

## **Covid-19 Ravages Kenya's Media Industry**

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<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/covid-19-report-safely/article/covid-19-ravages-kenyas-media-industry.html>

"Just a month after the first coronavirus case was confirmed in Kenya, three leading media houses have effected between 20 and 30 per cent pay cut for their staff, citing rapid shrinking of revenues".  
by Erick Oduor, General Secretary of the Kenyan Union of Journalists.



The three media houses, Royal Media Services, Standard Group PLC and Radio Africa Group have sounded a warning that the impact of COVID-19 is taking a toll on their revenue, which they claim calls for cost-cutting measures, among them salary cuts, to remain afloat.

While this has been contested by the Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ) which has filed a case in court for unfair labour practices because there were no consultations before the salary cuts were implemented, newspapers are struggling to maintain print orders. Newspapers have also been forced to reduce the number of pages since the advertising taps have dried up.

KUJ argues that the law was violated because there were no consultations before the employers raided the pay packets of their staff in the wake of disruptions that COVID-19 has caused.

The debate about shrinking revenue has been raging in the country for almost seven years, after the government, in an underhand way, centralized government advertisements under Government Advertising Agency, which has been accused of not paying bills and denying some media houses advertisements, in a bid to force positive stories about the government.

However, COVID-19 has disrupted the media in Kenya, forcing reporters, correspondents and editors to establish work stations at home, a development that has added more costs in power and internet charges. All major news organisations have emptied their newsrooms allowing staff to take home their desktops and laptops so that they can work from home - but this means that journalists must upgrade internet speed at their own costs.

In addition, newsrooms have also established a shift system to reduce congestion in offices in line with the government's directive of keeping social distance.

Whereas the government has listed media and journalists as essential service providers, there have been no deliberate efforts to cushion the industry from the wrath of COVID-19 that has not only led to the loss of jobs but changed lifestyles of journalists. Standard Group, for instance, announced that more than 170 staff will lose their job in a restructuring process.

Kenyan journalists are performing an essential role during the crisis

Journalists, however, despite the challenges, have maintained a high degree of professionalism, earning accolades from members of the public and government officials, who have been forced to recognise the importance of a vibrant media.

Health reporters and editors are working round the clock to inform the public despite the challenging environment. The government has reached out editors urging them to work closely with the authorities to disseminate accurate information and debunk fake news that could cause anxiety and confusion.

President Uhuru Kenyatta has praised the media for interrupting their programming to allocate extra space for coronavirus stories, helping to educate the masses and shape the debate for the common good of the society.

## **Guidelines for covering the pandemic**

To support journalists, media organisations, among them KUJ, Media Council of Kenya, Kenya Editors Guild and Association of Media Women in Kenya and Unesco, have developed guidelines on coverage of COVID-19.

The guidelines call on journalists to avoid live press conferences and encourage newsmakers to embrace teleconferencing with live feeds to ask questions. This has worked well with only Cabinet Secretary for Health Mutahi Kagwa being the only one to offer daily live press conferences to update the nation on the state of affairs and measures the government is taking to contain the virus.

Media associations also called on the government and employers to provide protective equipment to journalists visiting isolation centres and hospitals to keep safe.

The impact means that, just as the government intends to support other industries to shake off the effects of COVID-19, the media must also be considered in any economic stimulus package to cushion journalists from further job losses. This can start by the government urgently clearing pending bills for advertising to help media houses get back on their feet and pay salary arrears.