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THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS IN GENERAL PUBLIC DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF NKANGA LOCATION AT EASTERN CAPE

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ABSTRACT

During the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic journalists had a major role to play which was to collect and distribute the correct information to the citizen and government. Journalists were at the front line during the COVID-19 outbreak, ensuring that citizens get information despite the challenges of lockdown. This paper will examine the crucial role that is played by journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research is using the qualitative research design with the purpose of gathering the understanding, opinions, attitudes, and experiences of people about the role of journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper utilised unstructured interviews for data collection in fifteen participants, through purposive sampling. It also adopted the case study design and thematic approach for data analysis. It has been exposed that, journalists are mediators between the government and citizens in terms of distributing the information. The findings indicate that media journalists were the important middlemen during the COVID-19 despite the danger of the pandemic.

Keywords: Journalists, COVID-19, information, Citizens.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Towards the end of 2019, as the COVID-19 outbreak started to wreak havoc in Wuhan, China and across the globe, this disease have posed a threat of infectious, which have brought attention to the need for vaccinations against current and developing communicable diseases in Africa and throughout the world (Wagner, 2022). Coronavirus is a combination of viruses that make family which can infect both people and animals, SARS-CoV-2 virus is the cause of COVID-19, when an infected person comes into close contact with another person, the virus is most likely to transmit between them (Mirbabaie & Ehnis, 2021). Kittl, Anger, and Hendler (2020) further state that, this virus can also spread, when tiny liquid particles are inhaled by another person through sneezing, coughing, singing, speaking or when person breathes heavily into another people's eyes, nose, and mouth.

In the past, developing vaccines has been risky, time-consuming, and expensive, process, makes the disease to stay with people for a long time (Gonzalez-Cantergiani, 2018). Due to the details of transmission of these viruses, medical experts suggested that in order to manage this pandemic, wearing masks, social distance of 1,5 metres, washing of hands for 30 seconds regularly, or use of

hand sanitizer is important, these suggestions were means of minimising the infection of this virus (Watts & Dodds, 2020). However, many countries worldwide have declared lockdown in March 2020, Dutta-Bergman (2020, p. 347) define lockdown “temporary condition imposed by governmental authorities as during the outbreak of an epidemic disease in which people are required to stay at their homes and refrain from or limit activities outside the home involving public contact”.

Journalists were one of the important social institutions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists always educate, inform, and create awareness to enlightens the public on the steps to stop the virus's spread (Seo & Younes, 2020). These are the already acknowledged normative roles they play in society. The journalists collect information about occurrences and convey it to the public (Chew & Crisafulli, 2020). These roles were essential during COVID-19 as the society was expecting to hear about this disease. “The disease, already spreading like wildfire across the globe was elevated from endemic to pandemic by the World Health Organisation” (Thompson, 2020, p. 70). Similarly, this was declared as the worldwide emergency. However, doctors, and nurses as healthcare workers were the directed workers in treating the infected people, while Journalists and media were in forefront in collecting and distributing the information about the pandemic in terms of its risks, treats and measures that are needed to avoid this virus (Felbermayr & Mahlkow, 2020). Wagner and Beie (2020) added that if prevention measures such as wearing of masks, social distancing and stay at home message were not distributed by journalists to the public, people’s lives would be at risks. Despite the risks and perils involved, journalists have put their health in danger and waste time to cover all stories about the pandemic. The importance of journalists during COVID-19 was also confirmed by the government authorities (Schapals, 2020). Media houses were outside even in the total lockdown to gather and distribute the information to the public, journalists were exempted as the essential workers such as health workers, security personnel since they ensured that society is safe during the pandemic. Journalists have provided the information to the public to ensure that informed decisions are being made and why staying at home is important (Cappella, et al., 2021).

Journalists are not different from soldiers who are in forefront of the war, by distributing the information to the public to ensure that it stays informed, regarding the risks, deaths related to the disease (Susanto, 2022). Journalists have played a crucial role, that government officials were afraid to take (Gobang & Salesman, 2020). This paper examines the role played by journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic at Unitra community radio.

LITRETURE REVIEW

Journalists serve as the people’s network's "eyes and ears." The journalist’s role is unquestionably, the journalist is a crucial component of collecting, distributing, maintaining information while preserving democracy (Brezina, et al., 2016). Boykoff (2019) affirms that journalists form part of societal organisation that encourage people to debates in public issues such as formulation, execution of polies while ensuring that human rights are protected during pandemic. Society gets a chance to criticize government policies and encourage where necessary through the investigations of journalists (Maswanganyi, 2017). Discussion forums are formed by journalists

during the interview process, which helps the public to voice out their concerns to be heard by the government and check all the assessment and activities of government. Journalists serve as the watchdogs between government and society (Barak & Chiyamwaka, 2018). The idea of journalists serving as a watchdog clarifies the function of the journalists in keeping the public informed of their continuous operations. The role of journalists stipulates that all the services offered by the government agencies need to be transparent to the society all the time (Makgoba, 2019). This prepares the way decisions need to be taken during normal times, and difficulty times such as disaster, which is informed by rules and regulations (Nwogu, 2020).

Journalists are identified as the promoter of human rights “As per chapter two of the Bill of Rights, the information should be made available to anyone who wants to access it” (Strömbäck & Jespe, 2019, p. 58). As a result, journalists function as a watchdog, informant, and educator thus journalism is crucial for promoting openness and holding public servants accountable (Anderson, et al., 2017). Journalists as watchdogs play a crucial role in observing governments’ success, failures and reporting scandals related to COVID-19. The public has a of chance of stating their concerns during the pandemic through journalists’ interventions, for government to make informed decisions to accommodate the public interests during pandemic (Williams, et al., 2017). Journalists clear the confusion during the pandemic such as conspiracy theories about COVID-19, journalists as educators, keep providing information about pandemic to the public regularly (Roosevelt & Theodore, 2016). New information to government and to the society was provided by the journalists which make journalists to be the frontline workers during pandemic. During the lockdown process people’s lives depended on televisions, radios, and newspaper reports to access the information about the virus, which is possible through the journalist’s investigation (Shearer, 2020).

The medical experts provided deeper information and understanding about pandemic, because of journalists’ interviews. During the journalists reports, people were able to understand more about the pandemic, in terms of medications, consequences and number of cases around the country, continent and worldwide (Dominick, 2021). During lockdown people depended on information that is provided by journalists. Societies have gained more understanding of concepts about the pandemic through the journalists reports and interviews with medical experts (Worldometer, 2020). (Smith, 2020) state that updates on rules and regulations of the lockdown were provided by journalists to the people during the surge of the virus. The needs, expectations and demands of the society, such as the shortage of water, sanitizer, face masks in public institutions were reported by journalists to the government. Sujoko (2021) defined journalist as a middleman between government and society.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the safety of journalists has invited the attention due to the continuous exposure political, social, economic risks in the route of sending out social responsibility (Cappelo & Rizzuto, 2021) . The world over, show the evidence that majority of the journalists are leaving the profession, and practitioners due to the absent of safety in the industry (Mas’udi & Winanti, 2021). Wibowo (2021, p. 58) indicate that “the outbreak of Covid-19 had further re-echoed such lapses and failures in social and economic policies that seek to address the

risks and threats to effective journalism practices and wellbeing of journalists in trying to keep the society informed, educated and sensitized of the problems facing the world". Kovach & Rosenstie (2020) notes that COVID-19 has claimed most people and more than the conflict that have taken place since 1945. The messages on preventive actions must be enhanced and widely broadcast to have an adequate influence on the inhabitants of infected countries (Hu, et al., 2020).

The voices of individuals who had perished and the medical professionals who were attempting to save lives might be amplified. The public draws attention when the number of fatalities is mentioned, when infections have increased, when journalists describe the lethal effects of the virus and the victims (Ferreira, 2020). Journalists experience lots of challenges, when discovering information about the pandemic some get infected, and have no health insurance, due to the lack of remuneration, but they ensured that society is well informed about the pandemic (Marhaenjati, 2021). Wibowo (2021) indicates that journalists educate, enlighten, create awareness, and inform the society about the danger of COVID-19 based on social, economic, and personal life. It provides education in society about the measures that need to be taken to avoid contracting the virus. Nurmansyah (2022) points out that journalists do not only inform the society it also interprets the information for the public.

This knowledge is given in the form of analysis, news reports and among other things (Adiprasetio & Maryani, 2020). Dwiastono (2022) confirms that journalists interpret the information in manner that public will be able to understand the event. A journalistic report is one of the main ways that people learn about COVID-19 events in society and become aware of them. Journalists provide information and news that the society is not aware of and that is significant to them, with the meaning of such event (Khan, 2021). Kovac and Rosenstiel (2019) notes that journalists are the powerful way of gathering information in any events, and enlightening, educating, informing, sensitising the society on that event. Zappulla (2020) states that, the way journalists report the events of COVID-19 it shapes the opinions and responses of the society.

Richard (2022) states that journalists have a huge responsibility of explaining into to details the events of virus in an understandable and simple language. Corroborating these assertions. Chai and Smith (2020) observe journalists provide primary framework which community members can make sense of the virus. Trumthonosses (2020, p. 885) states that journalists function as the "ears and eyes of the public in any event". McMahon (2018) posits that journalists do not only educate or inform the public, but they take major risks to gather and distribute the information on what is happening on important events around the public. Thomsons (2017, p. 100) observes that "the position of the journalists as the fourth estate of the realm, watchdog, agenda setter and conscience of society as well as court of public opinion makes the role of journalists crucial and pivotal as they provide credible and useful information for public consumption". Ghebreyesus (2018) noted that more politicians than scientists were included in the news coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, which influenced the public's perception of the virus. Politicians and the journalists also contributed to the politicization and polarization of the pandemic (Kayla, 2019).

However, journalists discuss topics that have an impact on people locally, nationally, and worldwide and contribute to nation-building (Chidiebere, et al., 2019). Media professionals are exposed to the epidemic while performing these duties. As the population of the nation was kept under lockdown to stop the spread of Covid-19, the government's efforts to stop the spread of Covid-19 were being covered by journalists and help by reporting to the public (Worlu & Ajagbe, 2020). The order to stay at home was issued to prevent the public from catching the illness and journalists always reminder the public about the order (Elving, 2020). However, Journalists remain having a duty of collecting information that enable them to convey news even while covering unusual news occurrences during the surge of the pandemic (Williams, 2021).

During the lockdown, markets, schools, churches, mosques, and others, excluding the media houses, drug stores, security organisations and water boards which government believed were important social institutions (Banihashemi, 2021). Bery and Otieno (2021, p. 25) state that “like other citizens in the social crisis, while journalists reported from outside, covid-19 possess threats to the safety of Journalists especially as they mingled with government officials, citizens and security personnel enforcing the stay-at-home order”. Consequently, journalists are not different from soldiers in the war front, journalists are faced with several obstacles which they need to overcome during the collection of information under coronavirus but the obligations of educating and informing the public remain important as the journalist’s social responsibility (Ferkins & McDonald, 2020). Despite playing these important responsibilities, the journalists’ work continues to face negative obstacles during the pandemic (Inedegbor & Ahmed, 2021). Journalists are like warriors fighting on the front lines, practitioners of war must remain alive to continue helping society (Lewis, 2020). Journalists are well knowledgeable institutions that produce news and the society trust information that is reported by the journalists during the COVID-19 due to many conspiracy theories about the corona virus (Robbins, 2022).

Research Methodology

Interpretivist Paradigm and qualitative research approach was utilised in this study, as Creswell (2019) define qualitative as that approach uses individuals’ opinions, views, attitude, experience, perception, and feelings. According to Keeves (2017, p. 54) “Qualitative research helps capture the meaning people attach to things in their lives”. Using qualitative method provide participants with freedom of expressing their experience to certain event (Cooksey, 2018). The researcher chooses this approach because it is allowing participants to tell their story in accordance with how they understand the role of journalists. In doing so, a case study approach to inquiry was used, which give the researcher a chance to develop a thorough knowledge about the role of journalists. The Interpretivist paradigm seeks to comprehend the individualized nature of human experience (Biesta, 2016). This paradigm attempts to "get into the heads of the subjects being studied," so to speak and to comprehend, interpret based on what is the subject thinking or the interpretation to get the context (Davidson, 2017). The understanding and perspective of individual based on the world around them is crucial to this paradigm. Considering this, the central assumption of the Interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially produced (Morgan, 2018). This paradigm was used with the aim of understanding the role of journalists under normal circumstances and in time of crisis.

Data collection and analysis

Unstructured interviews were utilised to collect data in this research. Ethical consideration elements were followed during data collection from the participants, participation was voluntary as participants were allowed to withdraw from participating anytime, confidentiality, and respect of privacy. The purposive sample strategy was used to get the better insight on the role played by journalists, as Putnam (2016) state that purposive sampling enables the researcher to obtain worthwhile study results from small participants. By collecting qualitative responses through purposeful sampling, the researcher can gain deeper understanding and produce more accurate research findings (Anderson, 2016). Hence, the researchers choose purpose sample since it helps to identify key individual participants from Unitra Community radio who were knowledge holders and who would provide clear information about role of journalists.

The data was collected from total of fifteen (15) which consists of community and workers from community radio. The participants to take part in this study, were approached personally at Unitra Community radio and Nkanga Location with the purpose of getting deeper understanding. The data was analysed using thematic approach. This made it possible for the researcher to understand all the qualitative data that was gathered and to find its commonality. This analysis was completed by triangulating the data that had been gathered to combine it and give a thorough comprehension.

Findings and discussion

The COVID 19 novel has brought nothing but anxiety worldwide, due to the spread of this disease. As Hendler (2020) confirm that, this virus can also be spread, when small liquid particles are inhaled by another person through sneezing, coughing, singing, speaking or when a person breathes heavily into another person's eyes, nose, and mouth. The participants were asked, "what is new in collecting the information during the pandemic?". One of the participants indicated that: *"Going out there to collect information knowing that there is a dangerous disease and public is not allowed to leave their home due to the lockdown was the most scaring moments in media houses"*

As the number of COVID 19 cases continue to rise, journalists were expected to go out and collect the information to distribute it to the public. As the literature confirms, journalists have a key role to play in collecting and distributing the right information to the public with the purpose of educating, enlightening, and informing the public about the current situation of the state.

"One of the participants confirms that to know more about the situation of the pandemic in terms of the vaccination updates, precaution measures and lockdown processes, the public relied on the information that came from journalists".

It can be noted from the findings of the study that journalists are middlemen between government and public since journalists inform government about what is happening in the society and inform the public about the plans of government. New information to government and to the society was provided by the journalists which make journalists to be the frontline workers during pandemic (Shearer, 2020).

Some findings revealed that if there were no journalists many people could have died more than the recorded number that South Africa has experienced during the pandemic. As Dominick (2021) state that the medical experts provided deeper information and understanding about pandemic, because of journalists' interviews. The participants were asked about challenges they experienced during the collection and distribution of information to the public under COVID 19. One of the participants firmly said:

There many challenges during the collection of the information since the disease is new and it was never experienced by any human before, which created many conspiracies theories about the pandemic. Added that there much misinformation about the pandemic since some information were provided by the people who have affected by the pandemic.

Journalists take time to distribute some of the information due to the verification that was needed before the information is disseminated to the public. Despite the challenges of COVID 19, journalists have not stopped doing their job which is educating, informing, and creating awareness the public about COVID 19 pandemic. Drawing from the findings and discussion, journalists play crucial roles in ensuring that the public and government are alert all the time about concurrent situation within the state. The findings indicate that journalists provide information to government and help public to make better decisions and conclusions. Other participants confirmed that:

“During the lockdown majority of people were not allowed to go outside but the journalists’ function as eyes and ears of the public, as they were able to collect the information and deliver it to the public on their comfort”

As Trumthonosses (2020, p. 885) states that journalists function as the “ears and eyes of the public in any event”. More information was needed during the lockdown since the pandemic was new to everyone and journalists helped the public to get better understanding of the pandemic concepts correctly. Richard (2022) state that journalists have a huge responsibility of explaining into to details the events of virus in an understandable and simple language. Journalists work as an important watchdogs or middlemen in all events of the state to inform the public or government.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper is aimed at exploring the role played by the journalists during COVID-19 pandemic at Nkanga Location in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Journalists were identified as the educators, informers, and creators of awareness during the COVID 19. As journalists were playing a role of collecting and distributing the information to the public, they were faced with challenges such as risk of being infected by the virus while collecting the information, but that never stopped them from doing their job. The public was not much aware about the concepts that are used during the pandemic, journalists kept on explaining, interpreting the concepts related to COVID 19 pandemic to the public to have a better understanding. For the findings of this study to be validated and expanded, it is recommended that future researchers can use other areas that are more geographically diverse. It is essential to look whether the findings that are revealed here are particular for this case or it can be applicable to other areas. Since the study was limited to participants from Nkanga location and sample size was limited to fifteen (15) participants. Future

researchers can use other research methods such as quantitative or mixed research approaches in a larger area, because this study was limited to qualitative method and in a small area.

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