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COVID-19 and the media:

A pandemic of paradoxes

Photojournalists and camera-people wearing protective suits line up outside a crematorium in Bogota, Colombia on 6 July 2020. Photo: Juancho Torres/Getty Images

This is an abridged version of the IMS report; *A pandemic of paradoxes*, which in full covers responses to the infringement of the right to freedom of information, misinformation on social media and the impact on public interest media caused by the pandemic with a human-rights based approach and gender-sensitive lens.

Recommendations

“One day, when we look back at the coronavirus pandemic that paralyzed most of the world, I hope we remember all the lives we lost but could have saved. I hope too, that we remember the cost of telling the truth, especially when people’s lives depended on it.”

– Benazir Shah, features editor at Geo Television, Pakistan.

- Tax Big Tech companies fairly, instead of allowing them to pay little to no tax on revenues earned, and use the extra money to subsidise public interest media. This will help to ensure the post-COVID survival of public interest media and its crucial role fulfilling human rights.
- Fully respect core human rights to freedom of expression and access to information, including proactive disclosure of reliable, life-saving health information, only restricting such rights for the limited situations and durations permitted under international law.
- Impose targeted international sanctions on individuals responsible for grave human rights violations, including arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, especially in cases where a path to impunity has been laid.
- Counter the epidemic of misinformation and violence on social media, particularly with a gendered dimension targeted at women journalists, not through censorship but by supporting fact-checking as a public good and reforming hate speech laws to enable prosecution of online assault.
- Leverage the demand for reliable information by training public interest journalists in Media and Information Literacy. A better command of critical analytical skills will allow journalists to differentiate from competitors and better harness technologies to engage audiences and counter misinformation.

ABS-CBN enraged employees and supporters take to the streets to voice their opposition of the government's move to close down the country's largest television network on 18 July 2020 in Manila, Philippines. According to the company, more than 11,000 employees will be affected and millions of Filipinos will lose their source of news and entertainment just when people need crucial and timely information as the nation deals with the COVID-19 pandemic.
Photo: Jes Aznar/Getty Images



Summary

COVID-19 has been a pandemic of paradoxes for public interest media:

- *Journalists on the frontline have supplied essential live-saving information to massively expanded audiences in need of reporting they could trust, even as advertising revenues have collapsed, leaving public interest media struggling to survive.*
- *Seven in 10 journalists have reported hugely increased stress. Yet the top three emotional reactions to the pandemic were positive, including a renewed commitment to the profession.*

Partisan media ownership, the contagion of misinformation online, and audiences exhausted by negative news all factored against a public consensus developing on public interest media as an essential service. Yet the pandemic has left Ethiopian audiences crying out for reliable information to help protect themselves, while Sri Lankans have scoured sources to counter the lies and censorship seen coming from their own government. Paradoxically, again, the impacts of COVID-19 have driven demand for independent journalism, even as they hampered its development.

Methodology

Four IMS programme countries - Colombia, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine – were chosen for in-depth analysis upon consideration of geographical spread and data retrieval facility. One woman and one man were chosen from each country, aged from early 20s to late 50s, mixing both existing IMS partner organisations and individuals based in IMS programme countries. During one-hour online interviews in November 2020, interviewees scored a survey of 15 indicators, which produced comparable quantitative data. They then explained their rating, providing qualitative data that informed the thematic analyses in each chapter of the report.

Comprehensive desk research of existing reports from 33 IMS partners and leading journalism monitoring groups furthermore served to develop this report.

Highlights

Chapter 1 focuses on freedom of information and how some State responses to COVID-19 has infringed this right. How can the apparent tension between the right to health and the right to information be resolved following a human rights-based approach? IMS' interviewees unanimously agreed that gathering

first-hand reporting had become significantly more difficult.

Chapter 2 surveys the vast growing problem of misinformation on social media—a problem that panelists agreed had been turbo charged by the pandemic. How does online misinformation now represent a threat to the right to health and to what extent can it be considered a threat to freedom of information? The chapter provides a rights-based approach to the direct tension between freedom of expression and unlawful hate speech.

Chapter 3 analyses Safety of Journalists issues that accompanied 2020's pandemic, both physical offline safety, mental health, online abuse, and state surveillance, before outlining best practice. There was a strong consensus among interviewees that harassment of journalists had increased due to COVID-19.

Chapter 4 looks at the drastic impact on the viability of public interest media caused by the pandemic. Most journalists surveyed through 2020, including IMS' interviewees, agreed this was the single most significant threat to their work. As well as crunching the numbers, the chapter examines how threats to the business of public interest media are also threats to the plurality of opinion—vital to the promotion of free and democratic societies.

Philippines: Innovating under lockdown

PumaPodcast is the first podcast network in the Philippines. But a little over a year into its business, Covid-19 had left this IMS partner almost unable to continue operations.

"We had a regular news podcast, but it was very challenging because under lockdown we had absolutely no access to our studio, and it was unsafe for us to go and try and report stories on our own in the field," COO Carl Javier told the World Press Freedom Conference 2020.

So Javier and CEO Roby Alampay decided to innovate according to their original mission statement: "to share the joy, power, and value there is in listening." They decided to give up on news coverage entirely, and focus entirely on listening to people's stories.

"We threw out the idea of trying to control audio from the studio and we just took whatever audio we could find from people reporting, people travelling, people in the hospitals, and then brought those together and started creating podcasts out of those specific stories," said Javier.

"Everything went digital, and we had to change the way we were using our manpower. We reallocated our resources from being out in the field or the studio and used the new bandwidth we had from being stuck at home to stitch together more complex stories. We asked ourselves, given our limited money and limited opportunity to do reporting, how can we continue to bring insights to our listeners?"

'Covid Diaries', the series of low-tech, first person interviews with doctors, people diagnosed with Covid-19, urban poor, volunteers, relatives of fatalities, and ordinary Filipinos just trying to get by, proved hugely popular with listeners, and PumaPodcast saw its audience more than double over the early months of the pandemic.

"With podcasts, the engagement is much more personal," said Alampay. "It's a warmer medium than others. It sets us apart from the trolling culture, it insulates us from the paranoia, the anger and the overall culture of fake news that exists on social media."

The full report is available for download on www.mediasupport.org

IMS (International Media Support), the biggest media development organisation in the Nordic countries, has for two decades supported independent media where they are at greatest risk. We build partnerships to help journalists cover stories important to the public, push for quality journalism, challenge repressive laws and keep media workers of all genders safe, so that they can do their jobs. Through alliances and innovation, we help free, independent media contribute to positive change and better societies.