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This is Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania

My name is Richard Stupart and I'm a postdoctoral fellow at the school

The COVID-19 pandemic has come to define much of the experience of 2020, and even as we've had to rely on media organizations for information, they themselves have had to cope with profound challenges to business as usual

In this episode, we talked to journalists from newsrooms in South Africa, Nigeria, and South Sudan about how the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the work of journalists and the structure of their organizations

These conversations took place over connections that were often far from ideal, so you may hear a bit more noise than normal

For Branko Brkic, editor in chief of South Africa's Daily Maverick, the scale of the story that was about to break began to become clear as early as January

This is Branko recounting how he and the Maverick newsroom realized what was coming

Funny thing, I was in, at the end of January, I was in Sundance, Sundance Festival in, uh, in Utah. And, uh, turns out that might have been one of the super spreader events. You know, a lot of people got very, very sick afterwards

And from there, believe it or not, I went to Rome

So I really ticked all the boxes

And in Rome, I saw, uh, a lot of, lot of Chinese people, you know, and everybody with masks

And like in pure panic and that done to me, on me it's like, OK, this is not, not easy

Um, to his credit, Minister of um of Health created this, uh, this, uh, group, WhatsApp group for all the, all the, all the editors and people in media, and, uh, that group was there from either late December, early January

That they wouldn't be doing these things if it wasn't, if this wasn't a, a serious problem

So that, that, that was definitely a sign that something is, uh, this is a serious thing

Because remember we had a, we had H1N1 before we had the, so we had the bird flu, we had Ebola, and you know, you can, you tell yourself, OK, we, we survived those things

If nothing happened, it's gonna be the same

But you know, this was uh um sort of, so we're talking about around 10th of February or something that type and then afterwards it was um just watching it and stuff with more and more disbelief

And then we had the the gathering, I think 6th to March

And the day before, there was the first confirmed case in KwaZulu-Natal and uh the gathering, I basically almost had a feeling over, over the last supper

It was uh that type of, yeah, this is not going to go well

Soon afterwards, you know, um

I told the guys we need to do the, the newsletter on, on, on COVID-1919 and in those days, we call it coronavirus

And uh they said, OK, let's do 11 a week

Uh, I said, no, no, we need to do it every day

And they were like quite like surprised and then We, we, uh, settled on 3 a week

So every one of those steps over um milestones, but let's put it this way, the, the moment when I, when I said to the guys in the American Cities, this is a pandemic, which is a couple of days before that was uh announced, and we need to do coronavirus, um, every day, almost every day newsletters

That was the moment when I said, OK

You know, this is not gonna go away

Even then, I thought it's gonna go away in a couple of months because I reckon, you know, every flu goes, goes away in a couple of months

I did not, um, look, nobody really knew apart from the guys in China and Trump's guys and a couple other people were in business, they knew the nature of it, you know, so it, it's kind of difficult to make decisions like that, you know, but these are the, these are the milestones

Meanwhile, in Nigeria, an initially dismissive attitude that COVID would end up just being a problem for China or at worst Europe was interrupted as reality caught up

This is Ajibola Amzat, editor at the International Center for Investigative Reporting

You know, around December last year, I think that was when the news started breaking from

From China, that's, there was one strange disease that was killing almost everybody had

And nobody would ask so much about it because I mean China so

Thousands of miles away

So it wasn't really a big story

Until we start hearing that, oh

So Disease has moved away from China to some other places outside China, and then to America and then to Europe

And still, yeah, they feel that it's still the thing of the Europe, the white people and black ones are not going to be affected after all

So let them deal with their problem

So, but lo and behold, the news that featuring that this is actually going to be in Africa

And then that's why uh most news newsroom around here started getting worried that this may actually be the end of it for all of us

And in Nigeria, for instance, when I think in February, February, in February or March when the first uh case hit Lagos, that was when everybody woke up to the root sharply

In South Sudan, a similar belief that the country would be an exception was shattered as cases multiplied

Isaac Kenya was program manager at Top FM Community Radio station in the capital Juba, when the scale of the story started to become clear

First of all, there, there was that uh uncertainty regarding uh the disease

There are a lot of rumors, some misinformation regarding the disease

So, um, it was something that we could not really envision that it will be the way it is right now because, um, at first, Uh, it, I mean, since it started in China and then went to Europe and US, so, um, the, the information is like, OK, this is a disease that affects people in colder areas

So considering that our country here is so warm

So it means, um, probably we might not get it

So we woke up clearly uh to the reality that this is a disease that goes beyond the cold weather when, uh, Sudan confirmed, Uganda confirmed, Kenya confirmed, and then so, OK

Now if these ones can confirm, then it means it's a disease that will definitely reach us

For Isaac's newsroom, COVID meant a number of immediate challenges to the practical work of news gathering and some low-tech solutions

Journalists were asking a lot of questions now how do I do interviews? How do, I mean, what happens when, uh, I mean, does it mean I should not go out and conduct interviews because, because it involves coming closer to someone holding a a recorder and you know

And then the also taking into consideration the cultures we have here, um, at least you must shake somebody's hand, and if you don't shake somebody's hand, then you are not welcomed

So that culture was still there

Now how do we tackle this, it became really, really tough

We talked to some other colleagues

I had, I had some friends, we were in a certain uh Training together in Uganda and uh I, I reached out to them to ask how they are managing their, their newsroom and um they yeah, they decided to, to tell us about how they have sent some people home and they they work from home and, you know, stuff like that

But um, it became very difficult because for First of all, we, we, we were a new radio station

The radio was opened in 2018 and uh we don't have resources like other established media houses

We were so fixed

So when we decide that we are to send people home and people work from home, it will become so, so, so difficult to, to, to, to, to, to really get the stories out there

So what we devise when we devised um

Uh, uh, um, a plan where, uh, we bought, uh, uh, call credit and I would be the only one, together with the, the, the editor remaining in the, in the session

So the, the, we we only direct so no editorial meetings now, we only direct uh people from their fields to go to a certain location to come with, um, uh, stories, and then when you come with your stories, you will have to drop it. and it was so hectic, but that, that's the only way we decided to tackle them and then also put on, put on this uh the the guidelines that we were given and that's how we, we tried to at least follow the, the instructions from the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health

For Ajibola and the Center for Investigative Reporting, the newsroom quickly pivoted to being virtual

Uh, WhatsApp is a big thing

In Nigeria

We use WhatsApp for sharing some of the news of the day

If somebody is going to be assigned to a particular story, so we have WhatsApp group and uh we have different groups like that

So we have the WhatsApp group for the data people

We have the group for the social media

We have the group for the IT

And then we have the group for the newsroom

And then we have the group for the entire organization where if you want everybody to be part of a discussion, there is a, so WhatsApp, it's a very, very good, uh, uh, tool that we use to communicate

And our editorial meeting, we use uh Skype

Uh, a lot

Zoom wasn't very popular in the, uh, the earlier phase

So just later that everybody was talking about Zoom, Zoom, Zoom, Zoom

So, at that initial stage, we set up the Skype

Um, meeting and that's how we hold our editorial meeting on a weekly basis

It's just the way we used to do before, nothing that has really changed except that we're not meeting physically

In South Africa, Daily Maverick found itself unexpectedly fortunate as past decisions left them well adapted to a world of distant working

In 2014 and 2015, we didn't even have money to, to actually rent offices

So, um, instead of retrenching people, we, we retrenched our office

So, um, in those two years, we proven that they can exist without office, but, um, um, as a result, we became feral

And it was very difficult to, to punch us back into the office

So as of 2016, we had the full, we had offices in Joburg and, and, uh, and, um, Cape Town, but it was difficult to, to punch us back into, push us into, back into it

I still to this day, I'm struggling to go to the office and spend the whole day in the office

And um so then what happened is as COVID arrived, we just went our old ways that uh we got used to it, you know, what was actually incredible was the explosion of, uh, of, um, WhatsApp and Zoom and, and hangout

So we just, you know, at, at a, at a, at a, literally at the strike of a, of a heartbeat we managed to Uh, reorganize everything and just uh continue doing things without being present in each other's presence

Funnily enough is that at that we worked actually much harder than normal because the situation was so, so dire and the country needed to know more than anything else

So we ended up really working hard

In all three countries, the challenges of adapting newsroom practices to the realities of COVID were accompanied with exceptional audience growth as people turned to news media to help them navigate what was happening

This is Ajabala

The traffic for our websites really went up during the COVID period

We had more readers during the COVID uh period

And the question we're asking ourselves that where are these people coming from? Where were they before and all that

In South Africa, Branco described a similar picture

We, we did, we did drop a bit

We are now, we were 4.5 million, we are now on 3.5 million

So, so yeah, it's, it's stable there

So which is basically, we jumped, uh, 80% since, since, uh, February instead of 120%. But we, we're still very in a very good spot

Meanwhile, for Top FM in Juba, a growth in audience numbers also led to increased practical engagement with the radio station

One clear shift in audience behavior was increased engagement uh through phone calls and SMSs uh when the, the, the disease was announced

That's mainly because they want to get the new directives on how to stay safe and um what the disease is all about because uh we, uh, almost everyone is grim about it

We don't know what it does, how it affects people, and so everyone, I mean, many people, uh. really wanted to get the directives and then we were at the forefront together with some other media houses, so they were looking towards towards getting those directives and um so they were also voicing their concerns and also voicing their frustrations on the way the government is handling them

So yeah, there was an increased audience participation in after the announcing of the disease within the country

In all three countries, the economic effects of the pandemic have been strongly felt

News organizations, like many other enterprises, have struggled to stay open in the face of revenues drying up

Here's Branco describing the extent of the problem for media companies as it happened in South Africa

Yeah, look, I mean, you've got your, your fixed costs and uh if you commercial, commercial, fully commercial operation, if you commercial, you know, taps run dry, just like what do you do, you know, so, um

Most of them had to, had to cut their costs tremendously

Some of them had to close down, close down institutions, close down titles

It's a, it's a, it's, it's a, it's a bloodbath

We lost more than 800 jobs out of 5000 in the media in South Africa in, uh, in the last 6 months, which is It is terrifying number, which is Really something that uh I, I hope that the, the industry survives

I'm not sure it will, honestly

So again, the, the bigger you are, the bigger your, your, your fixed costs, the more dependent you were on, on um physical distribution

In bigger trouble er and it's, uh, you know, it's not about, it does not show that that somebody was a bad business person whatever else because pandemic is above our pay rate

It's uh Some something that's, you know, we, we use

You may plan for it, but you never know what's gonna happen

It's, it's not that these people are good business people and they were bad

It's just to be, we were lucky, of course, so relatively low

And we had some, we had some, we had some, um, something stashed away on accounts and uh we had the space to, to, to, to be imaginative because, you know, we didn't have to, uh, retrench anybody

We didn't have to worry about those things, you know, when you're the executive and you need, and you're told that you need to cut 20% of your, of your, of your costs

It just, you know, it's very difficult to, to go into publishing and think about publishing and you actually have to ruin some people's lives

So it's, it's really, it's really difficult to, to, to maintain motivation and to maintain commitment

And, and to be honest, to stay sane in, in the, in, in, in a, in a such a horrifying moment

In South Sudan, the effects on Top FM's operations have been no less severe

We were 19 staff at that point before the, the, the, the, the coronavirus began, but uh when it was announced that companies even cut their advertising and business was not even coming into the radio station, so there was a lot of downsizing that happened from 19, we were reduced to 6 staff only working for the radio

That's that, that, that shows the toll economically that the radio faced

In Nigeria, similar dynamics have been at play for commercial news operations

For those relying on grant funding or other non-commercial sources of revenue, the economic effects of COVID have landed somewhat more softly for now, though with effects on the kinds of reporting being focused on

So I'm aware that uh about 3

Of 4 newsroom in Nigeria now have either

You know, cut down the salary, and some have had some of their staff to go and I'm talking about big newsrooms

So, in our newsroom, our newsroom is not as big as those ones

So we are not asking anyone to go yet

And uh that is also because the funding that We have

Uh, was able to keep us working even to now

And I think we're a little bit more creative in our own way by setting up, uh, uh, different, uh, units, a fact checking units

So the fact checking units that we set up, uh, also allowed us to be able to access some funding from, uh, Some international organization like uh I think uh IWP also

So that money helps us to also be able to continue doing uh our fact checking

Journalists have found themselves under increasing personal and professional pressure as they navigate increased workloads on top of the anxieties of everyday life

This is Ajibola on Life in the Newsroom

I will speak for myself now and some of the reporters in my newsroom

Uh, one would think that, OK, because uh the COVID has made everybody to stay at home, so we have less work to do

But I tell you that was not the case

Actually in my own case, I, in fact, I could tell you that that was the most challenging period that I had this year cause stories were, we're still producing stories

Harry Potter were still producing stories like I said, because of different uh tools that we're using to get uh information

So we're still producing stories and as we're sending in stories, I need to The, you know, going after, I mean, going by every single story

So there was no even time and for my work

I mean, I wake up in the middle of the night and I started waking, I mean, waiting for me

So it's was just like we're just like walking down the clock

So being at home uh did not really stop people from walking

And now when you now have that to the, the fear of unknown, the fear about so what's going to happen

Are we still going to be able to, what if this pandemic extends beyond normal? Are we still going to be able to earn our salary? Are we still going to be able to access the normal life? Are we still going to be able to do things the way we do it and all those was the pressure of work that you're doing because information was coming and we're processing those information

So it was too much

Uh, for many of us in the new

So by the time we finally Zoom

Uh, and well, people were asking for leave

People want to be, can we just have this so that we can now go and rest because being at home did not mean resting for any of us

In South Sudan, the dynamics have been similar with many journalists now being driven out of the profession entirely in order to make ends meet

Honestly, many, um, I mean, most of the journalists really were affected by the, the, the, the changes, you know, they're used to a trend where trend where at least, um, you know, you can get your stories and now you

Newsrooms are also very strict

They want you to get a, I mean, at least a story or two stories other than the media houses 4

So it becomes very difficult, um, going out and at that time, it, it really affected most where people have to do more than uh more than the usual to, to get, uh, they have to put more than usual efforts to, to get stories and that kind of um

Give them that physical fatigue that um uh well, that burn out get burnouts and it really affected them in that way

But that is not the only thing, the economical aspect of it, because most, most journalists were laid off because of this in a way of downsizing

And, uh, they, and yet there are no jobs of many organizations closed, so it, it became very, very difficult for journalists to, to survive

So I uh I was passing around

Uh, the, the, the, the city, uh, just some 3 weeks ago, I found, uh, 11 of the journalists that I knew, prominent journalists riding, uh, you know, this, uh, border borders, borders are these motorcycles that used to carry people, you know, for money

So those are the ones who have those access, but there are others who could sell things on by the roadside or, you know, it becomes difficult

So that kind of have a, a serious effect on

Uh, it had a serious effect on the journalists and still have a, has a serious effect on the journalists, uh, economically, that is it

And then physically they get they are worn out because you have to do more than enough, more than more than what you used to do

Compounding these stresses on journalists even further is a growing concern about how much longer newsrooms can continue operating in such attenuated ways

Look, we don't know how long this is gonna last

The massive issues here is that how is this Affect mental health of journalists

Um, we, we have, um, we have somebody who is, um, on the standby and has been, um, incredibly helpful with several of our journalists who's providing help, you know, men, um, mental and emotional health, um, psychiatrist is a really good one

And, um, But that was a couple of months

If this thing, if this thing goes longer

I don't know if somebody, if people are gonna start cracking up

So it's not necessary question, but this is almost like a warning

We need people to understand that we are probably At the 50% or at the half right now at the midpoint

And it's going to take a long, long time to, and it's gonna take a lot of energy to survive this

So that, that element of mental Endurance, it's something that interests me a lot

Um, and I really hope that, um, it works out because the people need to understand, you know, people

I don't know if you seen that Czech Republic, they had a 45,000 cases yesterday

So they go down, you know, like a total, total lockdown

Why? Because they were incredibly good in the beginning and they had enough lockdown, but it, it was good, It was great. And then they dropped, dropped the, the, the lockdown and, and they went back like it, it never existed

And, uh, so can you imagine now, after 67 months of this, you go back into lockdown

So can you imagine the mental toll on people? In it, in a fixed, so it's just, I don't know how we, I don't know how the, the population and journalists, everybody is gonna survive and especially if they start losing their jobs and not having enough, enough food on the tables

This episode was recorded and edited by Richard Stewart

Barbie Zelizer is the director of the Center for Media at Risk

Learn more at www.ASCmediaisk.org.