


Exploring the Human Face of COVID-19: A Reception Study of Chronicle and NewsDay Readers in Bulawayo

SAGE Open
 April-June 2026: 1–11
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 DOI: 10.1177/21582440251381599
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


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Abstract

Since Zimbabwe reported its first case of (COVID-19) in March 2020, the country, like the rest of the world, slid into a health crisis. The pandemic tested not only public health systems but also the integrity and responsiveness of media institutions. In this article, we undertake a reception analysis of the coverage of COVID-19 in two ideologically distinct newspapers, *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*, during the height of the pandemic. Drawing on reception theory and in-depth interviews with Bulawayo residents, the research explores whether audiences perceived the coverage as consistently accurate, complete, balanced and ethically responsible. Findings indicate widespread dissatisfaction due to the politicization of the pandemic, hence the need for a robust revisiting of health journalism principles. The study highlights the need for more empathetic, accountable journalism in crisis contexts.

Keywords

COVID-19, global pandemic, Zimbabwe, reception theory, health journalism, Bulawayo readers

Introduction

Soon after Zimbabwe declared a state of emergency in March 2020 following the outbreak of COVID-19, the *Chronicle* newspaper ran a story headlined “Beware of this patient! COVID-19 positive woman gossips around town” (Tshili, 2020). Due to the potential danger of the situation and undoubtedly coupled with the sensational headline, the story went viral around Bulawayo and on social media platforms. Consequently, the said patient was subjected to ridicule as it was easy for anyone to trace her identity given the relatively few number of cases at that stage. After a few days, the *Chronicle* published an apology to the patient and its readers after having established that the accused woman had been wrongly identified. However, the damage had already been done. This incident raises questions regarding the role of media during crisis times and provides an entry point into probing how audiences actually respond to their reporting, particularly during an ongoing global pandemic.

In this article, we undertake a reception analysis of the coverage of COVID-19 in two mainstream newspapers (*Chronicle* and *Newsday*) by Bulawayo residents, the

country’s second largest city and one of the epicentres of the virus. The pandemic attracted a lot of attention in mainstream and alternative media. This study acknowledges that while social media platforms have somehow disrupted newspaper readership, with recent studies showing that online news and social media are now favoured channels of information during crisis times (Liu et al., 2016), our focus is specifically on the reception of these two publications in the context of the pandemic. Furthermore, it has been argued that newspaper publics should not be ignored at the expense of internet publics in assessing the reception and effectiveness of health information, hence our focus on this particular readership segment. Notably, the distinction between newspaper publics and internet publics is becoming

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increasingly blurred. In particular, the integration of web and traditional formats recently accelerated the sharing of newspapers' content via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter, particularly during the COVID-19-induced lockdown. We observed that during this time, newspapers also prioritized circulating PDF formats of their publications that were widely shared on WhatsApp groups. This study further acknowledges that while the internet and its related technologies are dominating news sharing, there exists a complementary effect on how content from mainstream media is shared (Chari, 2011). As such, much research has been dedicated at analysing media content, that is, how the media frames issues including the pandemic (Ndlovu & Nikabs, 2023), while some have looked at the institutional influence on media coverage of pandemics (Madrid-Morales, 2021). Research on audience reception is scarce. This paper attends to this limited research by conducting an audience research on mainstream media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic.

This study comes at the backdrop of mainstream media having lost public trust owing to "poor" news content (Chang et al., 2023; Tsfati et al., 2025). Such an observation has led to a growing number of alternative news that are emerging online to position themselves as offering authentic news (Andersen et al., 2023). Scholarly suggestions to regain media trust have been many but some of the views argue that the media should engage more with their audiences, including online, so that they can understand their views towards the media (Thorson et al., 2021). Therefore, reception studies are central in regaining media trust as they offer an avenue of understanding audience perspectives or views on media content. Hence, this paper's findings not only serve to show how media reportage during a crisis is critical, it also helps media houses to reflect, and understand their audiences' preferences, and assessment of media's reportage. The study is informed by the following research objectives:

1. To understand the meanings that audiences make from the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*'s coverage of COVID-19.
2. To examine audience perspectives on ways that news reporting by the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* on the pandemic can be improved.
3. To identify and analyse the similarities and differences in the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*'s coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political Economy of the Media in Zimbabwe

The media in Zimbabwe is largely divided between two camps that either support the ruling party and

government, and some which are critics of the party and government. The chosen papers—*Chronicle* and *NewsDay*—represent these competing paradigms. To begin with, the two publications were selected because they have high circulation figures in Bulawayo and the Southern region. While both newspapers command 16% of the national readership, they command a larger market share in their primary regions. According to the Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey (ZAMPS) carried out in 2018, the *Chronicle* boasts of 59% readership in Bulawayo, 37% in Matabeleland North and 44% in Matabeleland South. *NewsDay*, for its part, has since withdrawn from ZAMPS surveys, citing "mythical" results and rather focuses its attention on building its web presence, which reportedly has more readership than physical newspapers, which became pronounced in response to the pandemic (*Newsday*, 2020). More so, taking into account the polarized media environment (Chuma, 2008), using *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*, which are also daily papers, ostensibly helps in capturing various and competing discourses that readers might have. The *Chronicle* is a state-controlled newspaper that falls under the Zimpapers stable and practices "patriotic journalism" which supports the ruling party, ZANU-PF (Ranger, 2005). In its reportage, the government is cast in good light while its flaws are elided. On the other hand, *NewsDay* is privately owned and falls under the Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) stable as its flagship title. Its reportage is counter-hegemonic and gives voice to government critics. Thus, *NewsDay* practices "oppositional journalism" which is anti-government or status quo (Chuma, 2008). Therefore, in pursuit of the interests of their handlers, the private and state-controlled media have on a number of occasions disregarded the traditional values and ethics, resulting in a poor form of journalism (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2020).

Second, these daily newspapers are more important in health communication than other forms of media because they "empower readers to action and are an alternative source people rely on for health information about new health risks, disease outbreaks, domestic and international alerts and healthy living" (Torwel and Rodney, 2010, p. 235). Against the view that "media's dissemination of health information is important in shaping public beliefs and possibly behaviour" (Moyer, 1995, p. 147), through in-depth interviews with Bulawayo residents, we question whether audiences feel these publications consistently offered accurate, complete and balanced information about the pandemic. As such, the main research question is "to what extent did the *Chronicle* and *Newsday* play an informational role about the pandemic? Consequently, how did the audiences feel about the reporting done by the two newspapers during this period?" These questions are pertinent particularly

considering the increased distrust in news worldwide (Waisbord, 2018).

News Media and Their Reportage on Health Pandemics

The role of the media in health reporting is well documented, and its agenda-setting role whereby it sets the tone and directs society on key issues for digestion should be emphasized. The media thus remains a powerful force in educating and raising awareness on health issues (Collins, 2006). With pandemics coming at a time when people and the entire globe are caught unaware, accuracy, respect for privacy and authenticity are key ethical issues that the media is expected to uphold so that society can be served with proper information as opposed to being thrown into turmoil by insensitive reporting (Ngilangwa, 2007). Therefore, in their reportage, journalistic work is associated with “values of impartiality, objectivity and accuracy” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 368). These are some of the media ethics with ethics entailing acting in a morally accepted behaviour in a given community (Ward, 2011). Our concern is with how the two newspapers assigned accuracy, completeness, and balanced information as ethical standards in their work. These norms are part of the cornerstone of journalistic practice and are often considered alongside concepts such as truthfulness, factuality, and credibility, and thus their definitions are slippery but interrelated. In this study, we consider accuracy as referring to evaluating whether and how journalism reflects events based on facts and as truthfully as possible. Completeness pertains to providing readers with a complete version of events, while balanced information refers to giving both sides of the story and making sure all voices are heard (Hellmueller et al., 2013). These definitions helped frame our consideration of *Chronicle* and *Newsday*'s reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has been done in other contexts.

For instance, at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, print media in Lesotho were credited for prioritizing the disease as seen in the “positive salience given to the epidemic” and also awarding of “editorial space to the issue and thereby signalling that they regard HIV/AIDS as an important issue for commentary” (Strand, 2009, p. 87). Therefore, the media was instrumental in setting the agenda and determining the discourses that people were supposed to grapple with as they continued with their lives. Hence, the media positively served the society and left it well-informed and educated. Such a practice has also been credited by psychologists who acknowledge that the media are “heavily implicated in the construction of shared understanding of health” (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2006, p. 317). In Nigeria, an

assessment of the media's role in health communication found that while they were playing a crucial role in raising health awareness, much of the information originated from government officials (Torwel & Rodney, 2010). The challenge of relying on government officials for information is that the media fails to shape the trajectory.

The complementary role played by other organizations, governments included, in health communication and education during health crises should also be emphasized. For instance, in South Africa, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a pivotal role in educating the population on the HIV/AIDS pandemic that led to behaviour change (Chasi, 2007). Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zimbabwean government, through its Ministry of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services, disseminated and raised awareness to the public through both traditional media channels and social media. The Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC), as the public health authority responsible for health care, has taken a proactive role in information dissemination over the years regarding communicable and non-communicable diseases. This has also been observed during the COVID-19 outbreak as the MoHCC communicates through various platforms such as its website (mohcc.gov.zw), the @MoHCC Twitter handle and its Facebook page “Ministry of Health and Child Care.”

However, in the Zimbabwean context, studies on health journalism remain scant since most research tends to focus on political issues (Chuma et al., 2020; Ndhlovu & Santos, 2016). This paper fills this under-researched area, as health reporting is of importance under the current COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the media's function in health communication remains key in shaping public beliefs and desired behaviour, there is a need to evaluate the conduct of the Zimbabwean media through the eyes of the readers.

Theoretical Premise: Reception Theory and Critical Cultural Studies

Theoretically, this paper is broadly informed by the critical cultural studies school, which is marked by a theoretical (and methodological) shift from a behaviouralist paradigm to a more critically oriented appraisal of audience reception of media from the 1980s (Sullivan, 2013). The school helps in understanding different contexts and experiences that influence readers in their meaning-making. The study utilizes ideas of the main theorists such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall, among others. Raymond Williams refers to media not in terms of transport of information, but as a text which reveals the cultural meanings created in a historical period (Kellner, 1995). This therefore shifts the key

questions one asks about media from some exterior objective, behaviouristic impact defined by persuasive intentions or personality systems theory to subjective interpretation of meaning (Thompson, 1993). On the other hand, Thompson and Hoggart's work on working-class culture also provides a fertile analytic framework. Hoggart in particular looked at how different subcultures used media and other textual symbols to dramatize their interpretation of their situations. Furthermore, the critical cultural studies school concentrates on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, especially concentrating on media culture (Grossberg et al., 1992). Broadly, theorists in this school argue that assorted audiences interpret and use media culture in varied ways and contexts. For meaning to be determined in these contexts, the message must be "appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall, 1980, p.130), in the process of encoding/decoding of communication. Hall further argues that a distinction must be made between the encoding of media texts by producers and the decoding by consumers. This distinction highlights the ability of audiences to produce their own readings and meanings to decode texts in negotiated or oppositional ways, as well as the "preferred" ways in tandem with the dominant ideology. These views are important for this study, which seeks to explore the meanings readers make from the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay's* coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the influence of these theorists, audience research became firmly established in the 1980s and 1990s under the rubric of reception analysis, the methodological approach that informs study. It signalled a shift from over-reliance on surveys and highly structured experiments to a concern with prioritizing the self-representation of audiences through ethnographic research and interviews. Thus, reception theory can be understood as a product of socio-political values of theorists who hold the view that audiences are active in their engagement with media texts (Thompson, 1993). The main arguments of reception theorists are that meanings of texts are never merely transferred from the media to their audiences nor fixed or inherent within the texts, but are generated as a result of negotiation between the texts and discourses of the socially situated readers (Ang, 1991; Hall, 1980; Schroder et al., 2003). Therefore, this study deploys a hermeneutic analytical approach, which attempts to understand the meaning of a text in terms of socio-cultural and historical contexts of both writer and reader, emphasizing the capacity of readers to rework the meaning of a text in terms of their own peculiar context (Thompson, 1993). Thus, reception theory can be understood as a reader/text involvement concept that outlines text and reader interaction in the process of

knowledge and meaning production (Fiske, 1987). As guided by these proponents of the reception theory, this study therefore interrogates the Bulawayo readers' meanings generated through their reading of the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay's* handling of COVID-19.

Methodological Procedures

This qualitative reception study is informed by the view that media texts are only meaningful when they are appropriated at the locus of reception by media audiences (Fiske, 1987). This section provides an account of how 25 participants were selected from a range of Bulawayo readers. The first step involved categorizing Bulawayo into sections for sampling purposes. As such, we targeted participants from Bulawayo's three locations in terms of suburbs, that is, High, Medium and low-density suburbs as determined by population distribution in order to get an acceptable sample. The emphasis is on depth and contextual insight rather than statistical generalizability consistent with methodological and epistemological underpinnings of reception analysis. The next step then entailed identifying key vending points in these three categories. For the high-density suburbs, we targeted *Entumbane* Shopping Centre, *Zonkizizwe* Shopping Centre in *Famona* for low-density areas, then for medium-density we targeted *Sauersetown* Shopping Centre, the reason being that they were the few remaining vending points for newspapers during the COVID-19 induced lockdown. In selecting the participants, we deployed convenience and snowball sampling, both non-probability techniques, in order to get the most representative sample (Deacon et al., 2007). We visited these vending points to identify and target readers who came to buy newspapers, thus giving us an opportunity to approach them to participate in the study and they, in turn, referred us to other readers they knew. We also asked the vendors at these sites to refer us to their regular customers. These two sampling techniques were key for this study considering that more readers are gravitating towards digital media; therefore, tracing newspaper reading publics has become complex. As a result, these two techniques yielded 25 participants who said they read these newspapers at least three times a week, with some indicating their reliance on online versions of these publications. We then collected their cellphone numbers for ease of communication. These respondents comprised 14 males and 11 females, with their ages ranging between 22 and 57. Of these 25 participants, four were students at tertiary institutions within Bulawayo, 16 were formally employed, and five indicated that they were informal workers. The last part involved selecting stories to aid participants during interviews because we wanted respondents to refer to specific issues instead of

generalizing. As such, six stories, three from each publication, on COVID-19 were purposively sampled and given to respondents together with the research questions. The stories were meant to guide interviewees, but interviewees were also allowed to refer to others outside the sample.

The last step involved data gathering, which was done via individual interviews. However, given the inevitable shift in conducting research necessitated by the onset of the pandemic, we conducted these interviews via WhatsApp platform to minimize physical contact in order to comply with lockdown restrictions. Ethical considerations were prioritized in conducting interviews. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave informed consent prior to their involvement. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality including their right to withdraw at any stage. Interviews were semi-structured allowing respondents to give open and wide interpretations of the meanings they decoded from media discourses on COVID-19 (Adams, 2015). The research posed minimal risk, such as potential discomfort, but these were mitigated through empathetic engagement. The potential benefits, including valuable insights to restore public trust in the media, outweigh these risks, making the study worthwhile.

Having collated the data, we analysed the responses and organized them into identified themes as informed by the research questions. Thematic coding is useful because it “comprises, to varying degrees, the comparing, contrasting, and abstracting of the constitutive elements of meaning” (Jensen, 2002, p. 247).

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The three themes that informed our analysis are presented below, with the understanding that reception studies rarely make a neat demarcation between the analysis and interpretation of audience experience of media (Fiske, 1987). To this end, therefore, we offer an analysis-cum-interpretation of audience experiences of media in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and also to the broader socio-cultural and political context in Zimbabwe. Understanding audience reception in highly polarized societies is important because it helps journalists craft effective messaging that cannot only combat misinformation and bias but also save lives and inform future strategies.

The Perceptions of *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* Regarding COVID-19 News Reportage

News consumption plays a big part in structuring everyday experiences. This section addresses the concern with

the extent to which the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* played informational roles during the pandemic. This incorporates concerns about accuracy, completeness and balance of news from both newspapers. As such, most respondents said the two newspapers fell short in reporting news about COVID-19, particularly regarding the actual effects of the pandemic in the communities. They reported that the newspapers were preoccupied with giving out statistics and failed to fully inform readers. Respondents argued that this was due to an excessive reliance on statements published by the MoHCC and Bulawayo City Council. Respondent 2 explained:

The Ministry of Health only tells us what they want us to know, using the pandemic for their own political gain. Something is definitely missing. The statistics are not justified. For instance, this story headlined “Bulawayo COVID-19 cases spike” in *Chronicle*, just causes alarm. Also, the strategy they are using to test people is not clear. Do they test returnees, contact persons, suspected cases only, or everyone at random? There is no context in these stories apart from listing the areas where the coronavirus has been detected.

It is imperative for public health officials and the media to report accurate and complete information in order to maintain credibility and trust in the public (Seeger et al., 2018). Interviewees also argued that the news was incomplete as there was no debate to discuss the number of cases presented, no update on efforts to find a vaccine and neither was there critical discussion on the movement of the virus within communities, as some still believed it was a “myth” and they could not “get the virus from friends and family” (Respondent 18). Presumably, this accounts for the rise of fake news that has raised problems in the field of communication (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and demonstrates that news is indeed a social activity (Swart et al., 2017). When audiences do not trust information that they receive from traditional news sources, they turn to online news, interpersonal networks and social media, which provide personal observations and experience in a timely manner (Liu et al., 2016). However, while these alternative sources of information beneficially offer diversity, this also presents the risk of misinformation, and so this complexity needs to be handled carefully (Jang & Baek, 2018). As Fafowora and Salaudeen (2022) note, digital media platforms amplified misinformation by circulating conspiracy theories and false claims about the virus and its treatment, often deploying memes as a discursive strategy. In our study, several respondents indicated that they wanted to hear from people who had recovered from the virus in order to dispel myths and be informed in case they fell sick, something which they were not getting from the two publications. In this

regard, our findings have practical implications regarding the role of health journalism in times of crisis. Health journalists should actively seek out audiences' informational needs and address them in their reporting. This is in alignment with Liu et al. (2016)'s argument that there is a need for audience-centric crisis communication research to understand audience needs during times of disaster, as we do in this research.

In addition, the respondents wanted to know more about the government's involvement in trying to eradicate or fight COVID-19. According to Respondent 5:

The pandemic news is not balanced, and it is not complete. We have failed to discuss the impetus which drives COVID-19, especially in metros like Bulawayo and Harare. If I look at the aspect of public transport [particularly] how people are overcrowded, having to queue for four hours to get transport, and people all over the streets selling in order to survive, it's really sad. Moreover, the lack of protective clothing and type of sanitizers to be used are never discussed. That is something missing from the media's coverage of the pandemic.

The reference to public transport and street vending is a critical factor concerning public health considering that public health constitutes one of the priority areas as espoused in the National Health Strategy for Zimbabwe 2016–2020. During times of crises like a pandemic, clear, trusted messaging can save lives. However, it is concerning that little has been done to ensure the health of passengers and street vendors, especially relating to the issue of the latter, when Zimbabwe has a robust informal sector. We argue that critical health journalism must show how the effects of the pandemic are embedded in everyday contexts, thereby giving a human face to statistical information emanating from the government.

Generally, other respondents also bemoaned the unreliability of government statistics, as they reportedly hear about a lot of cases being reported in the communities, but numbers do not tally with official sources. As such, they accuse the newspapers of providing “skeletal information” (Respondent 22) and suggest that reading the news has become “more like guesswork being published since not every city has been undergoing the testing process” (Respondent 11). In particular, Respondent 13 opined:

In the Zimbabwean context, news on the pandemic has been nothing close to balanced and accurate. The statistics over the past weeks have been greatly unreliable because the numbers are not stable. For example, Monday = 142 total positive cases, by Wednesday = 135 and their explanation was that the difference was incorrectly diagnosed. Secondly, about 3 weeks ago, over 100 cases were said to be reported in one day, but later reports said it was over 7 days, but the

results just came in one day. This is highly unacceptable at a time when people's health and lives are at stake.

The respondent suggested that if there had been a complete system to accurately collect COVID-19 data, then there would not be any doubt regarding news from these sources. It is notable that this particular respondent has a university background and therefore has the ability to offer an informed critique, which enables an oppositional reading (Fiske, 1987). Because of the distrust of mainstream news, most of the respondents reported that they also relied on social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook for verification because they are “more engaging and critical in raising issues that are overlooked by the mainstream media” (Respondent 9). Some said they relied on some online news sources such as *ZimLive*, *Kukurigo* and *Morning Post*, among others, in order to get “independent views” that are more trustworthy because “even *NewsDay* has failed to offer critical evaluations of COVID-19 within the community because of its oppositional stance to government” (Respondent 18). Audience responses paint a gloomy picture, and further show that the development of health communication as a genre in African journalism is steep owing to unethical reportage. Instead, of being ethical and producing balanced information that informs and educates the people, the media produces unreliable information. In Zimbabwe, this is exacerbated by the apparent perceived political agendas pointed out by the respondents.

The Politicization of Pandemic News

Regarding how the audiences feel about the reporting done by the two newspapers during this period, we noted that audiences tend to evaluate the information based on the socio-political context in the country. This is demonstrated by the respondent quoted earlier who introduced the aspect of political influence reflected in reporting that most of the other respondents also felt strongly about. They variously used words such as “biased,” “propaganda,” and “lies” to describe the stories. Respondent 4 particularly felt that the “*Chronicle* reports on the camp of government and omits the challenges being faced by the general Zimbabweans,” while Respondent 10 elaborated that “*Chronicle* tries to conceal government's mismanagement and failures during the pandemic.” Such a response confirms the *Chronicle's* support of the ZANU-PF government which results in the paper failing to report on issues that paints the government in a bad light. This is within the realm of patriotic journalism where the state-controlled media only report on positive issues associated with the state, government and the ruling party (Chuma et al., 2020). It is for this reason that some readers prefer *NewsDay* because of its

“independence from government control” (Respondent 6) and the fact that it “will go further to reveal government shortcomings” and “verify what is being said by *Chronicle*, offer extra information or expose the misuse of COVID-19 funds by the government.” In particular, referring to a *NewsDay* story titled, “ED’s son in US\$1m COVID-19 tender scam,” Respondent 12 said: “the newspaper was able to expose corruption taking place in Government when it was supposed to fight COVID-19. I feel the media played a good role here.” A qualitative content analysis of the story shows that the newspaper carefully used words such as “went out of its way to authorise payment of nearly US\$1 million,” “company linked to President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s son, Collins,” “special dispensation” which are common in the story as the reporter sought to show the corruption in place. Therefore, sticking with the oppositional journalism paradigm which are critical of the status quo (Chuma, 2008), *NewsDay* had to dig and hunt for stories that paint the government and the executive in bad light. However, Respondent 16 dismissed the seeming saint-hood of *NewsDay* as suggested by preceding comments, stating that they tend to “focus on the negative side of things,” and further elaborating that:

NewsDay’s coverage caused alarm and fear. This is evidenced by their story “200 nurses, doctors contract COVID-19.” While it highlighted the unpreparedness of the country in fighting COVID-19 through highlighting problems faced by health personnel, the paper thrived on unconfirmed reports and rumours in its coverage of the pandemic. Both papers adopted an elitist style of reporting as they did not accommodate the views of the common people.

These views clearly demonstrate the polarized nature of the press in Zimbabwe, as already established, which has seeped into the general populace. Interview data show that readers were acutely aware of these biases. The bifurcation of the press is a reflection of the political economy of the media in the country, which has seen the media being largely divided between two camps, which are either anti-government or pro-government. Nevertheless, some readers voice that even though *NewsDay* tends to be critical of the government, sometimes their attacks are unwarranted. This dual cynicism demonstrates how politicization can erode trust across the media spectrum, even among those outlets perceived as more independent. We also argue that the ability of audiences to produce their own readings and meanings (Hall, 1980), is testimony that while the newspapers encoded dominant ideology that favoured their respective owners, readers decoded it in oppositional ways due to their lived experiences. Precisely, readers played an active role in meaning-making, and they were able to use their lived experience of media polarization to deduce

meanings. Another effect of COVID-ification of news was the deployment of sensationalism as a strategy by both newspapers.

The “COVID-ification” of News and Challenges of Ethical Reporting

In this section, we discuss the “COVID-ification” of news, a phenomenon in which COVID-19 news has been saturating media reports, not only in Zimbabwe but worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) has described this as an “infodemic” to signal the rapid global spread of pandemic information, some of it untrue, which has made it difficult to find credible sources of news. Inevitably, this has implications for ethical reporting. We also use the term “COVID-ification” to further signal the radical politicization of the pandemic as discerned from the number of comments relating to distrust of the government discussed earlier. In our study, the respondents unequivocally reported an increased frequency of news consumption since the onset of the pandemic in Zimbabwe, particularly among younger respondents who were most likely to have more news apps on their cellphones. Resultantly, respondents said pandemic related stories have come to dominate the news so much that the “usual” news had faded in importance since “everything news related now revolves around the pandemic” at the expense of “some critical discourses [...] being ignored or mentioned in passing” (Respondent 16) because COVID-19 has become more “important than any other development” (Respondent 21). This is consistent with the observation that in a pandemic that has the potential to induce fear and panic, audiences are likely to engage in active information-seeking practices, especially as they take command of their health in order to reduce the risk of infection (Jang & Baek, 2018).

Another effect of COVID-ification of news was the deployment of sensationalism as a strategy by both newspapers. Commenting on the sensationalized story alluded to in the introduction, some respondents expressed concern about its ethical implications and also displeasure at the way it “seemed as if the woman was recklessly moving around spreading Corona. The reporters must not report in a way that causes alarm and should not stereotype those who test positive” (Respondent 17). Similarly, another respondent also gave an example of the story “Churches declare end of COVID-19” that appeared in *NewsDay* on 16 June, exclaiming:

It is baffling why a reputable newspaper like *NewsDay* would publish such a story that does nothing but give false hope to people using religion. The story reports that certain religious leaders have declared an end to Corona and

Zimbabwe will not report any new cases. This is reckless reporting on the part of the media because they report it as a matter of fact, and yet they are aware that there is scientific evidence that exists to show that Corona cannot just be wished away without taking certain steps on the part of the populace. This is also an insult to our Christian faith. I am very disappointed in *NewsDay* (Respondent 22).

In the story, *NewsDay* subtly mocks the prayer meeting by indicating that a similar service was done on sanctions a few years back, and the clergy declared that sanctions would be ended, yet the “trade embargo is yet to be removed.” Coincidentally, this particular church service had been called by president Mnangagwa at state house to pray for the pandemic to end. This respondent questions the lack of critical reporting by *NewsDay*, as is the case with other cases involving the government. This shows once again the conflation of news and politics that has the potential to have devastating effects among lay audiences. In times of crisis, there is a pressing need for journalists to uphold their professional codes of conduct so as to objectively inform audiences. Failure to do so might cause alarm, fear and discord when the populace must be kept calm and positive during emergency crisis situations (Stolow et al., 2020). In fact, Respondent 17 went on to suggest that if the Ministry of Information, Journalism associations and other stakeholders had come up with a COVID-19 reporting strategy, guiding media houses on how to handle COVID-19 information, such incidents would have been avoided, giving minimal chance for the pandemic to become a proxy for political discourse. As Dugmore (2014) argues, health journalism demands veracity and inclusivity in reporting. This means that journalists need to have an expanded conception of authenticity, fact-checking and accuracy and reporting in such a way that they do not alienate and insult affected audiences, as in the two cases cited above.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that Bulawayo audiences are getting a raw deal from *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* newspapers as they are largely displeased with the reporting around the pandemic. As Fiske (1987) argues, the social experiences of the reader are key to unpacking their understanding of media texts. As such, the responses to COVID-19 news reports in Bulawayo cannot be divorced from the broader political tensions that exist in Zimbabwe. We found that the *Chronicle* remains partisan and therefore biased in its reporting, whilst *NewsDay* also remains largely reactive (to government) and therefore biased in its reporting, even in the context of a health pandemic. Their coverage was consequently not complete and balanced. Regarding this, Respondent 20 noted: “most of the *Chronicle* stories were more of

announcements, for example, “COVID-19 positive patients escape,” “22 family members quarantined after harbouring ‘returnee’ relatives.” I would have expected the media to focus more on getting people educated about the virus and safety measures.” In these two stories, *Chronicle* merely used the press release to tell a story of two “Malawian border jumpers” who “escaped from the quarantine centre.” The rest of the story is background information on other incidents that had taken place a month back. Such a reportage and observation had been common on health communication in Africa where, for example, in Nigeria, the reportage on HIV/Aids was mainly based on government statement (Torwel & Rodney, 2010).

Moving on, whilst one would have expected *NewsDay* coverage to be complete and balanced because of its relative independence from government, the publication surprisingly did not deliver on being critical of government when it mattered most, and instead, focused mostly on blindly criticizing government and thus inadvertently failed to provide content that satisfied audience needs. Unsurprisingly, the *Chronicle* was not expected to add more information beyond what is reported by MoHCC as is expected of traditional sources of news during crisis times (Jang & Baek, 2018). However, our findings indicate that on comparison in terms of trust, *NewsDay* is perceived as more tolerable, hence readers often negotiate with its stories, taking what is credible and discarding the rest, whereas with the *Chronicle*, there is relative distrust with its reporting. As a consequence, therefore, audiences have gradually turned to alternative news sources in order to satisfy their informational needs. This shows that there has been a significant shift to online sources, possibly owing to their content diversity, interactivity and firsthand unfiltered information (Basch et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2016; Veil et al., 2011). This shift blurred the boundaries between newspaper and internet audiences, thus creating hybrid publics that engage with news differently. This demands a recalibration of health journalism principles to cater to an increasingly reflexive audience that demands news “on the go.” However, speed loses relevance if accuracy is not factored in, hence the need for high-quality health information. Our findings reveal the need for more nuanced understandings of newspaper publics’ consumption of health news to inform health journalism principles. This is pertinent because readers were not merely responding to newspapers, but to a mediated form of them, filtered through social networks and reflecting the communities’ emotional responses. For instance, the *Chronicle*’s sensationalized story gained traction not just because of its content but because of how viral it became in a short space of time, thus underscoring the emotional and social dimension of media reception during crises and how


media can induce stigma. This shows that journalists have an ethical responsibility to protect vulnerable individuals particularly during public health emergencies.

Conclusion

While both the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* have played a critical role in raising awareness and mitigating the effects of the pandemic, we argue that COVID-19 has metamorphosed into the political psyche of a deeply troubled nation, reflected in the structure of news reports and responses of Bulawayo audiences to them. The majority of respondents felt that the government was withholding information related to the pandemic by underplaying the severity of infections, government's unpreparedness, the number of deaths and corruption. Inasmuch as *NewsDay* gave coverage on some of the government failures in contrast to the *Chronicle*, it fell short because of the tendency to also adopt a sensational style of reporting, thus a pervasive sense of distrust toward both newspapers were evident. Notably, some readers (particularly older) remain loyal to these newspapers despite the existing mistrust out of habit, accessibility and a sense of loyalty. It is crucial to note that journalists operate under a lot of internal and external pressures in the discharge of their duties, which tends to limit their autonomy in most cases (Kunelius & Waisbord, 2023). For example, if they were not allowed to release statistics ahead of MoHCC then it would explain why some of them would resort to either being sensational or keeping it short and simple. In turn, the news reports would then be inaccurate, incomplete and unbalanced and therefore unreliable. However, as agentic and reflexive citizens, Bulawayo readers rework the "preferred" meaning from mainstream media to suit their contexts and are active in finding alternative media that caters to their informational needs. The respondents, therefore, demonstrated heavy reliance on social media and other news sources for alternative information. Given that news and information are no longer the domain of professional journalists, the contexts in which journalists operate, Kunelius and Waisbord (2023) argue, should be taken into consideration when evaluating whether they perform their roles as expected, as these constraints impact their journalistic outputs. The Zimbabwean context in particular has seen the same polarization in traditional newspapers panning out on social media, especially with the rise of "*varakashi*," and this puts journalists under immense pressure to be more vigilant in their reporting. These dynamics underscore the importance of reception theory in understanding how media content is not just consumed, but lived and contested. To this end, there is a need for journalists to consider not just what they report, but how their work is received, reshaped and reinterpreted by

audiences. Reception studies are therefore vital for bridging the gap between media producers and publics, offering perspectives that can inform editorial reform and rebuild public trust. Moreover, considering the rampant spread of misinformation on social media, it is prudent that critical health journalism, particularly in Zimbabwe, is revived as there is a clear vacuum. It is our observation that most reporters assigned to the health beat have no formal training in health reporting; hence, the pandemic and news reporting around it have called attention to the importance of this beat. The onset of the pandemic forces us to rethink the future of health reporting within journalism; it demands that we re-centre health journalism training to be responsive to the fundamental needs of reporting during health crises of such proportions. We therefore argue that health reporting in these hitherto uncharted waters should eliminate sensational reporting in a bid to compete for top spot with other news sources. Ethical and just health journalism remains pertinent in this milieu, even as journalists' battle with overt and unconscious power structures that they work under. Ultimately, this research shows that the "human face" of COVID-19 coverage depends as much on audience reception as on the stories themselves. This study's limitations include its focus on print media in Bulawayo without further exploring how digital platforms influenced audience reception during this period. For further research, the study recommends expanding the scope to look into broadcasting and online media sites in other similarly polarized contexts.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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