

POLICY
BRIEF
AUGUST 2020

Impact of
COVID-19
on the
media

FREE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Free Press Unlimited and local partner organisations continuously monitor and research the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the independent media sector in countries of operation. From our analysis we see that the lockdowns and the economic recession impact media in many ways. First of all, the economic conditions of independent journalism deteriorate due to a global decline in revenue from advertisement. The pandemic has deeply affected the marketing budgets of companies and other advertising parties. Furthermore, independent media houses worldwide are suffering from a decline in sales of paper newspapers and magazines, forcing many outlets to make the transition to digital products and find new revenue streams, which takes time and money.

As a result we see a massive layoff of journalists and the disappearance of independent media houses that simply cannot sustain their operations any longer. Some of these independent media outlets are taken over by commercial companies or political actors, and lose their function as watchdog. As the global health crisis is expected to have a long-lasting impact on the global economy, these negative trends are expected to continue for a long time.

On top of the economic hardship that independent media houses face, many journalists are forced to work from home, which makes them less able to do investigations and produce reliable news. Journalists that do go out to interview people are often stigmatized for spreading COVID-19. Journalists that aim to verify COVID-19 statistics, health messages and policy measures face obstruction by governments. Content production and fact-checking is also constrained by a decrease in press freedom and access to information, related to emergency measures by governments.

At the same time, there is a surge of public interest in reliable digital media content and radio broadcasts since the start of the pandemic. Media outlets need support to translate this opportunity into financial stability, by making the transition to digital content and monetizing the increase in audience. Even though emergency funds for journalists are available, this requires a longer-term coaching approach to develop resilient business models, combined with donor funds to survive the transition period.

Next to a focus on resilience, more advocacy efforts are needed at national level to prevent the marginalization of the (independent) press and to defend media pluralism. Only by combining these strategies media can hold governments accountable for implementing the right measures and the spread of misinformation around the pandemic can be addressed.

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INTRODUCTION

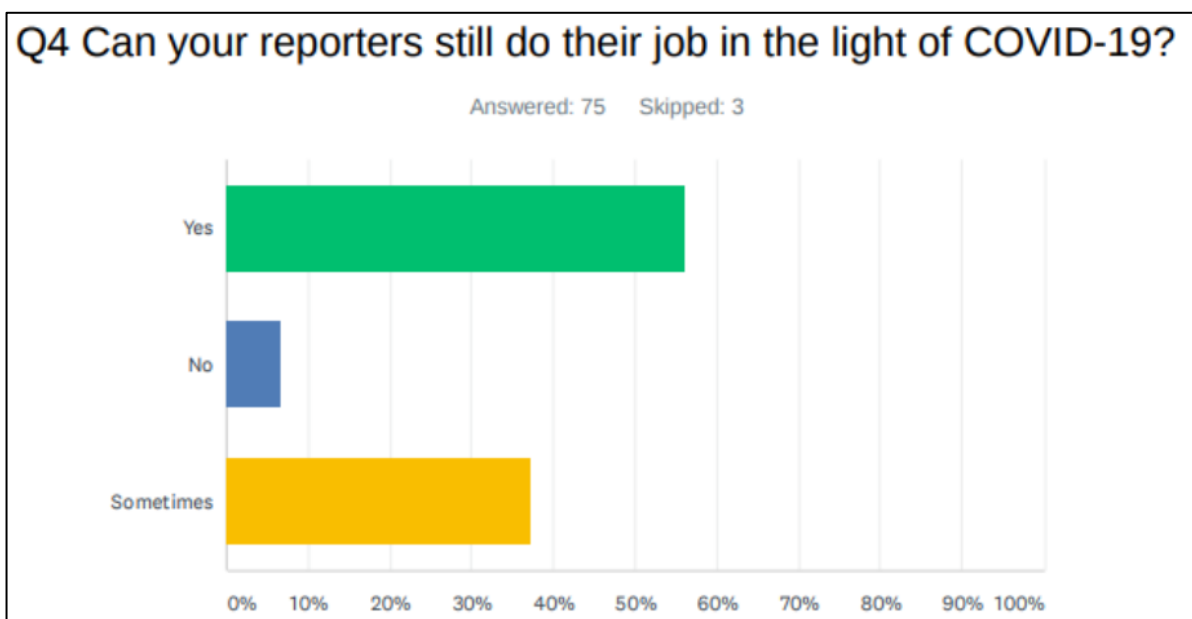
This policy brief summarizes ongoing background research by Free Press Unlimited and partners in follow-up of the letter submitted on 20th of August 2020. The research aims to answer the question:

What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-and medium scale independent media outlets in fragile contexts?

The research builds on two earlier research initiatives of Free Press Unlimited. The first research¹ (interviews with 92 media outlets) included an analysis into the factors that influence business models and revenue streams of these media outlets. We found that both economic factors as well as press freedom indicators influence the ability to create revenue. Another conclusion was that income diversification and generation of audience revenue take many years, which makes especially young media outlets (<5 years) very vulnerable to external threats and stresses.

The second research was a survey by FPU among partner organisations in the beginning of March 2020, which showed that many reporters already experienced problems to continue their work (see graph below).

In August 2020 Free Press Unlimited did a follow-up desk survey in combination with interviews with media partners in most countries. Our findings are summarized in the regional chapters below. We also developed *impact maps* that are included the Annex on page 12.



¹ Revenue Models of Independent Media in Fragile Contexts (Free Press Unlimited, 2020).

AFRICA & MENA

A survey by the Federation of Africa Journalists² (FAJ) among Press Unions around March 2020 showed the following: “A broad range of large and medium-sized publishers and news outlets started implementing cost-saving plans that consist of both paid and unpaid leave for significant numbers of staff and reduced salaries for others. Nearly 100% of respondents described this onslaught on jobs in the most graphic terms. There is one country only, Djibouti, that is fully unaffected “Media are all state-owned. As a result, there have been no job cuts or pay cuts.” (SPAD, Djibouti) Everywhere else the massive rounds of layoffs went beyond personal and institutional tragedy to become the biggest downturn in the history of African journalism.” (FAJ 2020)

In **Somalia**, FPU’s partner SOLJA reports that media in Somalia and Somaliland have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Journalists have faced job losses at a major scale. Existing media houses have failed to carry out their day-to-day work due to the restrictions and their inability to implement work-from-home policies. Fear of COVID-19 also lead people to decline interviews. Media increasingly report on the politics of the crisis, rather than on the effects of COVID-19 on the population. FPU’s partners in Somaliland reported the closure of media agencies, including two televisions and two newspapers during the last 6 months after failing to continue their operation due to poor funding and economic down-turn. They also reported that there were three COVID-19 cases among journalists, which have caused further reinforced the stigma against media.

In **Nigeria**, all media organizations have been affected by the pandemic according to FPU’s partners. Even major media organizations like the Daily Trust newspapers have let go of almost 200 staff and cut down the salaries of others.

In **Uganda**, the Africa Freedom of Information Centre reports that the Vision Group (who dominates the newspaper market in Uganda with ten publications), initiated salary cuts of 40 to 60%, which significantly affected individuals especially those who had loans with banks. A woman journalist working with the Vision Group in Mbarara committed suicide a few weeks after the cuts were announced. The Vision Group closed regional papers which used to publish in local languages: Orumuri, Etop, Rupiny and The Kampala Sun. The majority of Ugandans especially rural dwellers and women had these as their sources of information for development but also for health and education programmes including COVID-19 related. The Nation Media Group (The Daily Monitor, NTV and KFM) there was both laying off of staff as well as cuts. The Observer was not able to publish anything in the week following the announcement of the lockdown. They later reopened but the size of the paper is small and very few copies are currently published.

In **Iraq**, FPU’s partner KirkukNow found that several newspapers were forced to shut down. No number was given and the reasons for the shut-down remain unclear. In the northern Kurdish region, some stopped publishing because they could not reach the audience due to restrictions. Other reports indicate that media audience has increased. Al Menasa, an independent media outlet in Iraq, experienced a 25% growth in audience, and Daraj, a pan-Arab digital platform providing in-depth reporting and analysis, experienced a 50% increase in audience.³

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https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/E_pub_AFRICAN_JOURNALISM_IN_THE_EYE_OF_THE_PANDEMIC_STORM_BOOKLET.pdf

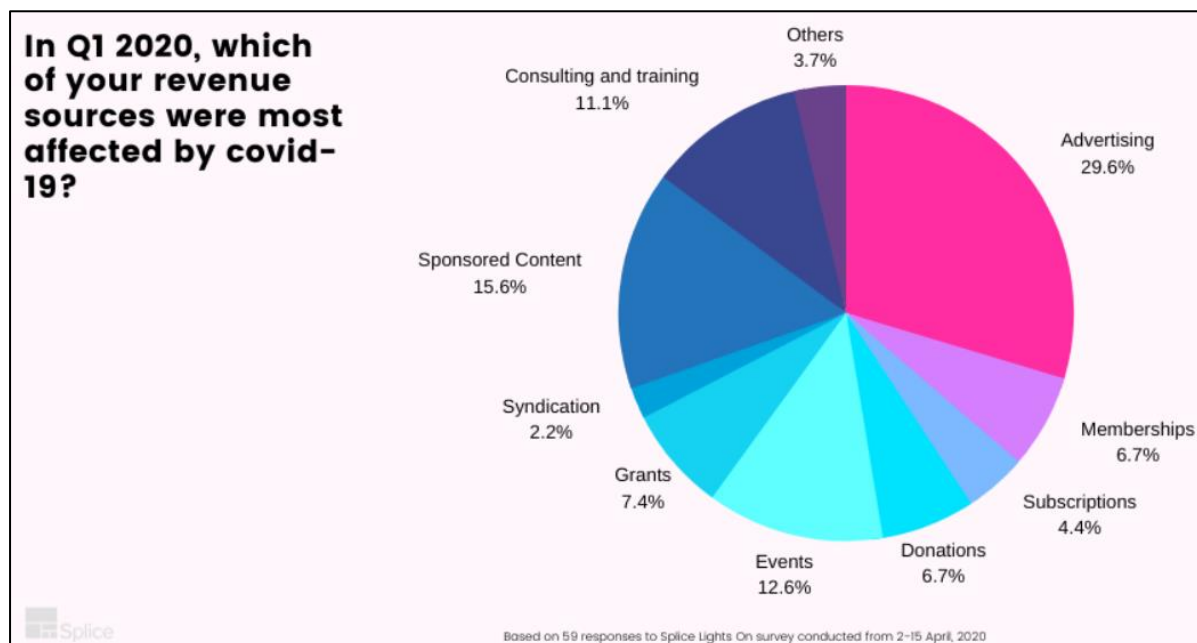
³ <https://www.mediasupport.org/covid19/>

In **Syria**, FPU's partner the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM) reports that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their members (independent Syrian media outlets) has been limited, because most of their employees work mainly from home, as most of these outlets are not registered. Registered outlets have asked their employees to work from home in order to protect them. The main reason for the closure of some outlets is the lack of funding. For ECSM members, during the past two months one outlet was closed due to lack of funding.

In **South Sudan**, the main financial uncertainties for the few independent media in South Sudan is related to the potential negative impact of COVID-19 on funding from the Global North. Internews published an interview with Eye Radio⁴ in Juba to explain the other challenges that journalists are facing: Aside from having to deal with issues during the COVID-19 pandemic such as lack of access to sources and poor Internet service when working from home, South Sudanese journalists are also experiencing harassment and stigma as they attempt to provide information about the virus to their communities.

ASIA

A survey by Splice⁵ among media outlets (59 respondents) in April 2020 mentions that: "Respondents say their businesses rely heavily on advertising and sponsored content, which have been severely affected by COVID-19 (see graph below). A weak revenue position affects their ability to address their main fixed monthly costs: full-time employees, part-time staff, office space. As a result, most respondents expect to have to cut jobs in the next 6 months unless they get help on their operational cashflow and payrolls." (Splice 2020)



In **Indonesia**, research conducted by AMSI (cyber media association with 319 members) in April/May 2020 showed that online media suffered from a 25-80% decrease in revenue.

⁴ <https://internews.org/updates/stigma-lack-access-hinder-south-sudanese-journalists-reporting-covid-19>

⁵ <https://www.splicemedia.com/splice-lights-survey-cutting-jobs-in-the-next-12-months>

Only one has closed down its operations, whereas 20% cut staff salaries (mostly related to less working hours). Data from PRSSNI (national private radio association with 600+ members) shows that the situation for radio's is worse: on average a 70-90% decrease in revenue; 30% cut their staff salary and 60% cut their broadcasting hours.

In **Bangladesh**, a survey of the Bangladesh Independent Journalists Network (BIJN) in June-July revealed that at least 275 out of 456 local newspapers (60%) have shut down completely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 18 local newspapers are published only when there are funds available (e.g. from advertising). In 6 districts not a single newspaper managed to resume operations. At least 600 journalists have lost their jobs. According to the Department of Films & Publications, under the Ministry of Information, out of the govt.-enlisted 340 district/national newspapers only 86 are being published now (75% stopped operations). A significant number of the TV channels and FM/Community Radio stations are struggling (no numbers available). 3,000 media outlets applied for a license for an online news portal. So far only 34 were granted. According to a national NGO called "Our Media Our Rights" the number of corona fatalities and infections among journalists in Bangladesh is relatively high (17 died of COVID-19 so far). A survey conducted by SACMID in May among 200 journalists shows that 32% do not have personal protective equipment, 27% are using personal protective equipment at their own expenses and 76% journalists have no health insurance or risk allowance from their employers.

In **Nepal**, recent research by FPU's partner Freedom Forum showed that:

- nearly 50% of the journalists lost their job (3,000 to 4,000 journalists)
- 80-90% of local print media closed
- 20-25% of national print closed
- 25% of the radio's closed
- TVs reduced broadcast news content production by 60%

In **Myanmar**, the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) did a survey⁶ among media outlets in March-May 2020, which revealed that all but two of the 36 respondents experienced revenue declines between March and May. Half reported a fall in revenue of 75% or more, considerably higher than the 40-60% that MDIF's partners elsewhere in the world reported during the same period. Media have so far managed to survive the economic shock of COVID-19 by taking tough decisions on costs, sometimes having to cut salaries just to stay afloat. As has been experienced by media in other countries, Myanmar media have seen a marked growth in their digital audiences, as people turn to trusted news sources during this time of great uncertainty. A big question is whether media can turn this difficult situation into an opportunity by rethinking their strategies and, in doing so, building more resilient businesses that will survive in the long-term.

In **Pakistan**, FPU's partner PPF is of the opinion that the COVID-19 crisis should be seen as an accelerator of already existing negative trends, i.e. revenue coming from advertisements and from government subsidies have significantly decreased. An economic crisis is to be expected due to COVID-19, which will have direct effect on all sectors, the media as well. There is a shift from print to online: printed copies distribution of newspapers have decreased yet online readership has increased, but some parts of the country and the society lack access to the internet (mainly women and people in rural areas). Access to reliable information has become a challenge: fake-news is an issue and means for verification has become more difficult for journalists. There is a huge wave of layoffs of journalists (no statistics available yet).

⁶ <https://www.mdif.org/mmp-survey/>

CENTRAL AND SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia shared a similar approach to containing the COVID-19 epidemic, which included an early lockdown⁷ and border closures. Research by the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) and n-Ost⁸ in these 9 countries (June 2020) revealed that:

- Journalists across the region noted a surge of public interest in their work. However, this thirst for new information has not translated into a rise in financial stability for the media providing it.
- The lockdowns have caused advertising revenue to collapse.
- The lockdowns severely impacted distribution networks for newspapers and magazines. These financial losses could accelerate the collapse of an already declining print sector.
- Broadcast, online, and print media laid off large numbers of employees or cut salaries; planned projects and expansions were put on hold. Freelance journalists, on whom many newsrooms had come to depend, reported a huge drop in commissions and fees for their work.
- Various emergency laws and provisions allowed governments increased control over public information. In several cases, these enabled officials to evade scrutiny and attack journalists whose reporting challenged official statistics and the effectiveness of crisis measures.

The crisis has demonstrated that existing business models are vulnerable and funding mechanisms woefully inadequate. This potentially makes media outlets more dependent on state advertising contracts, therefore vulnerable to different forms of political pressure. (FES 2020). According to research by Reporters without Borders⁹, “the economic crisis has also accentuated the phenomena of ownership concentration and, even more, conflicts of interest, which threaten journalistic pluralism and independence. The acquisition of Central European Media Enterprises (CME) by the Czech Republic’s wealthiest billionaire has alarmed several Eastern European countries where CME controls influential TV channels.” (RSF 2020)

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group¹⁰ (BiEPAG) notes that “Government-controlled media outlets in Serbia such as Kurir and Informer are sowing panic and inflaming the situation. Spreading panic and fake news has been so widespread in Bosnia and Herzegovina that the OSCE representative on freedom of the media felt compelled to express his concern in a statement. The lack of reliable and accurate information, combined with irresponsible statements by government officials, adds to the collective stress and destroys trust in the state.”(...) “Several media outlets across the region spread claims that the population was genetically immune [to COVID-19] or promoted fake remedies.”(...) “As a result, states are failing their citizens in the protection from COVID-19. It is unlikely that external actors, including the EU, can teach the Western Balkans governments to genuinely care about their citizens, but they can make an effort to support pillars of trust, media, public health services and economy, to strengthen the states in times of crises, without resulting in outright authoritarianism.” (BiEPAG 2020)

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/05/why-has-eastern-europe-suffered-less-from-coronavirus-than-the-west>

⁸ https://www.fes-budapest.org/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/pdf-dateien/A_Lockdown_for_Independent_Media_Report_Final.pdf

⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>

¹⁰ <https://biEPAG.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf>

EASTERN EUROPE

The most obvious economic impact of COVID-19 is the decrease in advertising revenue. Media partners try to replace this by subscriptions or crowdfunding campaigns (as Ukrainian TV Hromadske did) or by asking donors' support. In addition, no more revenue can be created through the organization of offline events. Vlast.kz, the most popular business media in Kazakhstan that used to cover about a quarter of its operational revenues by events' organisation, switched to the online events in April 2020, which decreased its profit.

Another serious negative impact of the pandemic in Eastern Europe is that independent journalism is permanently under pressure. In some countries (Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) the authorities implemented legal measures, restricting freedom of the speech. Newly adopted Russian legislation increased punishment for "knowingly spreading false information" about the pandemic. In many cases this instrument is used against journalists to hide the true extent of the pandemic. In August, 2020 the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta was fined for supposed "fake news stories" about coronavirus outbreaks in Chechnya and inside the Russian Army. The human rights group Agora recorded more than 200 cases of persecution of citizens and organisations for disseminating information that differs from official press releases in three "epidemic" months.¹¹ According to a survey by Reuters Institute, many staff of media outlets faced fatigue and burnouts of their staff in the past months.¹²

Due to the pandemic people's media consumption habits have changed. All newsrooms have had to change their workflow to adapt to the new situation and be able to reduce costs. Some newspapers were already in the process of the digital transformation, but due to the lockdowns they had to accelerate this transition. Eastern European media partners integrated more interactive formats in their works, like live music concerts on Facebook live (as Euroradio in Belarus and Hromadske TV in Ukraine did) or an interview in Instagram with an epidemiologist (by Russian Nivaya Gazeta). Unfortunately, these innovations have rarely been monetized.

Citizens mistrust official information related to the pandemic, evidenced by increased traffic to independent and reliable media in March. FPU's partners saw their websites and social media traffic spike with a 50 to 100% increase in visitors. In April and May this abnormal growth stopped for most of them, but some newsrooms used this opportunity properly. For example the Georgian newsroom JamNews recorded about 40% traffic growth on its account in Facebook. JamNews used the lockdown to disseminate their content more actively to national communities on Facebook and were able to keep the increased audience.

¹¹ <https://agora.legal/articles/Doklad-Mezhdunarodnoi-Agory-%C2%ABEpidemiya-feikov-borba-s-koronavirusom-kak/30>

¹² <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/covid-19-hurting-journalists-mental-health-news-outlets-should-help-them-now>

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PRESS FREEDOM

A decline in press freedom impact the business model of independent media outlets and journalists, making it harder or even impossible to do their job and publish news and stories.

According to research by International Media Support (IMS)¹³ in June 2020 on the effects of COVID-19, the following developments are highly likely:

- Intensified media regulation by states - in particular on online disinformation and hate speech.
- Intensified content regulation by and of the big tech companies as de facto “global speech moderators” and the related increase in algorithm-driven solutions.
- Emergency measures may transform into a more permanent status quo.
- Media operations can be more frequently obstructed, and access to publicly important information impeded or denied.
- Outbreaks of hate speech may trigger violence in conflict-prone communities and undermine peacebuilding processes.

This scenario has already materialized in many countries. In Central and South-East Europe several governments issued decrees, which directly or indirectly gave officials full control over public information. These decrees impacted the right to freedom of information; some doubled the permitted response time to requests. Emergency laws put journalists at legal risk when reporting critically. Authorities took the fight against “fake news” into their own hands, empowering themselves to block sites deemed guilty of spreading it, often with little oversight. Restrictions on “scaremongering” or spreading “misleading” information were similarly elastically defined. (FES 2020)

Also in DR Congo authorities have cracked down on peaceful critics, journalists, and political party members, while using state of emergency measures imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to curb political protests.¹⁴

Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) developed a tool called Tracker19¹⁵ (see map below), which aims to evaluate the pandemic’s consequences for journalism, documenting state censorship and deliberate disinformation, and their impact on the right to reliable news and information. RSF found that the Brazilian and US president have staged ferocious verbal attacks on journalists. Reporters have been arrested in Algeria, Jordan and Zimbabwe. An Orwellian law has imposed an “information police state” in Hungary. Cambodia’s prime minister has used the Covid-19 crisis to bolster his authority. And in China, the suppression of journalism allowed the epidemic to spread in Wuhan, and then to the rest of the world. RSF is also very concerned about journalists in Turkey and Saudi Arabia who, despite the epidemic, are still detained in prisons where they are very vulnerable to the virus.¹⁶

¹³ <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/covid-19-and-the-impact-on-freedom-of-expression-access-to-information-and-freedom-of-the-media/>

¹⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/22/dr-congo-authorities-foundering-rights>

¹⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/tracker19-Coronavirus-Covid19>

¹⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-complains-un-about-coronavirus-press-freedom-violations>

Country
DRC

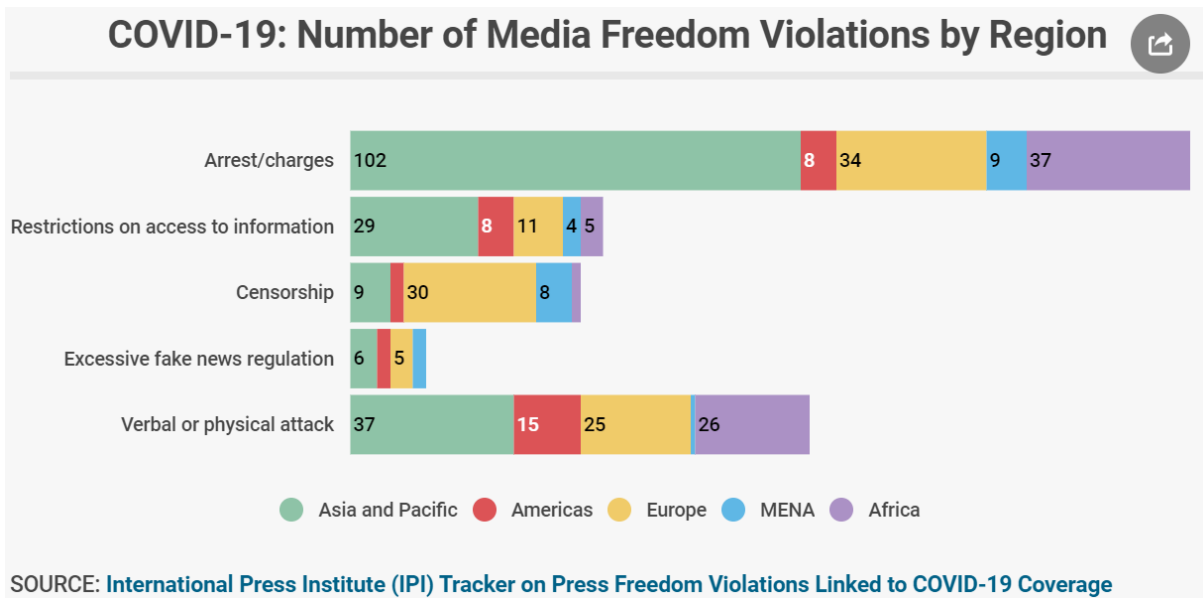
Situation
Journalists are subjected to physical attack and arbitrary detention for covering the coronavirus crisis and its impact on the population.

Read more
Congoleser reporter charged with violating Covid-19 restrictions: <https://rsf.org/en/news/drc-congoleser-reporter-charged-violating-covid-19-restrictions>

Congoleser police run down reporter covering coronavirus lockdown: <https://rsf.org/en/news/drc-congoleser-police-run-down-reporter-covering-coronavirus-lockdown>



The International Press Institute monitors press freedom violations globally and groups them in 5 categories.¹⁷ As can be seen in the figure below, most frequent are arrests and charges.



¹⁷ <https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-monitoring/>

CONCLUSIONS

Small and media-scale independent media outlets in the countries of operation of Free Press Unlimited are severely affected by the pandemic. They face a significant decrease in advertising revenue, caused by the lockdowns related to COVID-19 and the resulting economic crisis. Content production is also constrained by a decrease in press freedom and access to information, related to emergency measures by governments. We estimate that this has resulted in a reduction of 40 to 60% of media revenue and that an equivalent percentage of journalists have already lost their job. This means that the survival of independent media is under threat.

Seemingly in contradiction, there is a surge of public interest in digital media content and radio broadcasts since the start of the pandemic.¹⁸ Media outlets need support to translate this opportunity into financial stability, by making the transition to digital content and monetizing the increase in audience. This requires a longer-term coaching approach to develop resilient business models. Such a long-term approach should be combined with immediate donor funds to survive the transition period.

Next to a focus on resilience, more advocacy efforts are needed at national level to prevent the marginalization of (independent) press and to defend media pluralism. Only by combining these strategies the spread of fake news around the pandemic can be addressed and media can hold governments accountable for implementing justified and proportionate measures to protect citizens.

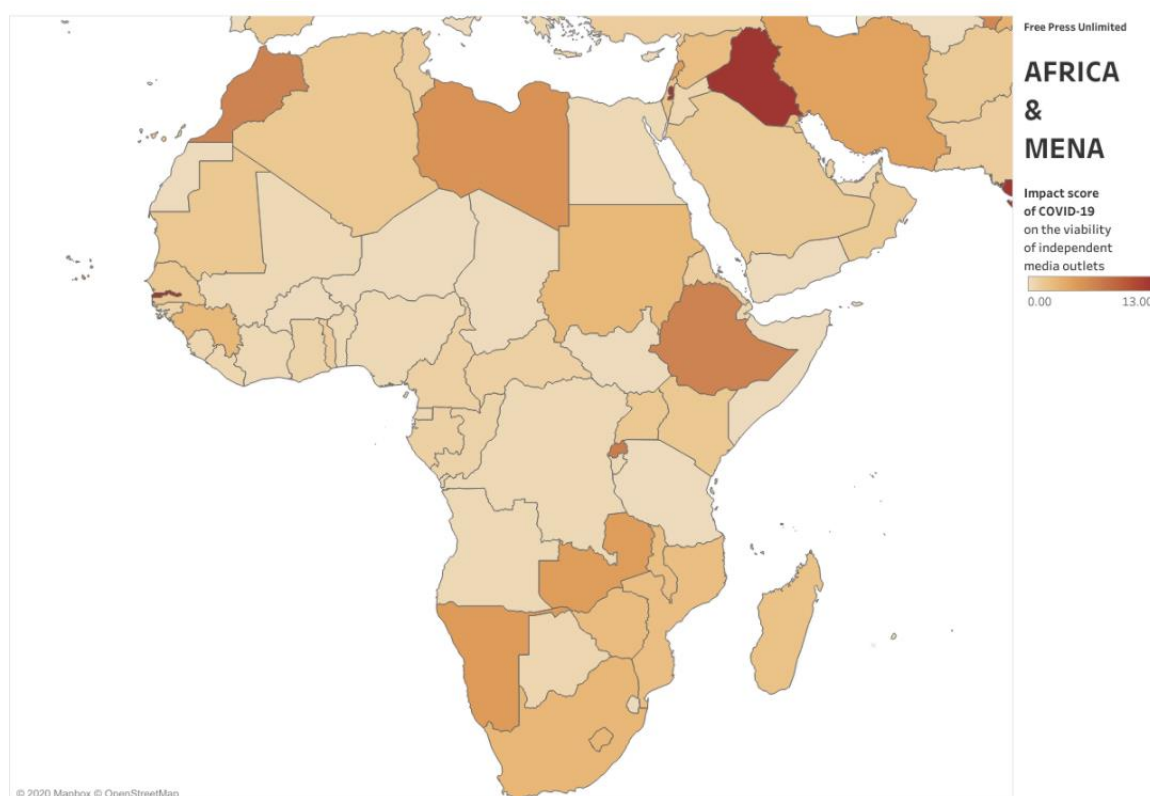
¹⁸ Open Society Foundations notes: “Readership at News Sites Is Up—but Revenue Is Down? Yes. This contradiction is illustrated by the New York Times’ first quarterly report for 2020. The paper saw an unprecedented 10 percent boost in total subscriptions and a doubling of the site’s traffic. Nevertheless, the Times’ report warned of a 55 percent slump in ad revenue for the second quarter of 2020, reflecting the impact of pandemic-related closures on the consumer businesses that drive its ad sales, as well as economic anxieties about the future. Smaller, independent outlets around the world are seeing boosted audiences, too. For example, the Jordan-based independent news site 7iber, a grantee of the Open Society Foundations, has seen an 85 percent increase in page views from mid-March to mid-April 2020. Much of this traffic trends towards articles like one the site recently produced on the science of ventilators, editors say.” (<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/how-covid-19-threatens-independent-journalism>)

ANNEX: COVID-19 IMPACT SCORE FOR THE MEDIA

To be able to identify the countries where media is likely to be most impacted by the pandemic, we developed the “COVID Impact Score”. Our research shows that media in low income countries with a problematic press freedom situation and a high incidence of COVID-19 are most affected by the pandemic. Based on these findings, we estimate the impact of COVID-19 on the media as follows for each country:

$$\text{COVID impact score} = \frac{\text{Press Freedom Score 2020} \times \text{COVID-19 incidence dd 28.8.2020} \times 10}{\text{GDP per capita 2019}}$$

The Press Freedom Score we used comes from Reporters without Borders¹⁹. The GDP per capita data comes from the Worldbank²⁰, and the COVID-19 incidence from the WHO.^{21 22} Since the resulting COVID impact scores still need to be verified by more research (interviews, internet search and expert opinions), the map below needs to be interpreted with precaution. In Africa & MENA, the highest impact scores can be seen in Iraq, The Gambia, Palestine, and Iraq. COVID-19 statistics are reported to be unreliable for certain countries like DR Congo and Nigeria.



¹⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

²⁰ <http://api.worldbank.org/v2/en/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?downloadformat=xml>

²¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/download-todays-data-geographic-distribution-covid-19-cases-worldwide>

²² We are using the ECDC 14-day notification rate of new COVID-19 cases. Comparing the epidemiological situation regarding COVID-19 between countries should not be based on this rate alone. At individual country level, this indicator may however be useful for monitoring the national situation over time.