

MEDIA SENSATION IN A TIME OF HEIGHTENED ANXIETY:

Analysing reports in three Western Cape newspapers

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in South Africa, the media has been influential in sharing information around personal protection and curbing the spread of the pandemic. The public was bombarded with sometimes conflicting messages about the pandemic, with an initial focus on death, economic collapse and violence. *Dane H. Isaacs, Catherine Ndinda, Mudzunga Neluheni, Thanduxolo L. Hlatshwayo and Gobuamang Setswake* looked at some of these news reports in the Western Cape.

In March 2020, when the South African government announced a lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19, members of the media were deemed to be providers of an essential service. In part, this was due to their role in helping to communicate information on COVID-19 to the public. Media reports would inevitably help shape and frame people's perceptions of the pandemic and the government's disaster-management interventions — and, importantly, perhaps also the public's willingness to comply with lockdown restrictions.

While confined to their homes and prevented from mingling in their communities, South Africans relied heavily on radio, television, online news platforms and social media to stay abreast of matters. This took place while facing fears around contracting the virus and losing their livelihoods, since most businesses had to close their doors.

Researchers across the globe had started warning about the risk of mental-health problems increasing during lockdown. Have media reports — with their typical focus on the more sensational and newsworthy aspects of events — been fuelling this risk? Multiple studies have linked social media use to increased mental-health problems, but few have explained the impact that representations in the news media may have on an individual's mental health.

HSRC researchers conducted a brief analysis of representations of COVID-19 in three prominent newspapers in the Western Cape, the *Daily Voice*, *Cape Argus* and *Cape Times*. This focused on coverage from April to May 2020. At the time of writing in June 2020, the Western Cape was the epicentre of the pandemic, recording the highest infection and fatality rates in South Africa. Three themes emerged from the analysis, as outlined below.

COVID-19 as a death sentence

Across the three newspapers, the fatality rate of the virus was the most common issue reported. A more balanced narrative was presented

in the *Cape Argus* and *Cape Times*, with articles consistently including the infection, recovery and fatality rates. However, in the *Daily Voice* (a tabloid), stories of recovery were vastly overshadowed by reports of fatalities and infections. Readers were constantly confronted with stories of COVID-19-related deaths and increased infections in different settings (e.g. schools, police stations, hospitals) across the Western Cape, possibly to highlight the rapid spread of the virus. Phrases such as the "deadly coronavirus", "killer virus", "grim reality" and "the pandemic is far from over" were common. Readers were also reminded of the collapsing health system in the wake of the pandemic, and the soon to be overpopulated cemeteries.

COVID-19 and the collapsing economy

Another recurring theme was the negative impact of COVID-19 on the South African economy. The three newspapers were heavily populated with reports on current and predicted increased inflation rates, retrenchments, salary reductions, job losses, small and large business closures, and temporary or permanent closures of iconic entertainment venues in Cape Town (such as the Baxter Theatre Centre of the University of Cape Town) due to diminished funding. Also extensively covered was the Democratic Alliance's call for an end to the lockdown period, for fear of South Africa's economy collapsing.

Violence and COVID-19

Violence was another key focus of the media reports in this analysis. At the beginning of lockdown, media attention shifted to the looting and vandalism at Shoprite stores in Langa, Gatesville and Manenberg, as well as violent protests for food parcels in Tafelsig, Mitchells Plain. As lockdown progressed, police and military brutality, as well as gang-related violence and murders on the Cape Flats, became the focus. Many of these stories appeared on the front pages, especially in the *Daily Voice*.

Implications for mental health Researchers, the United Nations and the World Health Organization have stressed the likelihood that the COVID-19 pandemic may have a negative effect on individual mental health and cause a long-term upsurge in mental-health disorders. An over-emphasis on negative aspects of the virus, particularly during the lockdown period, may be distressing for audiences and predispose them to several mental-health problems.

Emerging literature on addressing the mental-health impact of COVID-19 on the general population is still limited, but Ravi Philip Rajkumar of India's Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research warns that the volatility of the pandemic, uncertainty about its progression and effects, the seriousness of the disease, misinformation and social isolation are some of the key factors contributing to heightened distress and mental-health disorders.

The language and content of Cape Town media reports may have had the desired effect of causing alarm, fear and shock, but the dominant sensationalist messaging around death (especially in the tabloid press) could have a negative impact on mental health among readers facing an already stressful scenario.

The HSRC researchers recommend that media houses forge partnerships with researchers and academics to ensure that readers are presented with a comprehensive and balanced perspective of the pandemic. Moreover, in the interest of supporting morale among the public, newspaper articles should include relevant details of where readers may access psychosocial support during lockdown.

Author: Dane H. Isaacs, PhD intern in the HSRC's Human and Social Capabilities (HSC) division

Contributors: Dr Catherine Ndinda, Mudzunga Neluheni, Thanduxolo L. Hlatshwayo and Gobuamang E. Setswake, also from the HSC division

dhlisaacs@hsrc.ac.za