

Press freedom must be a pandemic priority

By Jonathan Rozen, Senior Africa program researcher, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, journalists play an [important role](#) in keeping people informed. Without a free press, the public's ability to make decisions is hindered, as is their ability to identify and guard against abuses of power.

But reporting by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the organization where I work, has revealed three alarming trends across Sub Saharan Africa: 1) a crackdown against journalists reporting on COVID-19; 2) security forces' use of COVID-19 response measures as a pretext to attack journalists; and 3) an expansion of government authority to control information, freedom of expression, and the press.

Journalists have faced reprisal for coronavirus reporting:

- In August, supporters of a religious leader and politician [vandalized](#) the office of the Senegalese newspaper *Les Echos* over a COVID-19 story.
- In June, Nigerian federal agents detained [Saint Meinpamo Onitsha](#) and charged him under Nigeria's cybercrime act for his reporting on COVID-19.
- In April, Sierra Leonean soldiers assaulted and arrested [Fayia Amara Fayia](#) for photographing a COVID-19 quarantine centre. They took his phone, allegedly beat him, and he spent four days handcuffed to a hospital bed under police guard.
- Also in April, in Somali police arrested and convicted [Abdiaziz Ahmed Gurbiye](#) for Facebook posts that criticized the government's management of the pandemic.
- In March, authorities in Niger jailed journalist [Maman Kaka Touda](#) for weeks over social media posts about a possible COVID-19 case that they claimed threatened "public order."

Governments' coronavirus response measures have been used to target journalists:

- In Nigeria, in August, journalist [Sikiru Obarayese](#) was assaulted by police after he photographed them enforcing mask requirements.
- In South Africa, in May, police beat journalist [Paul Nthoba](#) after he photographed them enforcing the lockdown. The officers charged him with obstructing law enforcement under a coronavirus regulation of the Disaster Management Act.
- In [Ghana](#), in April, soldiers enforcing COVID-19 restrictions attacked two journalists.
- In March and April, [Ugandan](#) security personnel enforcing COVID-19 measures harassed or assaulted at least six journalists.

New laws or regulations that claim to offer a remedy to the problem of disinformation, misinformation, or false news threaten press freedom:

- [South African](#) regulations published in March criminalized "disinformation."
- In April, Eswatini authorities issued an arrest warrant for journalist [Zweli Martin Dlamini](#) under new regulations concerning false news for his reporting on COVID-19. An

Eswatini government spokesperson justified the regulations in a statement to CPJ with reference to the similar rules passed in South Africa.

- In Nigeria, state-level laws have also been passed pertaining to infectious diseases. In late April, journalist [Chijioke Agwu](#) was detained and accused of publishing “false and damaging” information, breaching the new Ebonyi State law.

CPJ publishes an annual [census](#) of journalists behind bars for their work on December 1. The 2012 census documented only one journalist jailed on false news charges. In 2019, there were [30](#). In 2018, there were [27](#). Anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws have been used against the press for years. Like terrorism and cybercrime, disinformation is a serious challenge for societies. What must be guarded against, however, is the justification of legal harassment of the press under the guise of preventing false news. COVID-19 seems to have fueled governments’ broadening efforts to control information.

Blatant disregard for press freedom and freedom of expression is occurring at a time when journalists’ health is also at risk from the virus. In response, [CPJ issued a Safety Advisory](#) for reporting amid the pandemic. Available in nearly 40 languages—including [Wolof](#), [Hausa](#), [Nigerian Pidgin](#), [Kiswahili](#), [Afsoomaali](#), and [Amharic](#)—it offers practical advice for avoiding infection on the job. But for the over 30 journalists currently detained across Sub Saharan Africa, the ability to follow advice to avoid infection is limited.

The detention of any journalist, even briefly, amid the pandemic increases their risk of contracting the deadly disease. Journalists in [Egypt](#) and [Honduras](#) have died from the coronavirus, which they contracted while behind bars for their work, and journalist [Azimjon Askarov died](#) in a Kyrgyzstan prison after having a fever that his wife believes was COVID-19. Today, in [Cameroon](#) and [Eritrea](#), [Rwanda](#) and [Burundi](#), journalists have remained behind bars for months or years, some in pre-trial detention. All of their lives are at risk.

These challenges require active international solidarity across geographic and linguistic lines to compel governments to release every single jailed journalist and make press freedom a pandemic priority.