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What impact did COVID-19 have on the coverage of court cases in South Africa by television broadcasters?

Research Report

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ABSTRACT

In December 2019 a virus similar to pneumonia was discovered in Wuhan, a city in China. The coronavirus outbreak resulted in the disruption of many industries, sectors and households, one of those was the media. This report looks at the impact COVID-19 had on South Africa's television news broadcasters and the coverage of court cases in the high courts in Johannesburg, Mbombela and Cape Town. The media plays a vital role in assisting open justice by reporting on court cases and when the pandemic hit, physical access of court rooms was shut down during the 21-day hard lockdown. Television broadcast journalists had to contend with alternative ways of reporting cases of public interest and navigating the introduction of virtual court hearings. This research report unpacks the experiences and perceptions of television court reporters and camera operators in the year 2020 which were obtained through interviews. The consensus among those interviewed is that the pandemic challenged the 'traditional' ways of court reporting forcing journalists to think of new and creative ways while contending with a lack of psychological support, restrictions to court rooms and information. Even though virtual court sittings were accessible they had their own technical challenges. This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws on the concepts of agenda-setting and political economy of communication.

Keywords: COVID-19, Open justice, Court reporting, Agenda-setting, Public interest, Media production, Television, Broadcasting, News

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This section provides a comprehensive background to the study, situating the research within its broader context.

1.1 COVID-19 in South Africa

In December 2019 a virus similar to pneumonia was discovered in Wuhan, a city in China. This would be the beginning of the modern world's devastating experience of one of the most transferrable respiratory diseases identified as COVID-19 (Snowden, 2019). The World Health Organisation (WHO) was hoping that the virus outbreak would be contained to Wuhan, however by mid-January 2020 infections were reported in Thailand, Japan and Korea. These infections were all from people who had traveled to China (Honigsbaum, 2020). By March 2020 the virus had spread to 114 countries and it was officially declared a pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in the disruption of many industries, sectors and households (Snowden, 2019). One of those industries was the media. Initially, when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced on March 23, 2020 that the country would be instituting a lock down, a number of industries were exempt and classified as essential services (SANEF, 2020).

These industries included electricity generation, water, sanitation, food and manufacturing. The media was not part of the list, but a few days later the South African National Editors Forum received confirmation that the media would be classified as an essential service and that journalists would need to apply for permits in order to do field work (SANEF, 2020). One of the issues that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic was the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Government soon recognised the media's role in spreading legitimate and vital information (South African Government, 2020). In a statement, government recognised that the media would be crucial in ensuring citizens have access to vital information and developments in containing the spread of the virus.

> "In South Africa, the space, the airtime and social media engagement devoted by quality journalism to the outbreak and the national response has contributed in reducing misinformation and the negative impact of fake news." (Williams, 2020: 1)

Television court reporters play a crucial role in the justice system, providing accurate and impartial records of court proceedings. COVID-19 introduced new challenges for television court reporting that will be explored in this study.

1.2 The Oscar Pistorius Trial and Open Justice

In 2014, the trial of Paralympian Oscar Pistorius would transform the way in which the media reported on the courts. Retired constitutional judge Dikgang Moseneke, writes that the Pistorius trial presented a unique dilemma for the criminal justice system (2018). The judiciary had to make a decision on whether it would allow journalists in court not just with their notebooks and pens but with their cameras too. The Oscar Pistorius trial would become the first criminal trial which would be reported through live television and via social media. Anton Harber (2014) says before the Pistorius trial, South Africa's courts did have television cameras reporting on Constitutional Court matters, in other instances, a judgement in a high profile case like the 1999 Arms Deal case involving former president Jacob Zuma which is still on-going or a commission of

inquiry such as the 2012 Marikana Commission of Inquiry. However, a precedent was set when it was ruled in the Pistorius trial that almost all of it could be broadcast live (Harber, 2014). The North Gauteng High Court Judge President Dunstan Mlambo gave an order that would guide the media on the technical operations of how the trial would be broadcast live. The order was specific to how and when the audio and visual equipment would be installed in the court room and where the cameras would be positioned so that they would not be noticeable (Biber, 2018). Movie and flash lights were barred; still photography was allowed excluding that of Pistorius while he testified as well as the witnesses. Journalists were also allowed to tweet the proceedings live (Biber, 2018).

In South Africa's Debut into Broadcasting Criminal Trials – The Legal Arguments in Televising the Oscar Pistorius Trial (2017), Alison James provides a detailed examination of the legal considerations that emerged with South Africa's first live broadcast of a criminal trial—the Oscar Pistorius trial. The article investigates how the court balanced constitutional rights such as the right to freedom of expression and the principle of open justice against the potential dangers to a fair trial. Central to the discussion is the application of Section 173 of the South African Constitution, which guides the court's discretion in permitting the broadcast of trials (James, 2017). James outlines how the court weighed the risks of prejudice against the public interest in ensuring transparency, emphasising that mere speculation of the risk of unfairness should not be sufficient grounds for restricting the broadcast. Rather, any limitation on televising proceedings would require demonstrable evidence of judicial prejudice (James, 2017). The paper thereby not only explains the evolving legal framework governing courtroom broadcasts in South Africa but also situates the Pistorius trial within broader debates on media, accountability, and the administration of justice in the digital age (James, 2017).

Fast forward to 2020, when the world was in the midst of a pandemic, the courts like many other sectors were forced to shut down. On March 23, 2020, life for South Africans as they knew it was changed drastically. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national lockdown (Hattingh, 2020). This lockdown would limit South Africans' movement and operations in multiple industries and sectors of society. The initial 21-day lockdown was an attempt to reduce the rate and spread of infections in the country, this lockdown would later be extended. It came with some strict restrictions and was divided into five levels. Lockdown level 5 was arguably one of the world's strictest, according to Talita Greyling, Stephanie Rossouw and Tamanna Adhikari (2021). South Africans were not allowed to leave their homes unless it was for essential items, groceries or medical attention. Businesses which were considered non-essential were also shut down while alcohol and cigarette sales were banned (Greyling, Rossouw and Adhikari, 2021). The state of disaster management act allowed government to instruct citizens to work from home, travelling was banned, and exercising outside their place of residence was not allowed. This, while law enforcement agencies like the police as well as the South African Army were deployed to patrol the streets and ensure there was compliance to the restrictions (Greyling, Rossouw and Adhikari, 2021). During lockdown level 4 which was implemented on May 1, 2020, citizens were able to move around a little more, and purchase more than just essential items as long as it was within the curfew (Greyling, Rossouw and Adhikari, 2021).

It was to be expected, given the severity of the initial lockdown that the government's lockdown strategy and response to the coronavirus pandemic would be criticised. The country's economic outlook was negatively affected and at the same time people's incomes. It is this effect that sparked crucial debates about the value of the implementation of the lockdown (Greyling, Rossouw and Adhikari, 2021). Now, when the lockdown was extended a number of court directives were soon published to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the courts. These directives included restricted access to courts, only urgent matters would be heard, court cases which were enrolled for hearings were postponed until after the lockdown was suspended, some legal processes could be attended to electronically and social distancing would be mandatory

(Hattingh, 2020). The result of these directives was that the media's access to the courts was also limited which affected television broadcasters and their ability to broadcast court cases of public interest. By examining the impact of COVID-19 on television court reporting, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which the pandemic has affected the media's ability to report on court proceedings and the implications of these changes for the administration of justice and the public's right to know.

2. AIMS

This section of the paper outlines what the research report seeks to investigate.

The aim of the study is to explore how COVID-19 impacted the coverage of court cases by television court reporters and camera operators, with a specific focus on court reporting within the news agenda during the period under study (March 2020-December 2020). The report will examine the issues faced by reporters and camera operators technically, technologically and psychologically. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the media industry, particularly in the field of television court reporting, where there is a need for television equipment and the physical presence of reporters and camera operators. The research will unpack the lessons learnt and try to establish whether these newsrooms can be better prepared for the next pandemic. The courts in South Africa and all over the world have often emphasised that 'it is not enough that justice be done; justice must also be seen to be done' (Cobb, 2024). While the obligation to guarantee that justice is done is the responsibility of the courts, it is the media that reveals the administration of justice to the public and ultimately has the power to determine whether justice is seen to be done. In this paper I explore how the COVID-19 pandemic, like the Oscar Pistorius trial, has fundamentally changed court reporting. The research investigates the impact of COVID-19 on the broadcast media in particular television. Television broadcasters require having cameras in court to report and record court proceedings. However, in South Africa, when the country confirmed that COVID-19

had been detected, a number of measures were put in place in an attempt to manage the outbreak. Some of those measures had an effect on how television media could operate in courtrooms.

This report explores five main research questions:

1. What was the experience of television court reporters and camera operators in 2020?

2. What operational challenges and changes did they face?

3. How did COVID-19 affect the news agenda?

4. What impact did reporting on the pandemic have on their mental health?

5. Has COVID-19 changed television court reporting post the pandemic?

3. RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This section outlines the rationale and significance of this research, which explores the impact of COVID-19 on television court reporting. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on various aspects of society, including the justice system and the media.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted conventional journalism practices worldwide, and in South Africa it has altered television court reporting. With physical court proceedings suspended due to health and safety protocols in the initial stages of the lockdown, broadcasters had to quickly transition to virtual court sittings. This change has raised critical questions about the quality of reporting, the representation of judicial processes, and the balance between public accountability and commercial imperatives. Given these shifts, it is essential to examine how television court reporters navigated these changes amid an evolving digital landscape. Chief Justice Pius Langa emphasises that the judiciary and the media are foundational institutions that play a pivotal role in nurturing South Africa's democracy (Langa, 2021). Over the past two decades, South Africa has undergone a profound political transformation, moving away from the inequities of the apartheid era. As a result, the independence of the judiciary and freedom of expression have become cornerstone attributes of South Africa's society. The judiciary is tasked with upholding the rule of law and safeguarding fundamental human rights, while the media bears the responsibility of reporting and contextualizing information to ensure that the public can critically assess and understand judicial processes (Langa, 2021). This research is theoretically anchored in agenda setting and the political economy of communication. The agenda setting theory offers a lens to understand how broadcasters prioritised and framed court reporting during the crisis, shaping public discourse around open justice. It considers the criteria by which certain court cases are featured over others, thereby influencing the societal perception of judicial proceedings.

Complementing this, the political economy of communication framework provides a critical perspective on how market dynamics, resource disparities, and profitability imperatives affect media practices. In the context of COVID-19, these economic factors influenced content selection, the quality of digital transmission, and the integrity of court reporting. By integrating these two theoretical perspectives, this study not only contributes to academic debates on crisis journalism but also provides practical insights for media practitioners and policymakers. It reveals how the dual pressures of maintaining open justice and securing ratings have led to a reconfiguration of court reporting practices during a public health emergency. A qualitative research approach is well suited to this inquiry because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of television court reporters and camera operators. Through in-depth interviews, the study produces rich narratives that reveal both the challenges encountered and the adaptive strategies employed during the pandemic.

Moreover, the findings will have broader implications for how newsrooms can better prepare for future disruptions, ensuring that essential democratic functions such as transparent judicial reporting are preserved amid operational constraints and market pressures. Ultimately, this research report aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering evidence-based recommendations that address the technical, technological and psychological challenges faced by television court reporters in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how television court reporting has evolved from the pandemic will inform strategies to bolster the resilience and effectiveness of media institutions in maintaining democratic accountability during future crises.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section analyses the existing literature that informs this study as its foundation, focusing on four key areas: the history of epidemics and society, justice and the media, open justice and COVID-19, journalists' mental health and COVID-19.

4.1 The History of Epidemics and Society

Three main bodies of literature are relevant to this research. The first body of literature is around the study and the history of epidemics and society. Current research reports on the history of epidemics and society provide rich insights into how past outbreaks have shaped and continue to influence the development of our social, political, and economic structures. For example, the article published in Historical Social Research Supplement 33 (2021), titled “Epidemics and Pandemics – the Historical Perspective. Introduction,” details how events like the Black Death and cholera epidemics were not only disasters in terms of human loss but also acted as facilitators for societal transformations (Vögele et al, 2021). The authors demonstrate how these outbreaks gave rise to shifts in public infrastructure and technological improvements, laying primary foundations for modern public health and governance (Vögele et al, 2021). Similarly, the World Health Organization’s 2024 report, "History as a Partner in Public Health: A Report of the Foresight Think Tank on the History of Pandemics," brings historians and public health experts together to examine 14 interconnected themes related to pandemics. These range from pandemic accounts to mental health and economic consequences. By analysing these historical patterns, the report offers lessons on community resilience and policy-making that are significant to dealing with modern outbreaks.

Frank Snowden from Yale University is widely regarded as the authority on the subject and his book ‘Epidemics and Society –From the Black Death to the Present’ (2019) is listed as number one on the World Economic Forum’s list of the five books to read for context about the coronavirus outbreak. His book highlights the connection between epidemic diseases and societal change dating back to the Black death and leading up to COVID-19. Snowden exposes how diseases have not just had an influence in the

medical sciences and in how public health operates, his book shows how diseases have transformed the arts, religion, intellectual history and warfare (Snowden, 2019). The book provides a historical perspective on diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis and small pox, but also examines the outcome from recent epidemics (Snowden, 2019). His literature is important for this study because it questions the world's preparedness for the next generation of diseases, such as the era of COVID-19 (Snowden, 2019). Coronavirus which is a severe acute respiratory syndrome is still a novel disease and is still not very well understood in order to be able to assess its overall impact (Snowden, 2019). According to Snowden (2019) COVID-19 is not an unintentional or an accidental event.

> "COVID-19 flared up and spread because it is suited to the society we have made. A world with nearly eight billion people, the majority of whom live in densely crowded cities and all linked by rapid air travel creates innumerable opportunities for pulmonary viruses" (Snowden, 2019: ix).

Snowden highlights that of all the issues raised by COVID-19, the most important is preparedness which is what this paper seeks to understand is the preparedness of television newsrooms for the next world epidemic. What seems to be a recurring pattern along with outbreaks is what Snowden describes as 'societal amnesia' (Snowden, 2019). One example is the interval between SARS crisis and the Ebola epidemic. The history of epidemics and society is fascinating and complex at the same time. Epidemics have consistently provided opportunities for reflective moral judgment, forcing societies to grapple with sudden and expected mortality as well as fundamental questions about core social values. In the past epidemics have spurred societies to reinvent and rethink public health practices and administration.

> "With an increasing frequency of infectious disease outbreaks, the COVID-19 pandemic causing mortality around the world and the threat of similar future events looming large, mankind is faced with the herculean task of counteracting such threats with the best possible strategies and public health decisions. It is key that such decisions should be guided by previous examples of similar health emergencies" (Parihar, Kaur, Singh. 2021: 1).

Soon after the SARS crisis in 2005 the World Health Organization (WHO) produced a global influenza preparedness plan (Snowden, 2019). However, as the SARS crisis regressed, governments and citizens relaxed. When COVID-19 began its spread around the world, it thrived simply because society and the world had slept (Snowden, 2019). The question that arises now is whether the world will once again slip into amnesia or begin to prepare a plan to tackle the next pandemic. I am inclined to agree with Snowden (2019) that enhancing healthcare, international collaboration, education, protection of biodiversity and funding must be prioritised in all sectors of society if we are to preserve civilisation (Snowden, 2019).

A study by Shivay Parihar, Rimple Jeet Kaur and Surjit Singh (2021) examines whether the destruction of COVID-19 was due to the pathogen or the response to it. They conclude that in the past the damage to society was from pathogens themselves and minimal health resources. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic the risks arose not from the virus but from the lack of effective control measures in core social activities.

> "Our understanding of the epidemiology and effective treatment of this virus has rapidly improved and attention is shifting toward the identification of long-term control strategies that balance consideration of health in at risk populations, societal behavior, and economic impact. Policymakers should use lessons from previous pandemics to develop appropriate risk assessments and control plans for now-endemic COVID-19, and for future pandemics" (Parihar, Kaur, Singh, 2021: 1).

Another book that unpacks the history of disease in society is 'The Pandemic Century' by Mark Honigsbaum who details a history of global contagion from the Spanish flu to COVID-19. Honigsbaum reviews the last hundred years of epidemic outbreaks and illustrates how the only thing that is certain is that there will be new plagues and new pandemics. The book is a reminder that history can always repeat itself and help us understand the present. What we do know is that the coronavirus pandemic began in December 2019 in or around the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan, a city in China that has around eleven million people (Honigsbaum, 2020). By January 2020 the novel coronavirus which would be later renamed COVID-19 was transmitting freely in Wuhan. As a new virus, this meant that no one in the world had immunity from it and it would be

imperative to act quickly and contain its spread (Honigsbaum, 2020). However instead of making citizens aware, authorities were reluctant. It is only on the third week of January 2020 that China's president Xi Jinping, who had been informed much earlier of the virus- took the decision to quarantine Wuhan. In a matter of days this lockdown had spread to several other Chinese cities (Honigsbaum, 2020). In this book (Honigsbaum (2020) asks how despite a century of repeated outbreaks and pandemics, society failed to heed the warnings about the coronavirus and act before its devastating impact.

> "One of the tragedies of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, unlike earlier missed alarms canvassed in this book, vetinary ecologists, whose job it is to monitor remote animal habitats for emerging infectious disease threats had seen it or something like it coming. There had also been no lack of warnings from organisations who monitor global health security" (Honigsbaum, 2020: 267).

What unfolded next was the buckling of health systems around the world. Italy became the epicentre of the European outbreak and despite its initial cover-up of the outbreak, China has since been praised for the scale of its response (Honigsbaum, 2020). China's response has been hailed by the WHO as a model for other countries. China's president has been lauded for the speed in which his government was able to build new hospitals and rollout out COVID-19 testing which was key to China's ability to suppress transmission and keep its death toll low (Honigsbaum, 2020). Literature that unpacks how COVID-19 originated and how it was dealt with places this research within a historical context and showcases the epidemiology of pandemics while serving as reminder that pandemics are unpredictable and will reappear.

4.2 Justice and the Media

The second body of literature that informs this research is on the media and its function within the criminal justice system. The role of the media in society is not limited to investigating, researching, and analysing the issues they report on. The media in essence is a disseminator of information, knowledge and views. Former chief justice Pius Langa (2021) who writes that the media and the judiciary are critical in South Africa today. They play an essential part in keeping the government in check and holding it

accountable for the exercise of its power. The impartiality of the judiciary and freedom of expression are two of the pillars of an open and democratic society (Langa, 2021). While the judiciary is in charge of upholding the rule of law and ensuring that the government respects and promotes basic human rights, the media bears the responsibility to report what transpires in our courts and to provide the context within which that information can be assessed and understood by ordinary South Africans (Langa, 2021). It is against this backdrop where the principle of open justice informs the importance of the media in court rooms. Open justice is a global phenomenon. This research utilises Bohlander's (2010) summary of the principle of open justice as;

> "The general rule is that the administration of justice must be done in public, the public and the media have a right to attend all court hearings and the media are able to report those proceedings fully and contemporaneously. The public has the right to know what takes place in the criminal courts and the media in court act as the eyes and ears of the public enabling it to follow court proceedings and to be better informed about criminal justice issues" (Bohlander, 2010: 322).

Therefore, the principle of open justice stems from the values of openness, accountability and the rule of law and it is also a central part of a participatory democracy (Moseneke, 2018). The values of the principle of open justice are also entrenched in the South African Constitution.

> "The public is entitled to have access to the courts and to obtain information pertaining to them…The Constitution guarantees the freedom of the press, the freedom of the media and the right of the public to receive and discuss information and ideas" (Moseneke 2018: 496).

Television court reporting has undergone significant transformations since its inception. From the early days of courtroom broadcasting to the modern era of live streaming and social media, television court reporting has played a crucial role in shaping public perception of the justice system. The idea of courtroom broadcasting dates back to the 1930s. This is when radio stations in the United States of America started broadcasting court proceedings. However, it wasn't until the 1950s that television court reporting

began to take shape (Lawrence, 2018). The 1955 trial of Dr. Sam Sheppard is one of the earliest cases of television court reporting (Lawrence, 2018). The trial took place in Cleveland, Ohio in 1954. The case stems from the murder of Marilyn Sheppard, the wife Dr. Sheppard (Linder, 2007). She was killed in the bedroom of their home in Bay Village, Ohio. Sheppard denied any involvement in her death. Sheppard was found guilty by the first jury (Linder, 2007). Sheppard was then acquitted after a retrial. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned Sheppard's conviction, citing the "carnival atmosphere" of the original trial which was marked by extensive media coverage (Lawrence, 2018). The Sheppard case is considered among America's most famous because it produced a landmark U. S. Supreme Court decision on fair trial rights (Lawrence, 2018).

There was an increase in television court reporting from the 1960s and 1970s, with many high-profile trials being broadcast live. Concerns grew about the impact of broadcasting on the justice system which then led to more regulation (Lawrence, 2018. For example, in 1981, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Chandler vs. Florida that cameras in the courtroom were permissible, but also established guidelines for their use (Chandler vs. Florida,1981). The 1990s saw the growth of cable news and a dedicated channel called Court TV. It provided 24-hour coverage of court proceedings, including high-profile trials like that of sportsman O.J. Simpson (Neubauer, 2023).

> "Placing cameras in the courtroom has stirred controversy for decades. It's only natural and logical that journalists and their media organizations, in their roles as representatives of the public, want to take photographs and broadcast video from courtrooms, especially in trials and hearings of high public interest" (Hetzel & Strickland, 2023: 1).

The extensive implementation of digital technologies and social media has added a new layer to the coverage of court cases. Live streaming, online court and social media have made it possible for audiences to access court proceedings in real-time and from anywhere in the world. This increased accessibility has also raised concerns about the impact social media could have on the justice system.

> “Digital platforms do not typically produce news content. They do, however, play a key role in news distribution. They also shape the news agenda. As such, they are less than content producers, but more than mere intermediaries. They perform a hybrid role that involves, to some degree, both distribution and deciding what is and isn’t acceptable content” (Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018: 14).

In South Africa and around the world the advent of social media in the reporting of court stories has undergone significant changes. In the pre-social media era (pre 2000s), court reporting was a labour intensive and time-consuming process. Journalists relied on traditional methods of gathering information, such as attending court hearings, reviewing court documents, and conducting interviews with parties involved. The public's access to court reporting was also limited, as they had to rely on print media or television news broadcasts to stay informed (Gruce, 2024). Post the social media era (after 2000s) the rise of social media has modernised the way journalists report on court proceedings. With the advent of platforms like X, Facebook, and Instagram, journalists can literally provide real-time updates on court cases, allowing the public to stay informed instantly (Gruce, 2024). Social media has also enabled journalists to engage with their audience more effectively by providing context, and responding to questions and comments as they arise (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). This has helped to increase transparency in the judicial system. Furthermore, social media has democratised access to court reporting. Anyone with an internet connection can now access a court sitting or report, regardless of their geographical location (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011).

In Africa and particularly in South Africa television court reporting has been regarded as a vital component of the democratic process. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research and practical guides primarily focused on maintaining the principle of open justice and ensuring that judicial proceedings were accessible to the public. For example, in 2006 the South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF) published the guide "Reporting the Courts – a Guide for South African Journalists" which outlines best practices for accurate and ethical court reporting, emphasizing careful fact-checking, precise scripting, and the importance of background context to help viewers understand complex legal processes.

In addition, in 2020 the Magistrates' Commission set specific guidelines regarding media access to courts, addressing the delicate balance between upholding the public's right to know and protecting the integrity of judicial proceedings. These guidelines served to standardize procedures for recording, broadcasting, and reporting on court cases, ensuring that journalistic practices did not interfere with the fair administration of justice. Furthermore, SANEF's 2022 revised manual, "Reporting the Courts: SANEF's Must-have Media Guide", continues to provide comprehensive resources on legal terminology, judicial procedures, and ethical considerations, setting a benchmark for quality court reporting in the pre-pandemic era. Overall, the pre-COVID research and resources highlight television court reporting as an essential watchdog function in society—one that promotes transparency and accountability in the justice system, while also navigating legal and ethical situations.

Wallace Chuma's article on the Pistorius trial unpacks an important observation of the media's obsession with court cases involving well-known individuals and its impact which can at times contradict the media's role as a disseminator of information. By applying critical political economy framework, Chuma questions the manner in which the trial was framed by some of the newspapers in South Africa. He argues that while the Pistorius trial presented a unique turning point in the coverage of court cases by the media, the coverage did not contribute very much to society's understanding of the nature and impact of crime, which is in itself concerning but unsurprising in a country that records a high level of gender-based violence (2016). Chuma further contends that the coverage of the Pistorius trial was underpinned by hyper commercial rules, which included the sensationalisation of the trial that focused on Pistorius rather than the system itself.

> "This is not necessarily to invite citizens to critically engage with the issues at play; rather it is to appeal to the basic audience-consumer fascination with fallen heroes in an age where 'heroes' with staying power are hard to come by. The greater and more enticing the appeal, the more ratings the media – especially broadcasting – clinches, and of course, the bigger the profits" (Chuma, 2016: 325).

Access to justice is a fundamental right enshrined in the South African Constitution. However, despite this guarantee, many individuals in South Africa face significant barriers when attempting to access the courts. These barriers can be broadly categorized into structural, economic, and social obstacles. Moseneke (2018) notes that the greatest challenge to open justice is the media's role in reporting the judicial function of the courts. While the media has an obligation to report accurately, mistakes occur and the trend of allowing cameras inside court has increased. Bail proceedings, murder trials, and judgments are being streamed and broadcast live almost daily. While the terms are used interchangeably, broadcasting and streaming are similar but are not the same thing (Manaher, 2023). Broadcasting refers to the traditional method of transmitting audio and visual data such as television and radio, while streaming is transmitting audio and visual data over the internet in real time (Manaher, 2023). The latest trial that has South Africans glued to their screens is the Senzo Meyiwa murder trial unfolding in the very same high court where Pistorius's trial took place. The murder of the Bafana Bafana captain, South Africa's national soccer team, happened on the October 26, 2014. While the trial is only taking place nine years later it is receiving widespread media attention with local television broadcasters streaming and broadcasting proceedings live from the court room to televisions, smartphones and computers daily (Moseneke, 2018).

This court case is of particular significance to this research because it began to unfold in June 2020. Television court reporting has undergone significant transformations since its inception. From the early days of courtroom broadcasting to the modern era of live streaming and social media (Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018). Television court reporting has played a crucial role in shaping public perception of the justice system by providing society with a window into it, allowing them to see first-hand how courts operate and how justice is meted out (Neubauer, 2023). As technology continues to evolve, it is essential to consider the implications of television court reporting on the justice system and to establish guidelines that balance the need for transparency with the need to protect the integrity of the justice system.

4.3 Open Justice and COVID-19

The third body of literature that informs this research are studies which already exist regarding open justice and the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa was not the only country affected by COVID-19, around the world research shows that reporting on court cases by the media was impacted by the pandemic. Waller and Clifford (2022) write that in Australia the COVID-19 pandemic brought the justice system 'to its knees'. Between 2020 and 2021 Melbourne became the 'world's most lock downed city' Waller & Clifford, 2022). In March 2020 the United Kingdom government announced lockdown rules which were meant to curtail the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which was also followed by emergency legislation (Reardon, Smith, Gross & Keppel-Palmer, 2021). A study by Sally Reardon, Tom Smith, Bernhard Gross, and Marcus Keppel-Palmer (2021) examines the impact on court reporting and how much the principle of open justice is operating in practice. The paper finds that it is well established that the media plays an important role in facilitating open justice because the public in essence relies predominately on court reporting by mainstream media to receive information about what is happening inside court rooms (Reardon, Smith, Gross & Keppel-Palmer, 2021). Technically, before COVID-19 court reporting by television news was characterised by in-person coverage where broadcasters would send reporters and camera crews who used cameras, tripods and lighting to physically attend court proceedings (Haltom, 1998). High profile cases would be broadcast live using satellite vans or portable transmitters and reporters could conduct interviews with lawyers, experts and parties involved in the case. Being inside the court room also allowed for television news reporters to easily access court documents and transcripts (Haltom, 1998). During the COVID-19 pandemic television news broadcasters had to now adapt to working around social distancing regulations and the introduction virtual court sittings.

Sourdin, Li, and McNamara (2020) assert that courts globally were compelled to respond swiftly to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to an article by legal affairs correspondent Owen Bowcott published in The Guardian, the pandemic has instigated significant transformations in trial procedures within the United Kingdom, many of which are anticipated to be enduring changes (The Guardian, 2020).

The article highlights that both the High Court and the Court of Appeal transitioned to Zoom and other online platforms for cases involving a limited number of participants and witnesses (The Guardian, 2020). Furthermore, Bowcott notes that journalists were afforded remote access to these proceedings, with a prevailing consensus that, despite the occasional difficulties associated with remote access, it proved to be effective. The article also raises questions regarding the transparency of virtual justice, positing whether all courts traditionally accessible to the public should also offer online accessibility (The Guardian, 2020). The UK Ministry of Justice contended that, during the crisis, it was imperative for the public to be able to observe online hearings, notwithstanding judges' concerns about potential illegal recording or disruption of proceedings by those granted access (The Guardian, 2020). The Ministry concluded that permitting journalists, who are knowledgeable about court reporting restrictions, serves to uphold the principle of open justice (The Guardian, 2020). This discussion ultimately leads to an examination of the preparedness of newsrooms in the context of the pandemic. In his 2020 report, Alan Finlay evaluated the state of newsrooms and summarized the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on media in South Africa. It is an undeniable fact that media served as an essential service by keeping the public informed about the pandemic and its ramifications; however, the year 2020 for newsrooms was characterized by 'shock, confusion, and adaptation to a new reality' (Finlay, 2020).

A study involving journalists from countries such as Colombia, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic positioned journalists at the forefront of disseminating essential information (Macleod, 2021). Globally, journalism was classified as an “essential service,” allowing journalists to continue their reporting activities while being exempt from the restrictions that confined the majority of the population to lockdowns (Macleod, 2021). In South Africa, it has been observed that there was an initial surge in audience numbers following the onset of the pandemic; however, viewer engagement declined as the year progressed (Finlay, 2020). Concurrently, a 2020 study titled ‘Justice Undeterred’ conducted by the Data for Governance Alliance, an organization dedicated to promoting human rights and governance through data collection and access, found that South African courts successfully transitioned all

hearings and matters to virtual platforms (Data for Governance Alliance, 2020). Notably, South Africa and Tanzania were the only countries surveyed that managed to maintain physical access to courts while simultaneously shifting various matters online (Data for Governance Alliance, 2020). This research provides a snapshot of the performance of 11 countries regarding the provision and facilitation of the right of access to courts during the initial month of the COVID-19 outbreak in Africa, from March 20 to April 20, 2020 (Data for Governance Alliance, 2020). While the study offers a limited perspective rather than a comprehensive overview, it contextualizes how South Africa fared in comparison to other nations across the continent (Data for Governance Alliance, 2020).

4.4 Journalists' Mental Health and COVID-19

Journalism has the potential to expose individuals to traumatic events, violence, and stress. Research has identified the scope of mental health issues within the profession and has developed strategies for prevention and intervention (Williams & Cartwright, 2021). The mental well-being of journalists significantly influences the quality of their reporting, highlighting the importance of understanding how mental health impacts journalistic performance and the need for effective support systems (Williams & Cartwright, 2021). The issue of journalist safety has gained increased attention, particularly as the study of journalists' safety has evolved in recent years.

> "As more attention is given to the fact that a journalist is killed every seventh day for work-related reasons, the awareness of the safety of journalists as one of the most daunting challenges for press freedom and democracy around the world has grown" (Krøvel, Palumbo, & Orgeret, 2023: 825).

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for journalists globally, exacerbating existing mental health concerns while also generating new ones. Journalists have historically played a crucial role as disseminators of information, particularly during crises; however, their mental health remains frequently overlooked. Research conducted after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has examined the impact of the pandemic on journalists' mental health, focusing on the unique stressors,

consequences, and coping mechanisms employed during this crisis. Studies indicate that journalists are generally at a heightened risk for mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A 2021 study by Osmann, Selva, and Feinstein, involving 111 journalists from two global news agencies, found that those working during the pandemic exhibited levels of anxiety and depression comparable to those experienced by first responders (Osmann, Selva, Feinstein, 2021). The study also highlighted that timely psychological support could

significantly alleviate emotional distress (Osmann, Selva, Feinstein, 2021). Another investigation into psychological well-being in Finland and Norway revealed at least six prevalent symptoms of psychological distress (Backholm & Idås, 2022). This study reported that 77% of journalists experienced some form of distress, with 28% to 47% facing severe issues related to one or more distress subtypes. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and exhaustion were the most commonly reported symptoms. Distress across all six subtypes was notably more prevalent among female journalists (Backholm & Idås, 2022). Two risk factors, negative experiences resulting from remote work and a lack of social support, were found to predict increased distress across all datasets, while virus exposure during work was identified as a risk factor in two samples (Backholm & Idås, 2022).

Research consistently indicates that journalists covering traumatic events are more likely to develop health problems due to their occupation. The industry is characterized by high-pressure environments, strict deadlines, and, at times, risks to the journalists' own safety (Tyson & Wild, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many journalists across print, radio, and television were tasked with reporting on stories related to the pandemic, human suffering, and death. A study by Tyson and Wild (2021) investigated the effects of repetitive reporting on COVID-19 on the mental health of journalists, finding that those who repeatedly covered the pandemic exhibited higher levels of PTSD and mental distress compared to reporters focusing on unrelated stories (Tyson & Wild, 2021). A 2020 collaborative study by the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University examined the pandemic's impact on journalism worldwide.

The researchers found the results both surprising and alarming, emphasizing the need to measure the industry's critical needs and to formulate evidence-based recommendations to guide recovery post-pandemic, asserting that professional journalism is a vital pillar of vibrant democratic societies (Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020). The research revealed that many reporters struggled to cope effectively.

> “Seventy percent of our respondents rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work... The stress conveyed by these respondents was no doubt compounded by the fact that employers were evidently failing to adequately support them, and not only in the area of mental health” (Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020: 2).

Investigating journalists' mental health can help dismantle the stigma associated with mental health issues. By acknowledging these challenges, journalists may be more inclined to seek help and support. Furthermore, studies can provide valuable insights for news organizations to develop targeted support systems. The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), a non-profit organization comprising editors, senior reporters, and journalism trainers, conducted a workshop focusing on journalism and trauma experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mbele, 2020). Notably, 60% of surveyed journalists reported working harder during the pandemic while also managing increased personal responsibilities (Mbele, 2020).

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section of the research paper the theoretical framework will be discussed. This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws on the concepts of agenda-setting and the political economy of communication.

Sarah Vinz (2022) writes that theories are established by researchers to explain phenomena, draw connections, and make predictions. This research paper draws on theories that explain television news media production and what informs South Africa's television newsrooms when it comes to the stories and court cases in particular that are chosen to be given coverage. To conceptualize this experience, applying the agenda setting and political economy of communication theories is useful. Agenda-setting was first proposed in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, professors at the University of North Carolina (Drew, 2023). At the time it had two core assumptions; that the media controls reality and that it is the media that gives certain topics importance (Drew, 2023).

> "Agenda-setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us what to think about. The news also tells us how to think about it" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993: 62).

By broadcasting particular cases of public interest television news broadcasters not only fulfill their constitutional obligation but are also providing a platform for the public to be able to observe and scrutinise the way in which the judicial system operates. During the 1970s and 1980s television broadcasters and radio stations had much more control over what information and stories were publicised (Drew, 2023). However, in this day and age, the news has been decentralised (Drew, 2023). We now have social media platforms Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube just to name a few. This does not mean that the agenda setting theory is no longer relevant, an important proposition derived from the agenda-setting theory is the role of editors and broadcasters. They play a vital role in determining and publicising the news (Wilson, 2001). The news content that broadcasters decide to lead with in a television news programme is what they want society and audiences to focus on (Wilson, 2001).

When lockdown regulations were implemented editors in television newsrooms were then responsible in assigning reporters to stories that would show how these regulations affected the judiciary and in turn the administration of justice.

In order to understand media production, this paper will also engage theory on it. Dwyer (2015) highlights arguments that have been made about the political economy of communication, some of which include the recognition that the media is first and foremost industrial and commercial establishments that create and distribute commodities. According to Paul Dwyer (2015) in the absence of a theory of media production, academic study has been considerably influenced by labour process analysis. The political economy of communication framework assists in analysing television court reporting by zooming in on the interplay between economic, political and social factors. This framework puts into sharp focus several key concepts. The first is ownership and control. In other words, who owns and controls media outlets? The second is state regulation in terms of government policies and laws that govern the media. The third is commercialisation- how advertising influences content. The fourth is representation which looks at inclusivity, diversity in reporting. Lastly, labour practices which include the working conditions of journalists and their autonomy.

> "The political economy of communication needs to play a larger role in communication programmes, if communication is to escape its present path to irrelevance. I do not argue that the political economy of communication should be the dominant component, merely it should be the cornerstone" (McChesney, 2000: 1)

The political economy of communication framework for the purposes of this paper, is applied to television court reporting to analyse the complex relationships between media, power, and society in the context of courtroom broadcasting. The ownership structure of television news outlets and stations that broadcast court proceedings, including the role of corporations and state-owned broadcasters can be examined (Dwyer, 2015). This can also assist in unpacking how economic interests shape the selection and presentation of court cases. When it pertains to commercialization and sensationalism, one can analyse how television court reporting is influenced by commercial considerations, such as ratings and advertising revenue (Gruce, 2024).

This can include examining the use of sensationalised headlines, dramatic music, and provocative graphics to attract viewers (Gruce, 2024). When looking at access and representation, the framework can also investigate how television court reporting reflects and shapes public perceptions of the justice system, including issues related to access, representation, and diversity by taking a closer look at representation of marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Werner, 2015).

Furthermore, the political economy of communication observes regulation and policy by studying the role of government regulations, policies, and laws in shaping television court reporting, including issues related to camera access, audio-visual recording, and broadcasting of court proceedings. This framework can also analyse power dynamics and ideology in television court reporting, including the representation of dominant ideologies, interests, and values, and the marginalization of alternative perspectives (Dwyer, 2015). Finally, when it pertains to the impact on the justice system this theoretical framework can investigate the impact of television court reporting on the justice system, including issues related to witness intimidation, and the rights of defendants and victims.

6. METHODOLOGY

This section details the research design and methods employed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on television court reporting. A qualitative research approach was adopted, utilising semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from television court reporters and camera operators. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility and adaptability, enabling the researcher to explore themes and issues that emerged during the conversations. The interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved identifying and categorising themes within the data.

The aim of qualitative research is to investigate a social occurrence, reveal different feelings connected with the problem and appreciate the subjective experiences of individuals (Mwita, 2022). I collected qualitative data through interviews with nine participants from Johannesburg, Mbombela and Cape Town. They included six television court reporters and three camera operators from the main television news outlets-namely eNCA, SABC and Newzroom Afrika. Combined, the group has more than thirty years' experience in the television news broadcast industry and regularly reported on court matters during the period under study (March 2020 to December 2020). The interviewees are all personal contacts who I have worked with in my career as a journalist. The participants were chosen based on their expertise and practical experience of court reporting.

All respondents had been court reporters and camera operators prior to lockdown and had continued working throughout the period under study- with the aim of gathering data that is directly from a lived experience (Kothari, 2004). The interviews were conducted in January of 2024. The interviews were conducted individually and online utilising the Zoom platform. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed me to get direct responses to operational or production issues that arose but also allowing participants to share their lived experiences in the interview transcripts. The format of the interviews was conversational to allow respondents to interact and to encourage authentic responses (Mehta, 2023).

In each interview respondents were asked several pre-determined questions based on the objectives of the research, this was supplemented with follow up questions based on the responses. The initial questions covered basic information about the respondents (employment, experience etc.). The questions that followed covered issues related to the norms and standards of television court reporting prior to COVID-19, followed by the changes and challenges of court reporting with the advent of COVID-19 and subsequently the introduction of lockdown regulations, navigating virtual court sittings and developments in court reporting for television broadcasters post the pandemic. The approach is best suited for this research due to its ability to explain social realities (Mwita, 2022).

> "With qualitative research, a researcher collects data until what is considered to be sufficient is attained. In case a respondent does not understand a particular question, a researcher has an opportunity to make clarifications of unclear questions or asks the question in a different way" (Mwita, 2022: 621).

After transcription, using thematic analysis, the interview data was grouped around six themes. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that can be applied to various qualitative data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and texts (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). It allows researchers to gain a detailed understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns and themes in the data, which can help to develop theories or models (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It takes into account the context in which the data was collected, allowing researchers to consider the social, cultural, and historical factors that shape participants' experiences. Thematic analysis is a widely used and accessible approach, making it easier for researchers to communicate their findings to diverse audiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It is essential to note that the study, and the findings from it, is concerned with the perceptions of television court reporters and camera operators, based on their own experiences. Speaking to journalists can give valuable insight into what they observed and how they perceived their working environment (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022).

This research report acknowledges some ethical limitations.

> “Ethics emphasises the principles of morality, guiding individuals towards moral actions and assisting in achieving research objectives” (Awal, 2023:10).

The participant pool comprised of personal contacts of the researcher, which may introduce bias and impact the generalisability of findings. This strategy was utilised in order to target a specific group for the study (Manohar et al, 2018). It is important to note that television court reporting is a niche form of reporting and the pool of interviewees is limited to those who report on the courts consistently and who are qualified to speak on the research questions, as opposed to general news reporters who do not specialise (Manohar et al, 2018). The participants chosen are of independent thought and were not coerced to participate. All research participants provided informed consent for their identities to be disclosed in the publication of this study (Awal, 2023). Prior to participating, individuals were fully informed about the nature of the research, including the potential publication of their identities, and they voluntarily agreed to participate. The necessary permissions and approvals were obtained from all relevant parties, ensuring that the publication of participant identities was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and regulatory requirements (Awal, 2023). This transparency allows readers to contextualise the findings within the specific experiences and perspectives of the participants. The use of personal contacts as participants can lead to a lack of diversity in perspectives and experiences, potentially skewing the results. These limitations highlight the need for future research to employ more rigorous sampling methods to ensure a more representative and diverse participant pool (Awal, 2023).

7. FINDINGS

The themes identified were as follows:

- COVID-19 as the News Agenda
- Restrictions to Courts and Information
- Technical and Technological Challenges
- More Collaboration
- Psych-Social Support
- Preparing for Another Pandemic

The key findings drawn from across these themes will be discussed in this chapter. Ethical clearance for the study was acquired from the University of the Witwatersrand School of Journalism Research Ethics Committee, which was approved in November 2023.

This section of the research paper presents the main findings of the study which have been put together around the themes identified above. The findings highlight and discuss topics which include the effect lockdown regulations had on the television news agenda, court reporters and camera operators' day-to-day practices of court reporting during the various phases of lockdown. They speak to the technical and technological challenges that came with virtual court sittings as well and the struggle to acquire information and documents. The outcomes also look into restrictions in court during the lower levels of lockdown regulations when court rooms were re-opened to the public and the media and the collaboration between the television broadcasters described as 'pool feed'. In addition, they reflect the respondents' views on whether or not television newsrooms will be prepared for another pandemic. The findings incorporate various quotations from the interviews, as well as observations by the researcher. The evidence gathered suggests that court reporting by television broadcasters is very much reliant on the reporter and cameraman understanding the procedures and decorum of court sittings and the various practices and routines that underpin it.

A consensus amongst the interviewees was that court reporting was a specialty that requires some level of understanding of the law and court processes. Manqoba Mchunu has been a television broadcast journalist for sixteen years, the majority of his career has been spent on reporting in the South African courts, mainly in Durban and Johannesburg. In his interview he said that a lot of preparation is required before reporting on a court case:

> "You need to understand how court works. It is not like going to any general news story. You need to understand the role players in court, you need to understand the procedure of the court and you need to understand the terminology. Your job is to interpret the law and make it simple for the person watching your story to understand."

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recognises the importance of court room journalism, and as part of its initiatives, in 2021 a workshop was held to cultivate and improve court reporting practices in countries like Uzbekistan in central Asia. The media is widely described as the "fourth estate" and its ability to report accurately on what happens in the courtroom is the best way to ensure fairness and transparency (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

7. 1 COVID-19 as the News Agenda

A consensus amongst the respondents is that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the news agenda. In fact, the country's national shutdown period and subsequent lockdown regulations to try and curb the spread of COVID-19 gave rise to record TV ratings in the country with a massive surge of millions of viewers tuning in for both news and entertainment content (Ferreira, 2020). As Mchunu put it, COVID-19 was the agenda:

> "It became the story and the only story. It became the news agenda. We had to try and find ways of telling this story of COVID-19."

In his 2022 study of the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic by selected broadcast media outlets in the four regions of Africa (West: Nigeria, East: Kenya, North: Sudan and South: South Africa) between 2020 and 2021 Mohammed Abdullateef notes that mass media channels were consumed with stories on infection and transmission rates, the COVID-19 death toll and the dangers of ignoring safety protocols. Linda Mnisi who has worked in community and national television news agencies over the past eight years described how television news completely shifted the focus to educate and cover anything and everything related to the outbreak in addition to reporting on the infection and death rates. He said that the news agenda moved away from deep investigations and was instead focused on giving information and educating the public on COVID-19:

> "Pre-COVID-19 our content was centered around media briefings, press releases or following news makers. COVID-19 shifted that. It made us move back to people-centric news, things that affect the everyday human experience. Something as simple as when you're allowed to drive or how you would go shopping. It became a public service."

This is reflected in Feinberg and Willer (2011) which found that reporting on problems alone can at times result in "news fatigue". This has the potential to reduce the public's sense of agency which can then result in citizens' perceiving the news as always being negative and subsequently disengaging with the content. Hasina Gori has been a television news reporter for thirteen years. She began specialising in court reporting quite early on in her career. During the COVID-19 pandemic she was tasked with following the court cases that arose from the lockdown regulations. Gori describes how COVID-19 changed the way in which news was produced and what the news focused on. She says reporters had to find ways to be more creative because of the limitations that came with lockdown regulations:

> "Watching television news became a bit boring. We were watching zoom links. We had to find ways to move the content from being flat, and to bring it alive by using multimedia, or graphics. What shifted is that people were watching mainstream news more from their cellphones. COVID-19 made us remember who our audience is and what they want to see."

Even when it came to the court cases that were televised, most respondents noted that those were centered around lockdown and the regulations. This is reflected in a 2021 study about television news coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria that found that the television stations apportioned more importance to the coverage of COVID-19. By implication more COVID-19 stories were headlined and received the most airtime (Apuke & Omar, 2021). Zola Sholwana has been a reporter for three years working in community and national television newsrooms. She noted a decline in the coverage of court cases as a whole, but that cases related to COVID-19 became a focus:

> "A number of organisations took government to court to challenge the lockdown regulations. You could not ignore those stories. We were told by our editors that the stories we pitched had to have a COVID-19 angle to it, whether it was economics or a court story, education or health."

One of the first cases of this nature was Khosa & Others v Minister of Defence and Military Defence and Military Veterans & Others, brought by the family of Collins Khosa (van Staden, 2020). Khosa was a resident in the Alexandra township who was one of at least thirteen people that police and security forces killed in 2020 during the enforcement of lockdown regulations (Rajah, 2020).

Mnisi indicated that there was however, a notable increase in the number of gender-based violence cases in 2020 too. He said the lockdown regulations forced women to be around their abusive partners 24/7. Research from the World Health Organisation and in South Africa indicates that gender-based violence (GBV) has reached disturbing levels. Mbokodo et al (2025) has found that these numbers increase when people live together uninterrupted without some form of recreational events. The study found that during the COVID-19 lockdown GBV amongst women was reported as 34% (Mbokodo et al, 2025). Mnisi noted one case which attracted a lot of media attention and sparked public outrage. He said the public didn't care about the lockdown regulations and insisted on attending court proceedings:

> “The one story that stood out for me was the Tshegofatso Pule murder case. Pule was murdered at the height of the pandemic. That is when South Africa was supposed to be safe, but this pregnant woman was killed. Even with the restrictions, people came out to protest outside court. When the murder accused appeared in court, journalists had to be asked to take turns to enter the court room, because of how packed it was.”

7.2 Restrictions to Courts and Information

When the lockdown began in March 2020, directives were issued by the Justice minister Ronald Lamola which were gazetted. The minister designated the media as ‘persons with material interest in court cases’ and were therefore permitted to be in court rooms which wasn’t always applied. A 2022 study by the Democratic Governance and Rights Group (DGRU) looking into the impact of COVID-19 on the administration of justice in Namibia, Malawi and South Africa found that the directives and regulations were inconsistent and in other cases redundant and created confusion. Ayesha Ismail who has been in the industry for three decades describes the process:

> “Initially we weren’t allowed in court, but of course the courts still needed to function- within the regulations. That meant we had to go to court extra early to get in, there were long queues outside court. There was the process of sanitising before coming in to court.”

In some cases, once social distancing regulations were in place this had an impact on the number of reporters allowed in the court room. In most instances this was only an issue in high profile cases. Ismail referred to a matter involving the murder of a high ranking police officer who was investigating gang violence.

> “There was a case involving Colonel Charl Kinnear. The police officer who was shot outside his house. It was during the lockdown regulations and we were all wearing masks at the time, and because it was such an important case we were present in court but with social distancing.”

Gori noted that the initial 21-day lockdown was chaotic and was marred with a lot of confusion on how court processes would proceed. She said the lockdown regulations made it difficult to operate inside the court room:

> "Many cases were either postponed or moved. There were questions on how court would proceed and how would people be allowed to go in. There was absolute chaos at first. Sometimes the public was denied access, and we as the media couldn't record proceedings. As we moved through the lockdown stages, regulations began to ease."

This is cemented in Van Staden (2020) who highlights that South Africa's government with the help from the courts 'strayed beyond the bounds of the Constitution and engaged in unjustified violations of constitutional rights' with its lockdown regulations, which is reflected in the respondents' experience.

Most respondents like Sholwana mentioned that accessing court documents was also a challenge unless you knew the right people to speak to:

> "Sometimes you couldn't physically go to court, so if it was a new case you were reporting on, you would have to find out who the judge is, then find their clerk and ask for documents or whatever is available. The National Prosecuting Authority would assist the media at times in accessing the court documents by getting in contact with the prosecutors."

Generally, responses suggested that reporters could access a wider range of basic information about court cases during the period of study, however the finer details of the cases themselves proved a lot more difficult. In a 2020 article by AmaBhungane, an investigative journalism organisation, Cherese Thakur criticised the manner in which open justice was by in large 'ignored' by the judiciary during lockdown. Thakur questions whether the principle of open justice become less important in times of a national disaster (AmaBhungane, 2020). Mweli Masilela has been a journalist since 2008. In some instances, he does his own camera work when covering stories and

court cases. Masilela highlighted the lack of ability to easily clarify information or seek further detail in virtual hearings because of the lack of physical interaction:

> "Being unable to just approach a prosecutor to clarify details like name spelling or the charges was challenging. I prefer to be at the story physically, see the accused arriving in court, their demeanor and speaking to family members. Virtual sittings were limiting, especially in the way you want to tell the story. Being in court is the real deal."

Once the case was heard, the online stream would be stopped immediately, meaning reporters could not interact with participants of that hearing or obtain more information. Respondents emphasised that they had lost the capability to merely sit, listen and observe in court, which was a crucial method of adding colour or range to the story or adding a different element. Sarah Moore's 2019 article mirrors this finding. The article states that the increased reliance on video-link testimony signals a shift from the 'sensual to the sanitized'. This is in reference to the courtroom itself, where the sight, sound, smell of witnesses is replaced with their less intrusive virtual-double (Moore, 2019).

This process and the advantages of physical presence were explained by Gori:

> "A big challenge was finding ways to tell a story without it just being zoom links. You also didn't get a range of visuals, like gallery reactions from the public, which are part of the story telling of a court case."

Respondents highlighted that even though physical access to court rooms resumed, it did not have the same impact as prior to the pandemic because of the limited number of people that would be allowed inside the court rooms. This impacted the range of voices, meaning that the court stories that were reported were not rich in detail in terms of what was observed inside the court room. In turn, this had the potential to negatively impact the effectiveness and quality of the story. A report that looked at the quality and quantity of court reporting in the United Kingdom's local press found covering the courts in person allows journalists a chance to reflect a case in more detail, but also provides a

firm stream of unique stories (Jones, 2025). Almost all respondents submitted that even though, for the most part, information about court hearings was accessible, the onus was largely on them to find it. This meant reporters had to identify the right person to contact to obtain such details which could primarily be difficult in an unfamiliar court. This is further illustrated by Thakur who stated that Court rolls were only irregularly published on the website of the Office of the Chief Justice (OCJ), without clarity of how the matter would proceed (AmaBhungane, 2020). Furthermore, registrars' offices were prohibited to journalists seeking access to court records. The only alternative was to phone registrars' offices and make a request with the hope that you would be assisted (AmaBhungane, 2020).

7.3 Technical and Technological Challenges

Accessing online links to virtual court sittings also posed a challenge. All the respondents stated that initially, it was unclear what the protocols for attending virtual court sittings were, which made accessing them more difficult. In a study about remote proceedings in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, Whittear-Nel (2023) found that technological limitations have been cited as a reason working against using video-link technology to proceed with a case. Respondents added that there was an improvement once systems were established for virtual court sittings. The procedures used varied from court to court and from region to region with most involving some form of communication between the reporter and a court official to acquire a virtual link to the relevant court case hearing. Information on such protocols were viewed variably, some respondents described information as being timely and clear; while others stated that it could be more complex and could at times be provided late or not at all. This was also observed in AmaBhungane (2020) that found that hearing held virtually on platforms like Zoom were only known by the parties involved in the litigation and that the court roll was irregularly published on the website of the office of the Chief Justice, with no information on how the case would be proceeding.

Mchunu stated that these processes grew over time from disorganised and unclear in the first few weeks of lockdown, to simpler and accessible information on hearings as courts adapted to the new way of working:

> "One of the funniest things was entering a virtual court sitting and there's noise coming from your side, disturbing the virtual proceedings because you haven't muted yourself. We adjusted to a virtual court etiquette. Network was sometimes an issue. We would be struggling to hear or follow the online proceedings. It did require a big shift and being patient with the process to get the work done."

Some respondents stated that technological issues had the potential to pose a threat to the principle of open justice. In essence when technology functioned properly, open justice was improved – when it did not, it was severely constrained. Davies et al (2024) looking at experimental trials of virtual court proceedings in Nigeria found that the implementation of virtual court hearings is challenged by poor infrastructure, technophobia and the lack of technological skills. The study stresses that investment and training is required to sustain virtual court sittings.

Camera operators described the challenge in filming a virtual court sitting for television. Tebogo Masilo has been in the industry for nineteen years working in commercial and news productions. Masilo explained that at times as camera operators they had to work with footage that was given from online streams:

> "The biggest challenge was technical. We dependent on audio and live stream that was given to us by court administrators, and these may not have the format required for television. You also had a zoom link with multiple screens and it's not aesthetically pleasing. Sometimes the audio wasn't good or the picture because of internet connection."

Camera operator Gqabi Njokweni has worked in newsrooms in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng. His experience as a camera operator began in 2014. Njokweni described navigating the use of virtual court sittings and the method he used to record virtual sittings:

> "I just shot the computer screen. I would fix my shutter (camera setting) to accommodate the screen so that it doesn't flash, when you watch it on television. When you are shooting a computer screen it can give you flickering lines, to avoid that you have to set your shutter to a different speed. You have to match the shutter speed of a screen with your camera."

When physical court hearings resumed camera operators and reporters had to work around a different kind of technical challenge while still adhering to social distancing regulations. Morena Lekitla has been a camera operator for thirteen years and spoke about how as camera operators they were limited in the kind of footage they could shoot:

> "During COVID-19, you were shooting a hand full of people. From a camera operator's perspective, it affected us a lot in terms of playing around with different angles and shots."

Mchunu described that reporters and camera operators were paired and given tools to work remotely:

> "Newsrooms literally had to set up studios at presenters' homes to allow for that separation of human contact. Secondly, in terms of editing, the newsroom secured laptops for each and every journalist to work on the field. You had your own kit that you could take home. We would edit in the car and send the story from the laptop. Everything was done outside. The story was done and finished between the team of two."

Ismail highlighted some of the challenges of working remotely and the shift implementations:

> "We were removed from the newsroom, and placed downstairs which was not ideal. We were actually banished to the basement. We had 3 reporters on duty at a time instead of 6. We worked in shifts, 3 days on and 4 days off or vice versa. We could also work from home and record our voice on the cellphone. We did that for a while until we were allowed to return to the office. We were all wearing masks, and social distancing."

Respondents emphasised that television being a visual medium, meant that reporters and camera operators had to find resourceful ways in reporting a court story and news in general. Baldwin et al (2020) revealed that While modifications such as virtual court sittings allowed for courts to continue to they also restricted public access to the court room which created a different challenge for court personnel and those required to have contact with the court such as the media.

7.4 More Collaboration

A key development in television court reporting that is being utilised increasingly post the COVID-19 pandemic is the collaboration between television news channels in broadcasting and live streaming court cases of public interest. Due to the fact that a limited number of people would be allowed. Most respondents noted that while pool feed is not a new concept, there was an increase in its use in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Masilo says this heightened collaboration amongst news channels particularly in high profile cases:

> "We have adapted to this new norm of having one media house giving a pool feed. Broadcasters had to sit down, draw up a plan on how they were going to alternate providing pool feed. For example, the Senzo Meyiwa case there will be one broadcaster responsible for the feed for one week and then another for the next week."

On the African continent itself, organisations like The African Union of Broadcasting (AUB) created platforms to allow for increased collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic on a bigger scale (The African Union of Broadcasting, 2021). It revitalised its network of content exchange (AUB Vision), allowing broadcasters to share programs across Africa. This assisted stations to maintain high-quality content despite financial

and logistical constraints (The African Union of Broadcasting, 2021). Another observation made by respondents was the financial implications of broadcasting court cases. While some stated that broadcasting court cases had a financial benefit for news channels others felt it probably costs broadcasters more than the profits. Mnisi stated:

> "When you look at the interest in high profile matters like the Thabo Bester case that interest brings a lot of viewers, they watch the proceedings live. They want live updates on the case, they want to feel like they are in the court rooms therefore you have record breaking numbers at times, and so that brings in advertising. There is a financial gain."

Njokweni added that the financial gain that is associated with televising a court case, doesn't necessarily outweigh the cost:

> "I think they are doing more of a national duty to inform and educate people. I think it is actually a loss to them, it is actually quite expensive to provide a pool feed. Let's say ENCA is broadcasting on their own with their own tele-satellite. When you mount up the satellite it will cost you around R5000 per minute to provide the feed just for your own channel. I know that bringing a mobile broadcast van, and the satellite feed is costly, that is why they alternate."

Overall respondents highlighted that post the COVID-19 pandemic collaboration amongst broadcasters has been beneficial, especially in instances where there are multiple high profile cases occurring at the same time. While one broadcaster is responsible for one case, another broadcaster can be equally responsible for another court case, which means there's sharing of costs and resources to enhance open justice and media freedom. This collaborative approach is reflected in a 2015 journal article on news sharing in the United States of America (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). The study noted that journalism is commonly known to be a competitive profession however due to increasing economic pressure and new media technologies these factors are developing a new era of collaboration, working together has become "more the rule than the exception (Graves & Konieczna, 2015).

7.5 Psycho-social support

What came out strongly amongst respondents was the impact that COVID-19 had on their mental health. There was some form of anxiety they experienced in having to cover stories, interacting with different people while trying to avoid getting infected by the coronavirus. Lekitla described it as a very emotional experience:

> "To cover COVID-19 from day one until the end, going to hospitals to cover family members who have their loved ones and capture their emotions was hard. We would be reporting on the number of infections, every hour of every day. Sometimes you would go to family members that just lost their loved ones. I cry easily, so I would say emotionally for me, it really affected me, and it taught me how to be sensitive with dealing with stories like these. Generally, COVID-19 was scary, my older sister was also affected, she tested positive. I felt like this thing is not ending."

Ismail stated that newsrooms could have provided more psychological support, but all respondents said that their newsrooms provided them with some form of personal protective equipment (PPE). Mnisi stressed that face masks were mandatory:

> "The main thing we got from our newsroom were masks, they were provided, it was interesting navigating through that because the rules kept on being updated. Right at the beginning there was talk of not only wearing a mask but also wearing surgical gloves, then that changed."

Maagaketla Mohlabe has been a television journalist since 2015. He noted that there was an effort on the part of his newsroom to ensure journalists were protected:

> "We were given masks, sanitisers and protective suits. We were quite lucky. We were provided with PPE, so that when we go out there as essential workers we are not counted amongst the statistics of COVID-19."

Masilo added that although it was a stressful experience, as journalists' they were driven by their passion:

> "When everyone was indoors, we (journalists) were outside. We wanted to show the nation and people what's happening, we were experiencing the pandemic ourselves. We were out there every day and every night. We were never quarantined. It showed me how much we provide people with information. We are the intermediary between what's happening out there and the people. People are watching everything through us."

For Gori the experience still feels surreal:

> "When I look at the reporting I did on the first day of lockdown and now in retrospect looking back to what COVID-19 was, and how sick people got. I am still shocked we were outside with no masks and no gloves and sharing mics on the first day. To get a good story means you are going to places people are not going too, like the makeshift hospitals and the testing grounds. But we went to tell the stories, putting ourselves at risk, so we weren't prepared and we didn't completely understand the risk but we tried our best. It was a balancing act. We survived."

Njokweni spoke of the mental toll it took to continue doing their jobs:

> "I suffered from paranoia and anxiety. You see people getting sick and think to yourself, I was just filming at a hospital. I would end up taking three baths in one day, and wearing two masks, just to try and ensure I'm not infected. I lived with my daughter as well. As journalists we got exposed to a lot."

While most respondents admitted to battling their own fears of catching the coronavirus or infecting their loved ones, Ismail says this did not stop them from doing their jobs because they believed it was their duty to continue working;

> "I felt quite privileged to be reporting on the global pandemic from South Africa. There was always the fear of contracting the virus. It took a while to get the vaccine, so it was a concern. My colleague died from contracting COVID-19 and that was devastating for me. I was the last person to work with him. You think to yourself, if it can happen to him, it can happen to me. Then there were friends and family who started getting COVID-19 and dying. It was taxing."

Mnisi added that it was difficult coming home to loved ones and maintain social distancing:

> “When the pandemic hit I was living with my elderly grandmother, although she didn’t have comorbidities it was a constant worry as a young person and a journalist. I didn’t just visit court rooms I was in hospitals as well. I was in touch and in contact with a number of people. It impacted my personal life and how I interacted with my loved ones.”

On the African continent, journalists’ mental health is severely underreported. Many of them don’t have medical insurance and can barely afford counselling while covering traumatic topics and in this case a life-threatening pandemic (Al Jazeera, 2025). A 2020 study which looked into the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on East African women journalists found Mental health is an issue of concern not just among journalists but the general public (African Women in Media, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic considerably impacted journalists' mental health. It exposed journalists to heightened stress, anxiety, and trauma. They suffered psychological distress from covering emotionally charged stories. These include rising death tolls, overburdened healthcare workers, and misinformation. A study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020) conducted by Dr. Anthony Feinstein and Meera Silva, found that 70% of journalists covering COVID-19 reported some form of emotional strain, with 26% experiencing severe anxiety and 11% showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**.** The prolonged uncertainty, fear of infection, and increased workload contributed to burnout, while the lack of institutional mental health support in newsrooms exacerbated these challenges. These findings highlight the urgent need for systemic mental health support in journalism, particularly in crisis settings (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020).

7.6 Preparing for another pandemic

A consensus from the respondents was that like many if not all industries, television broadcasters were unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic and that reporters and camera operators were thrown into the deep end, learning as time went on how to maneuver around the regulations imposed by government and still fulfilling their obligations as video journalists. Mchunu says newsrooms have gone back to their old ways:

> “It seems we have forgotten. Everyone was still learning with COVID-19, but what if there is a next time? What happens then? I think newsrooms should have conversations, they should be beefing up where they were not beefed up and have policies in place. COVID-19 taught us that things cannot be the same. It made its own new normal that we had to adapt too. I think this is a missed opportunity. Not only for one particular newsroom but for the entire news fraternity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we were all caught napping in a sense.”

Gori highlighted how the role of journalists became a crucial element in getting factual and accurate information to the public:

> “I think COVID-19 as a whole highlighted how important journalism is. It demonstrated that there is a role that we play. We are there to ensure that the correct information is being broadcasted. We have access to change makers, law makers and news makers. We are able to ask the questions that people need answers too. I think through all the COVID-19 coverage, it showed that the role we play can’t be automatically taken by citizen journalism, it has a place.”

Sholwana describes how newsrooms and journalists had to maneuver unchartered territory:

> “Everyone was watching it from China and then a week after that boom, COVID-19 is here. The government was not prepared. Newsrooms had to think on their feet, while protecting the journalists on the ground. You can’t have no news, so newsrooms had to make plans and make sure they limit the risk for the guys on the ground. It was some scary times for television news reporting.”

Mnisi said newsrooms cannot take the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 experience for granted.

> “I think you never know when a disaster will hit. I think it’s important to prepare for anything and have teams that keep track of any disasters or health scares. That will help newsrooms to better prepare and for them to put money aside for any eventuality.”

Masilela stated that industry players should be gathering everyone who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic to develop a strategy:

> "I think it will be wise for broadcasters to prepare for another pandemic. Reporters and camera operators must be well resourced to work from home, as well as ensure more psychological support. There should be a forum, where reporters can share knowledge and share how COVID-19 impacted the industry."

Respondents stressed that the establishment of comprehensive guidelines and protocols is critical to reducing operational chaos in newsrooms during future health crises. They argued that pre-planned crisis management frameworks would not only streamline the reporting process but also better safeguard newsroom integrity under pressure. Moreover, there was a broad consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic underscored journalism's vital role in society—especially in ensuring the principles of open justice are maintained. This sentiment resonates with previous research from the Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism (2021) that highlights the essential function of clear operational methods and Newman et al (2021) that looked at the broader societal impact of strong journalistic practices during global emergencies.

8. DISCUSSION

This section presents a detailed discussion that intertwines the findings with the theoretical framework underpinning the study. It critically examines the data in light of established theoretical constructs, drawing explicit connections between the observed results and broader academic discourses.

This study on television court reporting in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals important dynamics when viewed through the dual lenses of agenda-setting and the political economy of communication. From an agenda setting perspective, the rapid shift from physical to virtual court hearings highlighted journalism's role in shaping public discourse. With the suspension of in-person court access in the initial stages of the lockdown, television court reporters were compelled to reframe their coverage, focusing on the fundamental value of open justice and the transparency of the judicial process. In doing so, they were not merely reporting events but actively determining which aspects of the pandemic were most relevant to the public. By having to quickly adapt to the new lockdown protocols, this highlighted the limitations of virtual proceedings and emphasising the dedication of court reporters under challenging conditions. This successfully put into focus the importance of accessible and accountable judicial processes during emergencies.

Concurrently, applying the political economy of communication perspective uncovers the structural forces underpinning the broadcast of certain court cases. This report reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted traditional television court reporting in South Africa, laying bare how economic imperatives rather than pure public interest influence where broadcasters will prioritise their resources. From a political economy of communication perspective, broadcasters are not isolated sources of information but entities operating within a competitive market where ratings are a key determinant of survival and profitability. During the pandemic, as physical access to courts was restricted, television networks quickly transitioned to virtual court sittings. While this adaptation helped sustain the democratic ideal of open justice by ensuring that court proceedings remained accessible, the underlying motivation for such

broadcasts shifted markedly toward ratings generation. High-profile and sensational cases were foregrounded not only because they captured public attention but also because they guaranteed higher advertising revenues in a time of economic uncertainty. This trend highlights how market pressures and resource inequalities drive content selection and presentation. In essence, the news values during the crisis skewed toward sensationalism, prioritising court stories that boosted ratings over those that might serve the traditional public interest of bolstering transparency and accountability in the justice system. as the economic pressures of the pandemic intensified, the public service mandate of open justice was increasingly compromised by the imperatives of profitability. This case underscores the need for policymakers and media regulators to re-evaluate structural support in order to safeguard the democratic functions of the media, even in times of crisis.

9. CONCLUSION

This section combines the research findings, reflecting on their implications in light of the study's objectives and theoretical framework. It summarises key insights, evaluates the contributions and limitations of the work, and offers recommendations for future research and policy development.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped television court reporting in South Africa, exposing both the vulnerabilities and innovative potentials of the system. The enforced shift from physical courts to virtual hearings not only hindered reporters from accessing the full visual and human drama of courtroom proceedings but also underscored a concerning trend, the drive for engaging, high-ratings content often overshadowed the public interest imperative of open justice. As newsrooms scrambled to adapt under strict lockdown measures and technological constraints such as unstable internet connectivity impacting both visuals and audio—the art of telling a court story was significantly altered. Despite these challenges, broadcasters and camera operators demonstrated remarkable resilience by adopting digital strategies and forging collaborative efforts with judiciary officials. This pivot, however, calls attention to structural issues within the broadcasting industry, where economic imperatives and the pursuit of ratings can compromise the depth and integrity of public interest reporting. Moreover, the mental and emotional toll on journalists further highlights a pressing need for sustained institutional support. While physical court hearings have resumed, virtual court sittings are here to stay. It remains essential for decision makers and media regulators to continually re-evaluate and invest in both technological and human resources, ensuring that television court reporting continues to serve its crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability, and open justice in an increasingly digital era. The findings of this study highlight the resilience and adaptability of television court reporters in South Africa during a period of unprecedented disruption.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude this research report, this chapter outlines a set of recommendations designed to enhance the preparedness and resilience of newsrooms and television court reporters for future pandemics.

Recommendation 1: Clear Protocols and Procedures

- A consensus amongst participants in this research report is that newsrooms were unprepared for the disruption that the coronavirus pandemic initiated. Clear protocols and procedures need to be developed that will ensure newsrooms can still function optimally and also take into consideration the safety of journalists. A dialogue between stakeholders in the industry could assist in developing standardised protocols and procedures which can then be adapted to the different mediums within the industry.
- Court staff should be adequately trained on how they can better facilitate online/remote court sittings for journalists as to better enhance open justice and to develop contingency plans if technology were to fail.

Recommendation 2: Appropriate infrastructure

- Court administrators and television court reporters can assist each other by having a dialogue about what kind of infrastructure should be included in court rooms to make it simpler to televise court sittings remotely for example cameras, lighting and microphones.
- Develop a guideline for courts when it comes to the positioning of equipment that will assist with online court sitting which can be regularly be reviewed.
- Develop clear guidelines on how online court sittings can be accessed by television court reporters and if technology fails what are the alternative arrangements.

Recommendation 3: Improved access to information

- Courts can consider creating a user friendly portal where journalists can access information about upcoming court sittings that are physical and virtual. Platforms such as The Southern African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII) and CaseLines do exist, however these platforms could also include a specific function for court reporters in particular that can assist in searching and providing more information on high profile matters and cases of public interest.
- Clear guidelines on who journalists can contact for specific court sittings along with their contact details such as email addresses and landlines to ensure a smoother process when it comes to media requests to bring cameras inside courts or to request permission to televise a virtual court sitting.
- Newsrooms can also make the SANEF 'Reporting the Courts' guide mandatory reading for all their journalists which is freely available online.

Recommendation 4: Continued collaboration between broadcasters

- Television news broadcasters should continue with the practice of collaborating and combining resources in televising court proceedings because it addresses issues that arise from recording court proceedings such as lack of space (a limited number of cameras are usually allowed inside the court room), controlling expenses (pool feed becomes a more cost-effective way to televise court proceedings) especially in situations where there is a case that is ongoing for an extended period of time such as a trial.
- Television broadcasters could also consider collaborating with mediums such as radio and print. These mediums generally have audio-visual journalists who record footage for their websites.

Recommendation 5: Mental health support

- This research report has found that journalists who were actively reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic suffered psychological distress.
- Newsrooms should provide counselling or some kind of therapy not only to assist journalists to deal with the trauma that was created by the COVID-19 pandemic to also provide them with tools on how to better manage their mental and emotional wellbeing if or when another pandemic occurs.

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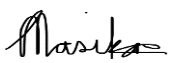
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