

# **KAS HEALTH JOURNALISM CONFERENCE 2022 – REPORTING IN COVID TIMES AND BEYOND**

**By Stefan Wollnik (Duisburg-Essen University, Germany)**

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2196  
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## Introduction

From January 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa (KAS Media Africa) hosted a conference on health journalism with a special focus on Francophone Africa. The event took place in Dakar and was titled "KAS Health Journalism Conference 2022 – Reporting in Covid times and beyond".<sup>1</sup>

The conference brought together experts on health journalism from 13 countries<sup>2</sup>, including in particular journalists, scientists/medics and members of civil society (in media). This event gave key players in the field of health journalism in Africa an opportunity for exchange and networking. Among the topics discussed at the conference were the societal benefits of health journalism (e.g., compared to government health and crisis communication), related journalistic challenges (e.g., neglected health issues and quality issues), and ways to further promote health journalism in Africa (e.g., training/development modalities and business models for health journalism). The following report is a summary of the key findings from the two-and-half-day conference.

## Social benefits of health journalism during the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a flood of information proliferated around the world regarding the nature of the disease, its socioeconomic consequences, and containment and control measures. This information came primarily from media reports, government health and crisis communication, as well as from social media.

*Health journalism vs. governmental health & risk communication.* The very first panel discussion focused on the differences between media reporting and governmental health and crisis communication in African countries. One of the central differences between journalistic health reporting and risk communication by governments from the participants' view was that health journalism has not only an informative function but also an explanatory one. Besides, health journalism assumes a critical and control function vis-à-vis the government, and in particular with regard to corruption. In addition, the difficult relationship between governments and the media in some African countries was discussed in this context.

*How the pandemic has changed health journalism.* The conference addressed the impact of the pandemic on health journalism itself. In general, the participants agreed that health reporting has gained significantly in public standing as a result of the pandemic. If health journalists were not exactly among the "rock stars" in newsrooms before the pandemic, they are now even being asked by their colleagues for advice on how to cover the disease. Further, Covid-19-related coverage often involved investigative research. Coverage focused particularly on exposing social scandals related to the Covid-19 crisis, such as those related to the falsification of Covid-19 test results. Moreover, health journalism exposed corruption in connection with personal protective equipment and other public measures to combat the disease and its consequences. For example, the South African Department of Health spent five times more money on personal protective equipment against

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<sup>1</sup> In 2020, the first year of the global Covid-19 crisis, KAS Media Africa had already launched a series of virtual podcasts and discussion panels with media practitioners and medical experts in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> The conference participants came from Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Germany, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Covid-19 than would have been appropriate and misused funds originally earmarked to address the pandemic (cf. October, 2021; Stevenson, 2020).

Additionally, the multidimensional nature of health news became apparent: Journalists were henceforth forced to deal more than before with various contexts of health reporting, for example, also with economic, sociological or political aspects of the disease. In addition, the solution-oriented and sometimes even strongly appellate character of Covid reporting showed parallels to activism or advocacy journalism, especially in connection with measures against the pandemic. In addition to the new attribution of meaning in the public sphere and the accentuation of the content of reporting, the participants also referred to the changing work circumstances of journalists, such as work routines from the home office or coping with the flood of constantly new findings from medical research, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

*Combatting health misinformation.* The special social value of health reporting is not only demonstrated in educating the public about Covid-19 or in exposing social grievances. The social value of health journalism is also particularly evident in the exposure and correction of misinformation. Misinformation spreads quickly.<sup>3</sup> In this context, governments or even media reporting, can on their own also be a source of misinformation: Media practitioners can be part of the solution as well as part of the problem. After all, journalists who do not specialize in health news are likely to lack the contextual and medical expertise to correctly classify and translate health information for their audience. As a result, according to the participants, errors have already occurred with regard to Covid-19 reporting. Such misinformation on the part of the media can be harmful, as it can not only endanger people's health, but also undermine public confidence in the media and in medical institutions. This suggests that journalists should only use information that they themselves understand. "It's okay not to know [certain health information], but it's not okay to publish [health information] without understanding it," said Ina Skosana, health editor at The Conversation Africa. Furthermore, journalists should always use the right contacts or experts as sources of information and always verify it.

*Health journalism in context of WHO & Africa CDC.* The great potential of the media in the fight against Covid-19 was also taken into account in the communications response of WHO Regional Office for Africa (AFRO) and the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) of the African Union. While WHO AFRO focuses on media training and investment in skills development programs for journalists and experts (Pilane, 2022), Africa CDC works directly with media organizations, providing them with daily statistics around Covid-19 (Africa CDC, 2021; Pilane, 2022).

### **Special challenges for health journalism**

Health reporting comes with a large number of challenges, some of which were raised and discussed by conference participants.

*Journalism needs to become more journalistic and accessible.* In a panel discussion on the quality of health journalism, participants tried to define good health journalism. When reporting on health topics, the quality of the articles plays a special role, since the information can decide "life and

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<sup>3</sup> Misinformation spread especially through social media, as a recent study commissioned by KAS Media Africa revealed on the basis of WhatsApp messages (KAS Media Africa, 2021).

death”, as South African health journalist Pontsho Pilane aptly put it. However, health reporting should first be understood as a specialized area of journalism. Therefore, journalistic standards should be applied first and foremost when assessing this field. These include, above all, critical thinking at all times and accurate reproduction and interpretation of health information. In this sense, reporting should be based on serious scientific findings (*evidence-based journalism*). The term “interpretation” is used here to refer primarily to the explanation and classification of medical/health science issues in the context of everyday life in a way that is appropriate for average readers or any other news consumers. Lack of journalistic quality can not only pose a threat to the health of the audience, but also undermine confidence in the media and medical institutions as already mentioned above. Moreover, participants believe that the experience of journalists has a positive impact on the quality of health reporting. Newsrooms with experienced journalists are therefore in an advantageous position.

Health journalism – as a separate form of science journalism – has a certain proximity to health science and medical research. It is here that the world of the media and the world of science inevitably meet. The fact that this relationship is not without tension is old news, but is considered a fundamental problem, both in countries of the Global North and the Global South: While scientists or physicians often complain about the lack of accuracy of medical information in news reports, on the other hand, journalists often accuse medical scientists/physicians for not communicating their research to the media in an understandable manner. This issue, as well as ways to improve this problematic relationship, was also addressed at the conference. Dr. Abdoulaye Bousso, a physician and former head of the Senegalese Ministry of Health’s Emergency Operations Center, spoke about the problems his medical colleagues face in appropriately communicating to the media. At the same time, he pointed out that media representatives need to become more familiar with the medical world to avoid misunderstandings and make their work more effective. After the presentation of all respective positions, it became apparent that for successful cooperation between scientists and journalists, it is fundamental that both sides be willing to be mindful of the work routines and constraints of the other. Here, appropriate training courses for media practitioners and medical scientists/physicians can be used to bring both worlds closer together.

*The forgotten health issues in African media during and beyond the pandemic.* Covid-19 is the bugbear of our time and dominates the public agenda like no other topic at present. As a result, too little attention is paid to other important health issues in the media. This also applies to the lives of people with other serious infectious diseases during the pandemic, such as AIDS and tuberculosis, which are particularly prevalent in African countries. To date, there is no clear evidence that people with recognized or unrecognized tuberculosis and those infected with HIV who are undergoing treatment are at increased risk of contracting Covid-19 (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2022; WHO, 2020) However, there are at least indications that HIV-infected people are more likely to contract Covid-19 without appropriate treatment (WHO, 2020). In both diseases, however, severe and prolonged courses of disease can occur, irrespective of the risk of infection (cf. Danwang et al., 2022; Sy, Haw & Uy, 2020; WHO, 2020).

The neglected reporting on such health issues is problematic because, due to the fear of contracting the coronavirus, many people are less likely to use important medical services such as HIV testing, preventive medical checkups or vaccinations against other infectious diseases than in

the period before the pandemic. However, the media could play a role here in reminding people of the importance of seeking medical services and could also alleviate their fear of contracting Covid-19 in the process.<sup>4</sup>

Another health issue that, according to the conference participants, is hardly covered by the media in Africa is non-communicable diseases, independent of the pandemic. These include, in particular, chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes and cancer) and mental health disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression). According to a survey by the World Health Organization (WHO), non-communicable diseases are responsible for 41 million deaths per year. This represents 71% of all deaths worldwide. Each year, 15 million people between the ages of 30 and 69 die from a non-communicable disease, according to the same report. More than 85% of these “premature” deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2021a).

However, it is precisely the media that could draw attention to these health problems and remind society of the importance of taking appropriate action. In contrast, media houses have – since the pandemic – often not had the capacity to cover other health issues besides Covid-19. The reasons for this lie in the comparatively poor economic situation of many African media houses, which is not least due to the pandemic and the measures taken against it. For example, many participants report cutbacks or retrenchments in newsrooms and among freelancers due to Covid-19. In addition, there were too few positions for health journalists even before the pandemic.

*The case of mental health.* As mentioned above, also heavily neglected in the African media are topics in the context of mental health. Preliminary study results show that there is an association between the Covid-19 pandemic and mental health impairments (e.g., anxiety disorders and depression) (cf., e.g., Mazza et al., 2020; Semo & Frissa, 2020). Mental health issues in Africa are on the rise and have been since before the pandemic (Sankoh, Sevalie & Weston, 2018). Meanwhile, African countries have fewer professional medical facilities than countries in the Global North (cf. WHO, 2021b). According to some participants, in some African societies (e.g., Burundi and Central African Republic) mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression are often associated with religious superstition or witchcraft and are rarely discussed in public. Media coverage of mental health issues could make an important contribution to eliminating the prejudices and religious beliefs about mental illness that are said to be deeply rooted in some African societies.

## **Supporting health journalism in Africa**

The subject of the conference was not only issues related to the social benefits of health journalism and its challenges, but also ways to better support it in the future.

*Better reporting through better training.* An important issue in this regard was the extent to which the quality of health journalism in Africa can be improved through better training opportunities. Participants largely agreed that academic or theoretical training for journalists is important for learning the expected standards and basics. However, the opportunity for aspiring journalists to gain practical experience was highlighted as even more important.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, many health systems are overburdened anyway, at least secondarily, and are less able to offer corresponding services.

Further, mentoring programs were highlighted as a possible way to get journalists well acquainted with the field. Aspiring reporters should in this way be introduced to journalistic activities by their experienced and well-qualified seniors. One important question in this context focused on the need for media practitioners to specialize – especially in health topics. Some participants noted that the markets in some African countries offer few opportunities for specialized journalists.

Moreover, inviting lecturers to universities or other journalism training and education institutions was discussed as a suitable way to combine training and practice in health reporting.

*Health journalism and media philanthropy.* African media houses, newsrooms or single journalists are sometimes financed to a large extent by donations from philanthropic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – especially from the Global North, which themselves have no direct connection to media and journalism and/or Africa. The fact that this relationship can pose a problem for the independence and freedom of what to cover has been discussed for some time. This also applies to African health journalism (cf., e.g., Kothari, 2018). In this context, the participants discussed own experiences with donation-funded journalism. They noted that media houses often have little or no choice but to accept donations. The downside is often that they are not free to report on certain topics. For example, some donations are explicitly tied to very specific health topics. They also complained that media outlets are reluctant to cover issues that affect their donors. With regard to health journalism, this circumstance becomes particularly explosive, since some health journalism donors are also involved in the development of medical technologies or the pharmaceutical industry and develop their own products (e.g., Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Merck Foundation, etc.).

Despite this problematic relationship between media organizations and donors, participants agreed that – at least until more suitable funding options for health journalism are established – donations will continue to play an important role in funding some media sector players. Nevertheless, the extent to which individual media houses allow NGOs to influence their reporting depends largely on their self-image or ideology. Media houses with a strong self-image as well as a strong negotiating position through other sources of revenue have better chances of success in asserting their independence.

*How to make health reporting sustainable.* Donations are not secure funding for media houses. This is because donors can stop making donations and support other media houses financially instead or they could simply change focus or divert their funds to different interests. In this context, some conferees reported that some donors also shifted their focus in the wake of the pandemic, putting the recipients of their funds in a difficult position.

Furthermore, financing solely through donations can create dependency relationships that could also influence journalistic reporting (see above). Therefore, the question of alternative funding models for health journalism in Africa arises. According to the experiences of the conference participants, there are many possibilities for funding. These sometimes include funding through subscriptions and paywalls, advertising, or support through government programs. Moreover, there are also innovative forms of funding, such as a membership option with special services for members (especially digital services such as newsletters) or collaborations with institutions to promote health journalism (e.g., *Premium Times*).

But a key insight from the panel discussion is, above all, that media houses should not make themselves dependent on one donor. Instead, they should value diversity and acquire multiple donors and/or funding sources. Another essential point for the success of financing models is their acceptance by audiences that media companies want to reach with their reporting. After all, it is only these people who ultimately decide on the future of the media company and its offerings. For this reason, media houses should also be transparent in regard to their funding models to keep the trust of their audience.

Another important point in this context concerns the media's capacity for self-preservation. Long gone are the days when editors only looked after the editorial side. Whereas in the past, only specialized sales teams took care of revenue, circulation, advertising, and all other money matters, today editors also have to think entrepreneurially. They should be on the lookout for revenue opportunities, identify them, know and manage revenue streams, and be innovative. Ultimately, editors and journalists should know how their editorial departments or media houses can generate their own money.

### **The future of health journalism**

At the end of the conference, one question remained unanswered: In which direction will African health journalism develop in the future? In this regard, Christoph Plate, Director of KAS Media Africa, made the following comment:

After two-and-half days [of the conference], I think that one thing is for sure: The future of health journalism looks better than it did two years ago. There's funding. But most of all – and I think that that's even more important than the funding – there's a demand, and there's an acknowledgement of what health journalism can do.

Although Covid-19 represents a huge human catastrophe, it has forcefully demonstrated to the world how valuable health news is. In this respect, it can even be cautiously argued that health journalism worldwide – and especially in Africa – has been able to benefit from the crisis. This is also because many NGOs in the field of media development assistance could increasingly focus their attention on health journalism in Africa over time, in order to better prepare societies more strongly for future pandemics. However, these organizations should not forget that health journalism does not only cover pandemic reporting, but also the representation of numerous other health issues, some of which will play an increasingly important role in African countries in the future (e.g., chronic diseases and mental health), some of which were addressed at this conference.

Despite the increased awareness and recognition of health journalism in African societies, it is important to remember that health reporting is only one journalistic specialization or field among many. Health reporting can therefore only survive and develop in the long term if the framework conditions for journalism as a whole – including stable and independent media systems and markets for journalism as well as good training opportunities – are in place in African societies.

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