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**Teddy Mungwari**  
(Ph.D.), Senior Lecturer  
Chinhoyi University of  
Technology, Centre for  
Language & Communication  
Studies, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe

**Sophia Mapuranga**  
Freelance Journalist, Media  
Centre, Harare, Zimbabwe

**Shupikai Kembo**  
Ph.D. Student Department of  
Marketing and Retail  
Management, University of  
South Africa. Principal  
Assistant Registrar,  
Examinations Office, Midlands  
State University, Gweru,  
Zimbabwe

**Correspondence**  
**Teddy Mungwari**  
(Ph.D.), Senior Lecturer  
Chinhoyi University of  
Technology, Centre for  
Language & Communication  
Studies, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe

# Reorganisation of news production in Zimbabwe during COVID-19

**Teddy Mungwari, Sophia Mapuranga and Shupikai Kembo**

## Abstract

This article explores the reorganization of news production practices during COVID-19 pandemic in selected newsrooms in Zimbabwe. It examines how newspapers and radio stations coped with the imposition of lockdown measures and restrictions. The article analyses strategies employed by media houses to deal with challenges occasioned by the lockdown and examines changes in work routines, news gathering, processing and dissemination practices. This study is qualitative and employs thematic analysis of data. Technology mediated interviews were conducted from each of the selected media organisations which included Zimbabwe newspapers (Zimpapers) (*The Herald, H-Metro, The Chronicle, B-Metro, Star FM, Capital, Nyami Nyami, Diamond*), *Classic 263, News Day, Central Radio, YAFM, NewsHawks, AB Communications and 263Chat*. The lockdown restrictions created a situation where some news stations adopted simulcasting while taking turns to physically report for work and others worked from home using digital media technologies. The article concludes that different media organisations capacitated their reporters and producers with information, knowledge and ICTs to cope with the crisis. Newsrooms have adopted and innovated strategies and practices in the new normal.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, disruption, lockdown, strategy, practice, technology

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 was first detected in Zimbabwe in March 2020 and the government of Zimbabwe declared a state of national disaster while the first case of the novel virus was reported in humans in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 is an infectious illness caused by the coronavirus, with different variants emerging since it started. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and immediately urged members to take drastic measures to combat the disease. African governments, Zimbabwe included imposed national lockdowns. The national lockdown closed all business activities except for those engaged in essential services. Essential services are defined in Section 102 (a) of the Labour Act as "any services the interruption of which endangers immediately the life, personal safety of the whole or any part of the public". Media are part of essential services. Workers engaged in essential services continued reporting for duty despite the risk of COVID-19. In Zimbabwe, journalists are considered as part of the essential group and frontline workers, albeit after some advocacy work by media support groups.

From the onset, global and local media were instrumental in providing information to people on this new disease, its spread, and its effect on society. However, media institutions and journalists face new challenges; especially unique health and safety challenges, as they attempt to gather, process, and relay information on this disease, often travelling to affected areas, and listening to accounts of those affected and infected, thereby placing their own safety in jeopardy (Gender & Media Connect n.d).

COVID-19 can be described as one of the global issues to cause massive disruption in news practices because it forced professionals worldwide to abruptly abandon their physical newsrooms and change their working procedures (Garcia-Aviles 2021) <sup>[14]</sup>. Many media organisations experienced periods of confinement and restrictions to social activity, media employees implemented teleworking and virtual communication systems and adapted to the circumstances.

In a scenario of uncertainty, journalism has become more essential than ever to keep societies informed. COVID-19 and its economic effects accelerated changes in news production, distribution, consumption and business models (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. Such remodeling of organisational processes and resources reflects the strategic responses to disruption that firms must undergo to remain competitive (Bughin & Van Zeebroeck 2017) <sup>[4]</sup>. Different kinds of disruption in media work help reformulate existing procedures through a complex structure made up of people, artefacts, actions and negotiations.

It is important to note essential services employees' rights during COVID-19 and national lockdown, since as earlier pointed out, that they continued reporting for duty. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the legal position of such employees' right to safe and healthy working conditions, the legal obligations of employers towards journalists rendering services in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic which was categorised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as an occupational disease. Employers must ensure that the workplace, machinery, equipment and processes are without risk to health; employees must be provided with adequate protective clothing and protective equipment; and employers have a duty to provide adequate measures to deal with emergencies and accidents including first aid arrangements, among others (See SI 2020-083 Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) National Lockdown) Order, 2020).

Newsrooms which were selected introduced the WHO recommended measures to curb the spread of the virus in their newsrooms. Masks or facial coverings are now commonplace, as are regular temperature checks at the entrance and exit points of the facilities and they encourage use of hand sanitisers. Journalists are encouraged to work from home during hard lockdowns, shifts have been introduced to reduce the number of people in the newsrooms at any one time. Physical distancing is now a requirement (this is later explained in detail under Personal Safety and Security).

Journalists operated outside physical newsrooms during confinement and produced content for their organizations remotely from their homes. Teleworking is increasingly common for professionals in virtual environments (Kanawattachai & Yoo 2007) <sup>[19]</sup>. The emergency of virtual newsrooms during COVID-19 pandemic revealed that professionals quickly adapted to procedures to produce news content, collaborating via video conferencing and messaging platforms. However, journalism is increasingly subject to precarious, insecurity, freelancing and other non-permanent contractual arrangements (Edstrom & Ladendorf 2012; Ornebring 2018) <sup>[8, 24]</sup> which might have been aggravated by this crisis.

Scholars have explored how technologies facilitate internal newsroom organisational processes. In this regard, working environments are expected to guarantee journalistic coordination, foster communication, and increase cooperation. According to Koivula, Villi and Sivunen (2020) <sup>[20]</sup>, technology shapes innovation in dispersed journalistic teams and provides more avenues for sharing information and informal communication. Organisational integration in the form of coordination and cooperation among departments is found to be critical for innovation (Garcia-Aviles *et al.* 2018) <sup>[13]</sup>, yet little attention has been paid to management strategies during disruptive crises.

This study focused on reorganisation of news production in Zimbabwe during COVID-19 pandemic; and how managers and journalists responded to disruption. Through the lens of Disruption in News Organisations, we explored managers' roles in virtual newsrooms and how reporters coped with the crisis. The method is based on in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 13 respondents who among them include executives (Editors, Managing Editors and middle management reporters and producers).

We posed the following questions; among others: what were the main changes in journalistic practices in newsrooms? How did managers cope with disruption in virtual newsrooms? What new practices and strategies have been adapted in organisations? As COVID-19 persists, what plans are in place to ensure newsrooms keep core functions operating and ensure journalists stay safe?

As we analysed newsroom scenarios during hard lockdown, partial lockdown and present situation when reporters are back in newsrooms. However, there is fear that a new variant Omicron, a variant of concern (WHO 2021), might pose another crisis. Our findings indicated that media companies embraced innovative and creative practices and strategies in order to overcome the disruption. News organisations also ensured that journalists' working environments, both at home and workplace were safe and healthy. Of importance to note is that organisations equipped reporters not only with gadgets but also skills and health knowledge.

## 2. Theoretical framework: Disruption in News Organisations

Our research is guided by disruption in news organisations (Garcia-Aviles 2021) <sup>[14]</sup>. Disruption can be characterised as deviations from the normal workflow that are tied to underlying developmental contradictions of an organisation's activity, as they are considered the driving force behind change (Bughin & Van Zeebroeck 2017) <sup>[4]</sup>. Media disruption is usually related to a huge technological shifts (digitalisation, the Internet, artificial intelligence among others) or the consequences derived from an event that shake up existing structures (Garcia-Aviles 2021) <sup>[14]</sup>. For news companies, facing disruption often meant incorporating changes in technology, products, practices or business models. In business theory, 'disruptive innovation' creates a new market and value network that eventually displaces the established leading firms, so that new comers can even overthrow the incumbent leaders (Christensen, Raynor & McDonald 2015). COVID-19 pandemic caused immense disruption in media organisations especially in Zimbabwe where journalists had no similar previous crisis which could have given them experience to cope with. Nonetheless, the circumstances made newsroom managers quickly rethink innovative practices in order to keep core functions operating smoothly.

The world faced an unprecedented social, economic and health emergency during COVID-19 outbreak and Zimbabwe was not spared. This global pandemic affected not only the daily activities of media companies, but also their business structure and their employees' personal lives. The COVID-19 demonstrated that media companies reacted in record time to ensure their employees' safety and to provide continuity in their essential activity as providers of information (Garcia-Aviles 2021 <sup>[14]</sup>; See IREX, *Covering COVID-19: Handbook for journalists*, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>. As earlier

discussed in the introduction, employers have obligations to ensure that employees are safe during COVID-19 crisis.

Disruption results in virtual newsrooms which can be conceptualised as a social construction that is continuously produced and reproduced by users who share a professional activity. Accordingly, a virtual team can be defined as a group of people who work interdependently with shared purpose across space, time and organisational boundaries using technology to communicate and collaborate.

Crises are sudden and unpredictable events that may pose a danger to society, create high levels of uncertainty and time pressure (Fleischer 2013). As a result, crises generate a specific kind of disruption in media organisations. Scholars have concluded that during a crisis, news outlets need to reshape their structures, modifying hierarchies and organisational processes, challenge journalistic practices, and contribute to innovation in terms of processes, products and genres (Konow-Lund, Hagvar, & Olsson 2019) <sup>[21]</sup>.

Other researchers have offered extensive analysis about the transformation implications on COVID-19 from a cultural and technological perspective (Garcia-Aviles 2021) <sup>[14]</sup>. In this regard, adopting appropriate strategies to handle COVID-19 helped organisations respond to crisis situations and minimise its adverse impact (Dirani *et al.* 2020) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### 2.1 Communication Ecology

Another theory which we used in this study to explain the nature of media environment journalists working on during COVID-19 pandemic is Communication Ecology. The normative role of a journalist is to share information of consequence with the public, and this is particularly important in the midst of a public health crisis like the COVID-19. News organisations are normally part of a communication ecology, and so during COVID-19 pandemic journalists and news organisations can be understood to be working in a COVID-19 communication ecology (Perreault & Perreault 2021) <sup>[25]</sup>. In this regard, journalists serve as a resource for others within the ecology while also balancing personal challenges of the crisis.

When sharing information about crisis and disaster, journalists exist as a part of an ecology in which journalism influences and is influenced by the environment. Perreault & Perreault (2021) <sup>[25]</sup> argue that journalists working during COVID-19 discursively placed themselves in a vulnerable position within the communication ecology, despite their responsibilities to facilitate relationships. For journalists working in COVID-19 conditions, interviewing people face-to-face might be difficult, but using online video conferencing software like Zoom could mitigate the challenges posed by pandemic restrictions. Journalists exist as a micro environment within the COVID-19 communication ecology. Therefore, dissemination of information by journalists relies on their capacity and the overall composition of the media environment. Consequently, the function of news in crisis and disaster communication reflects the overlapping of citizens, organisations and journalists through social media (Houston *et al.* 2015) <sup>[16]</sup>.

While journalists, like any individuals, must adapt to crises and disasters, the COVID-19 communication ecology provides an environment where new norms and practices can be established and tried, and perhaps innovated.

### 3. Methodology

In order to examine institutional changes and professional strategies, we used qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 respondents. The goal of the interviews carried out in this study was to obtain a broad sense of the newsrooms' strategic responses to variations in work practices and organisational processes generated by COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were selected in a purposive sample of 13 respondents (6 females and 7 males), representing state controlled print and radio at national and regional levels; private print and radio stations as well as online media. The selected media outlets were among those with the highest number of unique users. 13 respondents can be regarded as part of the top and intermediate level management that held the most responsibility in the news organisations. This group included Chief Executive Officers, Editors, Managing Editors, news editors, Station Managers and producers. Purposive sampling is a non-random technique based on the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities they possess, which allows information rich cases to be identified and selected for the most proper utilisation of available resources (Garcia-Aviles 2021) <sup>[14]</sup>. In addition to knowledge and experience, other selection criteria include availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate and reflective manner (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim 2016) <sup>[10]</sup>.

News organisations which were selected for the interviews include: Zimpapers (*The Herald, H-Metro, The Chronicle, B-Metro, Star FM, CapitalTalk, Nyami Nyami, Diamond*), *News Day, YAFM, Classic 263, Central Radio, 263Chat, AB Communications, and News Hawks*.

The interview guide covered the following issues among others: processes implemented during telework, internal coordination, adaptation to the virtual newsroom, evolution of journalistic practices, the role of management, changes in processes of news gathering, distribution, consumption, launching of new products or services, relationships with colleagues, the consequences of COVID-19 for their organisations.

The in-depth interviews were conducted between September and November 2021. Respondents were granted anonymity and assured that no information provided and published would be traced back to them.

Although lockdown restrictions were lifted, some news organisations were not comfortable with physical face-to-face interviews so we largely used technology based interviews. Majority of interviewees sent text responses via WhatsApp, with a few who sent WhatsApp audios which we later transcribed. Regarding Zoom, we agreed on specific days and times convenient to our respondents. We ensured to have stable electricity and reliable Internet connection. We used voice recorders and later transcribed data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with CEOs, Managing Editors, Editors and Station Managers only. It is important to note that the WHO regulations and protocols like sanitising, proper wearing of masks and social distancing were strictly observed. The interviewees allowed us to record the interviews which we later transcribed.

This study employed thematic analysis. In the next section, we present findings, analysis and discussion.

## 4. Findings, analysis and discussion

### 4.1 Onset of COVID-19 pandemic 2020: Newsroom and journalists' capacitation

On the onset of the pandemic, there were so many challenges media organisations had to grapple with; one of them was the issue of operation. According to Zimpapers, the issue of streamlining to ensure that everyone was incorporated was critical. Initially, they did not have resources to ensure that everyone would have to be working from home and how they would do it. However, one of the things news organisations managed to do was to ensure that reporters were equipped with smartphones, iPads and laptops. News houses had to keep these digital gadgets connected to network by always providing adequate data to journalists. It is important to point out that data is very expensive in Zimbabwe from all service providers such as Econet, Telecel and NetOne who increase tariffs every month.

*We have tried to capacitate our people; in the absence of capacitation there isn't much that you can do even if you buy gadgets for journalists. So we're rolling out a robust training program in website management and online video editing to ensure that in the event that you are saying 75 percent of newsroom should work from home, we should not have problems in reporters trying to send us stories...* (Interview with Zimpapers Managing Editor).

What came out clearly is that all news organisations bought digital gadgets for their employees. Some reporters downloaded appropriate software so that they could work from home to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. It is important to note that some of the downloaded software was for fact checking purposes.

#### A Station Manager at *Capital* had this to say

*And we also realised that COVID-19 might be with us in the unforeseeable future. We are equipping our people to deal with such challenges in their own spaces. We believe that for us to be able to operate effectively, we need healthy workers who are coming from a healthy environment.*

#### The *Chronicle* editor noted

*Since the advent of the pandemic, the newsrooms had to cut on the workforce to reduce congestion in the newsrooms. The first strategy was to introduce morning, afternoon and late duty where a number of reporters would report from 8.00 am to 1 pm then 2 pm to 5 pm while the last group came in at 5 pm until 10 pm.*

This routine was mainly for the hard lockdown and it was experienced by all media houses especially print and radio.

#### As for *Star FM*

*At the onset of the first case of COVID-19 victim, Zororo Makamba, there was palpable fear of the unknown. During that time there was not enough information or knowledge about the virus so there was rush to clear the newsrooms. Reporters were now required to work from home whilst only a few were at the station. The news readers were required to be at the station and the company decided to pick all staff members required to be at the station.*

Experience so far shows that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to present a heavy psychological burden on those who are involved at the frontlines. Journalists are among those who are heavily affected, especially when they have to report stories from affected zones and localities, or even

isolated centres and health facilities where COVID-19 patients are being treated. In this regard, media institutions should plan for periods of trauma briefings and socio-psycho support if teams are working on traumatic content, or in the unfortunate case of colleagues being infected with the coronavirus or even loss of a colleague(s) (Gender & Media Connect n.d).

Journalists and other essential media workers – including drivers, makeup artists, administrators, engineers, producers and cleaners - all have come under increased risk. It is worth noting that media institutions, along with everyone else, were not prepared for the health risks that have now become apparent as the virus has continued to spread with new variants emerging. Media institutions are being forced to adapt rather quickly to the changed circumstances by instituting measures to protect core workers from exposure to the virus while on duty and even at home. Regrettably, Zimbabwe has already lost some journalists and media workers and cannot afford to continue losing more media professionals to the pandemic.

### 4.2 Newsgathering, verification and relationships

Adapting an organisation's culture is not easily accomplished during a crisis and understanding the need for change is often not enough to convince employees to transform their routines. The findings presented in this study show that, in adapting journalistic practices to the virtual newsrooms, management tried to ensure a smooth functioning in the new setting while maintaining the status quo as much as possible. Rather than developing an entirely different approach to work in virtual newsrooms, managers built around well rooted practices, as previous studies found (Gade & Raviola 2009) <sup>[12]</sup>. At the same time, internal bonds among colleagues were reinforced and staff experienced more internal cohesion.

During hard lockdown, government restricted movement and it was not easy for journalists to gather news despite being essential services providers. One producer at *Star FM* noted:

*The news was now gathered through the use of smart phones and transmitted to a bulletin editor at the station via email or WhatsApp. Initially, the challenge was lack of adequate resources for reporters with hardware (laptops or smartphones), inadequate data and poor network. With lifting of the lockdown all reporters are now coming to work physically. All news bulletins for Diamond FM, Nyami Nyami and Capitalk were broadcast from Harare with Star FM leading the process. The station also fully utilised its provincial bureaus for stories. The upside is that news coverage was now fully national and not Harare centric. Unfortunately, this has been abandoned as the bulletins are now using Harare stories. The news is also being simulcast on the various radio stations run by Zimpapers. For programming, the presenters would rotate from each station on a particular shift. For example, Breakfast radio would be from Diamond FM (Mutare) on Monday and Tuesday, another station would do the same shift.*

Similar sentiments were echoed by *Capitalk FM* presenter: *COVID-19 pandemic was a blow to our radio station but we improvised so that work continued as usual. With regards to sources we had to look for ways to talk to our sources. We usually call for sources for news and programs. We used platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp. WhatsApp was used in two ways; WhatsApp calls for programs and interviews for*

news. Sometimes we asked our sources to send audio notes via WhatsApp. Zoom was used for video conferencing to get news from sources.

The producer further elaborated on teams, emphasising that they used teams for in-house business or meetings. They utilised Microsoft Teams to manage business during COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of verification of news, they used various tools online to verify and fact check information. Usually, the procedure is meeting sources and discuss issues with them but it was not possible during lockdown. It is difficult for highly placed sources to give news via WhatsApp platform due to issues of trust but they had agreement that information would be secure and anonymity and confidentiality were agreed on.

### **The Chronicle and B-Metro editors concurred with Capital presenter by saying**

*Newsgathering became very difficult with news sources base cut as some were either locked down or simply unavailable on mobile phones. The only way of gathering news was telephone interview as well as following discussions on social media groups. Verification of facts was done through specific authorities. However, after lifting lockdown restrictions, newsrooms have been slowly adapting to the new normal but news consumers, especially those buying hard copies are becoming very few thereby affecting business. This shows that hard copy newspaper consumption patterns are greatly changing for the worse as people now read online newspapers. Most reporters worked as teams; switching between working from home and from station every two weeks or so, and they communicated with each other via Google Hangouts. The rest of staff worked from home and went about their usual reporting duties with added precautions, such as frequent hand washing, avoiding crowds and proper wearing of masks as much as possible when at work. We have become closer calling each other often and having more time to talk in detail about each other.*

The interviews showed that a positive work relationship required trust, respect, self-awareness and open communication. It allowed reporters to get to know each other better on personal basis and improved their team building. Working at home combined the profession with private life, drawing a fuzzy line that often does not know where one begins and another ends (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro - Garcés 2020) [3].

In the virtual newsroom, internal bonds among colleagues flourished. The interviews highlighted that online networking made reporters feel closer to their colleagues, enabling them to connect with each other's homes and develop strong emotional ties. Several executives acknowledged that as a result of this crisis, the relationship with the audience has improved for the better. As audiences demanded information about how the pandemic was affecting their lives, journalists were aware of their needs and tried to provide solutions to their problems.

### **One editor pointed out**

*More often than ever, we have put ourselves at the service of the reader. We listened to audiences much more closely and produced content designed to respond to what people really needed.*

In terms of organisational learning; a culture was fostered in

some newsrooms as executives faced new situations. They said that some of their routines changed to make them more efficient showing that there was creativity. They learned something new every day. Other editors expressed similar views about the need to acquire the skills to master technologies and coordinate staff. Fostering knowledge transfer among co-workers through meetings and sharing internal documents was also essential (Argote *et al* 2011) [2]. Executives developed cohesiveness and a good team atmosphere. A symbolic motivation was embodied in the idea of a common goal that united professionals beyond physical and virtual settings. Another strategy besides intrinsic motivation was creating synergies. A synergy refers to cooperation between different sections, departments and other areas of the company. Collaboration ranged from information sharing between journalists and desks, reporters producing or repackaging stories for diverse platforms, content cross promotion, team alliances development among others (Perreault & Perreault 2021) [25]. Journalists from sections that had little or no work due to the pandemic, such as sports or culture, supported other sections on COVID-19 related coverage and helped social media departments to generate content (Dirani *et al.* 2020) [21].

The other critical issue concerned emotional support. The emotional toll during the pandemic was high. As journalists spent a lot of time locked up at home, they faced a strong psychological impact. One producer at *Star FM* noted:

*More could have been done in offering psychological support. A lot of reporters went through trauma in working with an unseen adversary especially when we lost colleagues in other stations such as ZBC and YAFM after the passing on of Janet Munyaka and Tawanda Gudyanga respectively. Management working from home could have been more sensitive in dealing with traumatised frontline workers.*

Similar sentiments were expressed by *Classic 263* presenters who had worked with Tawanda Gudyanga before he moved to *YAFM* in Zvishavane.

*When you are covering COVID-19 the whole day, you don't stop to think about how it affects you. To alleviate this problem, the editorial staff set up a round of comments in which we shared how we felt. Management focused on the human factors: accompanying staff and being interested in their daily concerns. A wide range of activities for collaboration such as virtual teams stand ups, formal meetings, and after work virtual chats in various communication platforms afforded opportunities for managers and peers to regularly check on team members' well-being and facilitate team building.*

In a research commentary released in the early days of the pandemic, Lewis (2020) [22] argued that the COVID-19 did not only solely add new issues for journalists to work through but also compounded existing issues and enlarged "the blind spots in our work" (p. 683). In particular, Lewis (2020) [22] explained, "Journalism research... tends to underplay some aspects of their lived experiences. Consider the complexity of covering crisis and trauma while experiencing the same yourself" (p. 685). In Zimbabwe, this sentiment was shared by all journalists especially when there was so much spike in the country where top political figures succumbed to 'COVID-19 related complications.'

In line with recent research, Konow-Lund, Hagvar and Olsson (2019) [21] argue that news work routines demanded coordination among a diverse set of journalists and

technologists to accomplish organisational goals; multidisciplinary teams worked together to respond to the demands during a crisis.

COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of media transformation, disrupting income sources and alerting publishers to abandon traditional mindsets (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund 2020) <sup>[23]</sup>. One of the challenges in the post COVID-19 newsroom will be how managers treat their staff. The evidence suggests that COVID-19 related distress affected employees' psychological and physical well-being and that many executives cared about their employees and committed to their welfare; thereby managing mental health issues.

#### **4.3 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Innovation in news organisations**

Our interviews revealed that media organisations were proactive in ensuring that their employees were safe during the course of their duties both at station and field. One producer said:

*The company provided medication kit and PPE was adequate.*

Zimpapers Managing Editor explained in detail about measures the organisation put in place to protect workers:

*We have invested a lot in protective clothing for our reporters whom we call frontline workers, those who go and interview government officials, those who are on the ground. So we make sure that in terms of protective clothing, they are adequately covered; sanitisers, masks and sometimes overalls and the goggles when we feel that the environment is unsafe. In addition to that, we test our employees. Once every two weeks everybody is exposed to the PCR testing however uncomfortable it might be.*

She further pointed out that since reporters mix with a lot of people it is incumbent upon Zimpapers to ensure that they are safe. This means that news organisations take all necessary measures that are needed for employees' safety. During hard lockdown, newsrooms minimised journalists going out but were selective on the nature of assignments that they sent out reporters. Where possible they encouraged people to use Zoom, Skype meetings and phone calls so that they would minimise physical interaction. Online editorial and other meetings - using platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangouts, Jitsi, and Microsoft Teams, among others - have also been introduced. These guidelines are meant to support the safety of journalists working in Zimbabwe, while reporting on COVID-19 (Gender & Media Connect n.d).

#### **Zimpapers Managing Editor further added**

*But we believe that with the robust initiatives that we took, that includes vaccination, the use of regular medication or supplements, we still feel we are protective but we cannot really say we are safe because of the different variants that are coming but we believe we have done all that is necessary so that our staff remain safe. We are also giving our workforce supplements to ensure that once in a while they are not infected with COVID-19. We are encouraging everyone to be vaccinated and our policy here is that we are looking forward to achieving a 100 percent vaccination.*

Journalists in Zimbabwe had no previous experience in working under serious crises like COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges of reporting in a pandemic centered on providing adequate coverage for the community despite a

lack of experience of reporting in a crisis. Zimpapers Managing Editor revealed that as an organisation, they also follow various guidelines from local and international organisations such as Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ safety advisory: Covering the coronavirus pandemic, 2020; Internews, Your Safety as a Journalist Reporting COVID-19, 2020; A Culture of Safety Alliance (ACOS Alliance), COVID-19: News organisations safety protocols – Working with freelancers, 2020; among others.

*The biggest thing I have learned from covering the pandemic is just how important it is to be versatile as a reporter... We've seen virtually every reporter covering stories they normally wouldn't if it wasn't for the pandemic. I tend to write a lot of feature and enterprise stories at News Day, and while I still do that, I've stepped into breaking news, healthcare and education more than I normally would (News Day reporter).*

This reinforces the importance of being versatile in journalism. Adaptation also spilled into newsrooms where journalists began to cover COVID-19 in all aspects of their work, as every story became a COVID-19 story.

Normally, when journalists are operating at the station they get technical assistance from engineers but during COVID-19 pandemic when reporters were working remotely from home they learned how to be all round. A reporter can now be self-reliant on any technical related issue without calling an engineer. Journalists have learned so many digital skills like using different software for verification and fact checking on news.

#### **4.4 Personal Safety and Security**

It is important for journalists and all media workers to have basic kits and use equipment properly to ensure their safety and that of others. The basics of physical distancing, regular washing of hands, proper masking and use of such other equipment such as sanitisers is critical. Equipment such as overalls are critical for those journalists assigned to high risk places such as hospitals and clinics. This includes if journalists and other media workers are to use public transport, there is increased risk in public and therefore the need to try and maintain physical distancing as far as practically possible, while also properly wearing of masks and using hand sanitisers. If visiting a facility or location, journalists should enquire about the hygiene measures put in place by the local authorities, and whether special PPE is required (IREX, *Covering COVID-19: Handbook for journalists*, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>.

#### **4.5 Working in Newsrooms and Studios**

According to Zimpapers Managing Editor, ordinarily, journalists and other media workers spend huge amounts of time in the newsrooms and studios. News organisations therefore encourage staff to work from home as much as possible; those in newsrooms ensure that work space is properly planned so that they do not face each other. Back to back or side to side sitting arrangements are recommended with at least 1.5 metres physical distance while controlling the number of people in the newsroom through implementing shifts. From interviews conducted, most newsrooms stagger tea and lunch breaks in order to minimise physical contacts. Again, several measures have been taken to ensure safety of workers in studios by working with a reduced crew. All equipment, for example, microphones, faders, keyboards, and touch screens, among

others, are constantly wiped down before and after use with alcohol-based sanitisers (Gender & Media Connect n.d).

#### 4.6 Embracing digital media technologies in newsrooms

Digital only outlets such as *263Chat* and *NewsHawks* appeared better prepared for remote work because of previous experiences unlike print outlets. Arguably, news organisations with a print background had already developed a solid digital focus because most of their staff were becoming accustomed to using online technologies. As discussed earlier, most newsrooms in Zimbabwe used smart phones, video conferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Google Hangouts among others as well as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter and Instagram for various purposes. All radio stations such as *Classic 263*, *Star FM*, *Capitalk*, *Nyami Nyami*, *Diamond* and *YAFM* utilised WhatsApp for broadcasting as confirmed by respondents.

After the emergency of the pandemic in Zimbabwe, a raft of restrictive measures was taken by government as a way to curbing the spread of the virus. This saw more Zimbabweans consuming online information especially the younger and most active population. Journalists and the public faced internet challenges due to power outages and infrastructural impediments. Many people are no longer passive consumers of news but are actively producing their own hence the increase in inaccurate, and fake news, disinformation and misinformation (See Trewinnard 2020) [27]. Media institutions urged journalists to attend workshops organised by media support partners on fact checking so that reporters would debunk fake news.

#### 4.7 The future of news organisations

What is coming out clearly is that COVID-19 crisis is the new normal therefore newsrooms are planning around the pandemic and other unexpected natural disasters that may occur and affect their operations.

*In dealing with the operation of the organisation, when we're doing our yearly budgets we are setting aside something for a rainy day. In the event that for a strange reason we're unable to publish something for a week or so, we should ensure that employees are catered for in terms of their salaries. We should have a running budget that sustain us and then looking into the future, we believe that there's a lot that we can do to capacitate our workforce* (Zimpapers Managing Editor).

#### They further explained plans for the organisation

*One sector we are investing in is transport. Unlike before the pandemic where we would encourage our people to use public transport, we try as much as possible to provide transport to our workforce; ferry them to work and home. All has not been bad during COVID-19 pandemic. Business wise we have grown our market share. We have had more advertisements. People now believe in the power of the media. So COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to be robust and more daring to look at opportunities. But we believe that in the near future, we should be able to harness all the expertise and experiences that we went through at the beginning of the pandemic until now in order to build a better brand* (Zimpapers Managing Editor & *The Herald* Editor).

These sentiments were shared by *263Chat*, *News Day* and *AB Communications* respondents.

Before COVID-19, the media was already in a crisis mode due to economic and political impacts. The pandemic impacted the media in a huge way, therefore information dynamics have changed in all newsrooms. The traditional business model for print newspapers, underpinned by advertising and circulation imploded during COVID-19 pandemic. This is not a new occurrence but that the pandemic worsened the situation: revenue from these two sources has been steadily declining in recent years due to the uptake of digital news and the challenging economic environment in many African countries, and Zimbabwe has not been spared (See Eisner 2020) [9].

Given the foregoing argument, print media industry should consider migrating online. There is general agreement in scholarship and practice that newspapers will sooner or later, cease to exist as we know them today. To sustain post COVID-19 journalism, African media houses should make the transition from print to online publishing. This will entail hard decisions but media owners must be practical: invest in digital resources into saving their product, capacitate staff with digital skills and embrace innovation and creativity to build a strong online presence.

Indeed, online publishing is not a panacea to journalism's challenges because newspapers that have adopted a digital strategy or moved entirely online still struggle to generate revenue. However, there is no option for survival.

#### 5. Conclusion

Adapting an organisation's culture is not easily accomplished during a crisis and understanding the need for change is often not enough to convince employees to transform their routines. In these virtual newsrooms, management used several strategies to cope with disruption, such as articulating visions and goals for the organisation, harnessing resistance to change and learning by doing. For developing collaboration, management created synergies among teams, focused on intrinsic motivation and provided emotional support to co-workers. Virtual teams increase collaboration, teamwork and transparency (Garcia-Aviles 2021) [14].

Transition from a physical newsroom to a remote one became easier because managers assumed a proactive role in the processes of knowledge sharing, cooperation and routinisation. Nevertheless, production in virtual newsrooms raised problematic issues such as work overload, strong psychological distress and job insecurity (Ornebring 2018) [24].

Our study showed that when facing the disruption generated by the pandemic, news managers usually followed a conservative approach of doing journalism as usual but management's strategies in virtual newsrooms focused on the reorganisation of journalistic work while maintaining standard practices from the physical newsrooms and overseeing power relationships. Journalists quickly incorporated teleworking, new communication protocols were created, and practices were adapted, such as setting work limits, increasing task flexibility, building team spirit and providing channels to alleviate stress. To cope with disruption, editors used several strategies related to three kinds of processes such as the negotiation of meaning, the building of employee cooperation and confidence, and the control of the dynamics of power.

There are several conversations that require further investigation and attention moving forward. The pandemic

is still raging on and journalists are still dealing with the daily challenges of the crisis especially given that there is a new variant Omicron which was declared a variant of concern by WHO.

At the time of writing our article, there is not an end in sight to the pandemic with ongoing mutations as the virus wants to survive, despite efforts on vaccination and boosting; and certainly no end in sight for the effects of the pandemic on the media industry, journalism and journalists. We hope news organisations will continue being innovative and adapting new strategies for their sustainability and ensure safety of employees.

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