daily challenges. Reporters covering COVID-19 were in direct contact with the health threat they were reporting on, and without the protection offered to health personnel. They also lacked mental support and faced stigma, biases, and threats against their work and themselves. This book gives insight into coping mechanisms and crisis communication strategies, with examples from Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

What Was and Who were Given a Voice Through the Media?

During crises, media plays a key role in discourse setting, by the way they frame and communicate the crisis. How a crisis is framed by the media, and who the media choose to give a voice, play important roles for peoples' perceptions of the

crisis. The questions of framing and representation are important also to understand who gets a voice during times of crises. While people who are marginalised, excluded, or poor often are the most affected by national or global crises, and hence merit a voice in the media, the reality is that they often are non-represented in the media coverage.

The media has power and can directly influence people's health behaviour. The COVID-19 pandemic was nicknamed an infodemic since it came with confusion, distrust, and spreading of rumours, false news, and politicised news. When the media provided evidence-based information to the public, it enabled the users to take appropriate action and limited the spread of the virus. If the news instead was based on false or politicised information, people's actions were suited, and the virus likely to escalate.

This book gives insight into how the pandemic was covered and framed by traditional media and digital media in various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and shows how this could influence health-related perceptions and behaviour. It highlights examples of mainstream media using a fear-based framing strategy to try to make people take precautions and documents the counterproductivity of this strategy. It also investigates the gendered representation in print media and finds women severely underrepresented. When represented, they were mostly depicted in domestic roles, and portrayed as victims. Framing examples are given from Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Rwanda.

To What Extent Did Marginalised People Have Access to Information?

People who are marginalised or live-in poverty often lack access to information, either because the news is not available where they live or because it is unaffordable and inaccessible. There is little research on whether the pandemic changed the accessibility, availability, and affordability of media for people who were considered marginalised in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This book provides unique perspectives on who had access to information and who did not. The questions of availability and affordability were key. The book examines marginalised people's sources of information about COVID-19, their knowledge about the virus and their level of trust in the classical media channels. It concludes that health messages often do not reach marginalised groups. One of the reasons is the lack of social and cultural adjustments of the messaging. When the literacy (including digital literacy) level is low, the message needs to be shaped with extra care. The book also covers African diasporic communities. It investigates the COVID-19 information provided by the host government at different levels, measuring whether the information was understood and accepted by the diaspora.

This book brings together perspectives from 16 countries: drawn from Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan, Burundi, DRC, and Norway.

Closing

This book should be on all media studies' reading lists. It helps us understand measures that may have the potential to strengthen or weaken journalism and media in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. We get the full breadth of framework factors, from media production via the media houses' finances, priorities, and competence, to the media' room for manoeuvre and independence. We are given a unique focus on what kind of media products reach (or do not reach) marginalised people, and insight that is important during normal times. Equally unique is the insight to who are excluded from framed stories. The broad selection of topics is thoughtfully interlinked. The book gives a unique insight into real-life media challenges during a global crisis. The world needs this book and should take advantage of the findings and recommendations.

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Media Viability

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Chapter 1

Viability of Paid Subscription in Uganda: An Analysis of *Chimpreports*' Paywall

Alex Taremwa

Abstract

Digital media platforms in Uganda experimented with subscription-based models as an alternative to the traditional advertising model and as a recovery plan from the effects of COVID-19. Drawing from the theory of the political economy of the media, this study focusses on the critical success factors for subscription-based models in digital media platforms, audience consumption habits vis-à-vis payment for content, the effect of paywalls on the company financials and finally, establish the barriers to subscription uptake in Uganda. Media started charging users subscription fees for content in the 1990s (Chyi, 2005). Technological advances changed audience consumption habits from consuming hardcopy newspapers to accessing content on the go through their smartphones, tablets, and computers (Berger, Matt, Steininger, & Hess, 2015). Whilst some consumers pay for content, several audience surveys in East Africa indicated a lack of consistency among the paying audiences (KARF, 2019). Most consumers never purchased subscription and were averse to paywalls. The study used a mixed-method approach to find that the increase in internet penetration in Uganda and smartphone usage were the most significant enablers of paid-content consumption in Uganda. The quality of content, poor packaging, and unfair prices by publishers were the biggest barriers to consumption of paid news content.

Keywords: Media viability; subscription; paywalls; business models; reader revenue; political economy of the media

Introduction and Background

The decline in newspaper sales and the subsequent fall in advertiser revenue in East African media, coupled with the migration of audiences to consuming content on digital platforms (Kenya Audience Research Foundation [KARF], 2019), most for free, forced legacy media to implement different models of revenue generation to supplement their print and advertising revenue (Berger et al., 2015). This study focussed on one case study: ChimpReports, a Ugandan-based news website that publishes news content across all genres. ChimpReports¹ is a breaking news website in Uganda founded on 15 October 2011, by Giles Muhame.

At the time of this study, Chimpreports employed eight full-time staff and several part-time stringers and freelance. According to Alexa.com, the website ranked among the top 10 most visited news websites in Uganda, averaging 450,000–640,000 visits per day and about 19 million page views a month. The website was targeting 50 million page views and 1 million per month at the time of the research. The website used the freemium paywall to monetise its premium content. Freemium is a popular paywall type where media offer basic content for free on their websites or mobile applications but charge a subscription for premium content. ChimpReports' subscription model notwithstanding, struggled with drops per unit sales partly caused by effects of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that escalated the audience's inability to pay for content.

Technological advances in the media ecosystem also had a tremendous effect on the production, and overall distribution of media content over the world, changing audience consumption habits from consuming hardcopy newspapers to accessing content on the go and on-demand through their smartphones, tablets, and computers (Berger et al., 2015). The newspapers' failure to match their print advertising success on their online platforms and the entry of Google, Facebook, and other tech giants, ceding ground and revenue, brought a resurgence of the reader revenue approach. Berger (2015) found that the audience assumes all content on the Internet free. This 'culture of free' (Chyi, 2005) was the biggest challenge to monetising content. The shortcoming of many studies on media viability was focussing on only the economic aspects, ignoring other key indicators such as the legal regime, media development, journalism training and readers' access to technology to make payments for the content they consumed.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the demand for media content on digital platforms grew by more than 75% (Tzuo, 2020). The spike in online readership was followed by a dash by media companies to erect paywalls to tap into what they hoped was the eureka moment for user-generated revenue. However, paywalls without careful market research can backfire in the long term. Media ought to understand the audience's consumption habits to meet their expectations lest the paywalls might meet the same fate as their predecessors that readers rejected outright. While this study's findings indicate that the subscription model was

¹ www.chimpreports.com

viable in Uganda, it also concluded that several factors must be addressed to increase paywall acceptance and eventual success.

Conceptual Framework

Most newspapers and publishers in the United States (US) and Europe started implementing paywalls in 2013. Pickard and Williams (2014) declared it the ‘Year of the Paywall’ as newspapers viewed them as a stopgap for the dwindling advertising revenues and paper sales using the digital subscription model. Since 2013, digital subscription has been a subject of debate. Some scholars called it a ‘Hail Mary Pass’ (Pickard & Williams, 2014), while others viewed the model as the final test for journalism’s sustainability and the newspaper’s viability.

Mosco (2009) builds on the work of earlier economists like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill, who centred their arguments on labour, industrialisation and the market, but it was Richter and Gräf (2015) who would later explain the connection between political and economic structures on the production, access, and consumption of media content. With the developments in media technology, this theory investigates institutional reforms, journalistic practices, media content, and its reception among the larger consumer market structure. Hardy (2014) contends that with the dependence on media in our daily lives, the study of its political and economic organisation (political economy) has never been greater.

Dallas Smythe defines political economy as the study of control and survival in social life. He defines control as the process in which media organises, manages, and adapts to the inevitable changes it faces. The general definition of political economy is the study of social relations that constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. Golding and Murdock (2005) identify four distinguishing factors that separate the political economy of the media theory from mainstream economic approaches. The duo views the economy as interconnected with society, culture and politics, not as a separate domain. They add that the process is concerned with balancing capitalist enterprise and public intervention and goes beyond technical efficiency issues to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity, and the public good (Golding & Murdock, 2005).

Paywalls have not been a resounding success for media in Africa, but some companies have seen tremendous growth in audiences and finances by experimenting with this business model. *The Premium Times* in Nigeria, the *Daily Maverick* in South Africa, *Business Day* in Nigeria, *Nation. Africa* and the *Standard* in Kenya are good examples of successful paywalls. Paywalls, in our context, are an attempt by a digital platform to limit the consumer’s access to some (soft paywall) or all (hard paywall) of its content without prior payment. A freemium paywall is a type of paywall that allows free access to basic content but restricts premium content unless a subscription is paid. Financial survival remains the biggest worry for the media outlets in the Global South, followed by political risk and physical safety (Schiffrin, 2019).

Commercial or otherwise, the media must have financial health to achieve sustainability. Incoming revenue is a great indicator that the financial conditions of

a media house are growing and, as a result, a good measure for viability (UNESCO, 2015). Put differently; the media can only maintain support for content creation when multiple sources of revenue are created. In this instance, the quality of content available directly affects media viability (Moore, Hollifield, Jurrat, & De Roy, 2020). One of the biggest enablers for digital disruption in the media ecosystem is the constant change in technology and the quick embracement that media consumers extend to it.

The media is now undergoing rapid transformation, with local and international media houses adjusting their strategies from print to 'digital-first' as effects of disruption deepen. While most professional journalism is still funded by newspapers (Nielsen & Selva, 2019), revenues from digital platforms in several countries – including Kenya are slowly rising. Daily Nation – East and Central Africa's most selling paper has seen its sales drop from 150,000 copies a day to 75,000 – and the number could have reduced even further due to the COVID-19 pandemic (KARF, 2019).

The picture gets grimmer in Uganda where the most selling daily is a vernacular tabloid; *Bukedde* at just 33,289 print copies, an 11.1% fall while the mainstream dailies such the *New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* cannot raise a combined 50,000 copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2020). The domination of new players like Facebook and Google in the advertising space has created daily migraines for executives in the media space and, the academy looking for alternatives to the failing traditional advertising model and the sales revenue income stream that is no longer tenable. The efforts to increase user-generated revenue were stepped up across the continent, but Callanan (2012) argues that it was not commensurate with the quality of the content created and, by extension, not worth being a payroll.

This affected the credibility of the media, with many of the young audiences finding the content published to be blunt, devoid of value and falling short on storytelling exhibited by the international competitors like *New York Times*, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, *The Economist*, *Guardian* et al., even when it came to covering local issues. According to a Pew Research Centre study (2018), online was the only news category that showed signs of growth due to digital platforms' outbursts. But the growth notwithstanding, the profitability issue still preoccupied the minds of several digital publishers to date as no business model seemed to generate reliable or sustainable revenue for online publishers (Chyi, 2005). This is because online publishers and newspapers were still tiny players in a market dominated by large technology companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Netflix, who account for 75% of all digital advertising spending in the United States (Pew Research Centre, 2018).

A 2019 survey by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism stated that digital advertising was a key income source at 81%, digital subscriptions at 78%, and native advertising at 75%. The study also noted that digital subscription would remain a key priority for the news industry as it advanced, with 52% of the media executives expecting it to be the main revenue focus in 2021 (Newman, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2019). Indeed, the subscription for digital news and media subscriptions grew 110% in March–May 2020 compared to the previous 12 months, partly due

to the COVID-19 pandemic (Tzuo, 2020). The *New York Times* recorded its biggest quarterly increase in new digital-only subscriptions up to 587,000 in the first quarter – helping subscription revenue increase 5.4% to \$285.4 million.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported a digital subscriber bump reaching a record 3 million overall, 2.2 million. New evidence showed that local publications were profiting from paywalls and subscriptions with their audiences opting to subscribe to international newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Financial Times*. Newman, Richard Fletcher, Schulz, and Kleis Nielsen (2020) found that in countries such as Norway, where payment for news was high, local publishers enjoyed a higher subscription rate (64%) than the international competitors, while in the United Kingdom (UK), global players still dwarfed local newspapers such as *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* by over 19%.

According to Newman et al. (2020), content formats and genres were part of the four strategies that news media around the world adopted to increase consumers' willingness to pay. Unlike in Uganda, the underlying trend was that digital platforms provide different value and exclusively original content from their parent products. Such differences included visual, storytelling, and presentation on several devices like tablets, smartphones, and desktops (Berger et al., 2015). Digital platforms were used elsewhere to offer special content apps and editions. The *El Mundo* in Spain introduced an evening app edition and a daily gossip app. Several leading publications such as *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* created new content products customised for tablets and mobiles in Brazil. Pickard (2020) found that most publications were acquiring video rights on their platforms to drive audience engagement for paid online content.

Berger et al. (2015) found that audiences showed less involvement with content on online platforms than offline formats, especially since certain online formats can only be accessed from specific devices. Their study found that content formats were the second most important aspect of willingness to pay (WTP) after price, ranking even higher than journalistic style. Important to note is that consumers were willing to enter long-term subscriptions if the media guaranteed the provision of specific content. This argument was also advanced by Brandstetter and Schmalhofer (2014), who posited that readers are only inclined to pay for online content if it adds value to their lives and is not readily available for free elsewhere. The duo qualified value in terms of discussions, multimediality, hypertextuality, and archives.

The core of their argument was that if the media used special authors (experts and columnists), genres and topics, they created the uniqueness necessary for exclusivity. News should not feel as easy and accessible as Facebook and Netflix (Flamingo & Reuters Institute, 2019). The formats should be native to mobile platforms (portrait video) and most socially conscious (Olsen, Kammer, & Solvoll, 2020). Because audiences place greater emphasis on the value and quality of the content (Berger et al., 2015), the way media covered and presented stories needed to change.

Visual formats, on-demand podcasts rhyme well with young audiences mostly because of their mobile-based content consumption, and that is how they share and discuss content. However, this is not a guarantee that they will pay. The 2019 *Reuters Digital News Report* found that despite the media's best efforts to charge for online content, the number of consumers willing to pay was still considerably low.

Internationally, the same report found that the Nordic countries led with 34% of their population paying for news, especially in Norway and Sweden (Flamingo & Reuters Institute, 2019). In the United States, the figure still lingered between 17% and 20%, 3% are an addition of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chege, 2020). In countries like Germany that have a significantly high level of payment in Eurasia, the vast majority only had one subscription. Newman et al. (2019) argued that subscription fatigue was already setting in with most consumers ready to spend their subscription budgets on entertainment (Netflix/Spotify/Showmax/Apple TV+) rather than news in some of these markets. Using a limited quantitative analysis, Myllylahti (2017) studied paywalled content in three leading newspapers in Australia. Her research showed that readers paid more for business and opinion articles. Although it was out of Myllylahti's scope to analyse the originality and quality of the content. Goyanes (2014) had earlier done a study that spelt out the lack of content value to be a major hindrance to consumer's payment for content. His argument, just like Pickard and Williams' (2014), was that digital content is overly commodified and cheap to create mostly by 'desktop journalists'. As a result, it is undifferentiated, reads the same and does not interrogate critical societal issues. There is also the perception that Kammer, Boeck, Hansen, and Hauschildt (2015) presented that audiences viewed online content as inferior in quality compared to print newspapers despite the popularity of digital platforms as sources for credible news and other content.

Internet penetration in Uganda was at 50%, with 20 million people accessing the Internet. Globally, Africa's internet penetration was only 39.3% as of March 2020 (Miniwatt, 2020). While these figures looked rosy, they also spoke to the economic and social constraints that impeded the uptake of subscriptions when unpacked. Beyond social media platforms, there was little online activity in some parts of Africa. This made it hard for users to pay for any content and made it easy to spread fake news and misinformation. While social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, were good content distribution tools, they were still tough to monetise (Ogenga, 2011) and were impeded by legal and tax regimes that blocked access in countries like Uganda. Other barriers to uptake include price, which Chyi (2005) found to be the most misconstrued of all the factors that influence payment largely because it carries a negative connotation and meets resistance followed by a desire to negotiate. In 2010, Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) found that the maximum amount an average consumer was willing to spend on online news was \$5 a month. Nine years later, a 2019 *Reuters Digital Report* stated that the average price for a digital news subscription available (without discounts) was \$12.19, compounding to \$36 a month. Using pricing, packaging, and bundling as levers was key. A one-size-fits-all no longer applies, and companies need the flexibility to offer different packages for different customer segments (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018).

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to examine the viability of digital subscription as a business model for digital media in Uganda, employing both in-depth interviews and a survey to collect data. The respondents were staff and