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Newspapers' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini: from distanced re/presentations to socio-health panics

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This paper examines the coverage and re/presentation of the coronavirus pandemic by two mainstream newspapers in the Kingdom of Eswatini, namely, the *Times of Eswatini* and the *Eswatini Observer* between January and June 2020. Framing and discourse analyses are used in the examination of news stories. The key to this study is how the coverage and re/presentation evolved as 'new facts' about the virus emerged. From being re/presented in a distanced form to becoming a localised scare, the travelling of the virus in space and time and its profile in the newspapers are examined. When the virus began to enjoy widespread coverage, news stories focused on virus incidence and later started paying attention to the internal evolution of the virus and how the government was responding to it. The analysis shows that political indexing sustained the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to political and official indexing, media coverage largely reproduced the views of those in power, especially the construction of lockdown regulations as rational and legitimate. The government and security officials characterised the coronavirus as an invading enemy that could only be defeated through 'war'. The news media reproduced the war language of the government and security officials, and thus legitimised the lockdowns and security surveillance. In addition to regulatory interventions, the results reveal that the government and civil society initiated prayer and fasting sessions as part of response interventions. This paper concludes that health journalism pays less attention to health scares that are seen to be happening 'elsewhere'. However, once the problems become local, the news value of proximity enables journalists to provide extensive coverage. In addition, the coverage of pandemics begins with increased coverage and panic, followed by constant attention and after some time, the stories leave front pages as journalism fatigue kicks in.

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Introduction and context

At the time of writing this paper, the Kingdom of Eswatini (a small country of 1.3 million people in Southern Africa), has recorded 46,330 COVID-19 cases, 44,734 recoveries and 1231 deaths. The COVID-19 pandemic is evolving daily, and so are the infections, deaths, and communication situation dynamics. While several countries recorded their first COVID-19 cases in January and February, Eswatini had its first case on 13 March 2020, and since then the spread of the virus has been on an upward trend. The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has become an existential nightmare. It has forced an unprecedented life shutdown across the world, with governments implementing varied 'lockdown' strategies to contain its spread. In the context of the 'lockdowns' and confusion around the spread and lethality of the virus, panics amongst the population increased. These panics are worsened by fake news, myths, and disinformation regarding the virus. In this context, this paper argues, journalism becomes essential in debunking the 'infodemics' and disseminating accurate information through coherent public health communication. The right to know has been heightened, and the media's role in communicating the crisis is more central than ever. This paper examines the coverage and re/presentation of the coronavirus pandemic by two mainstream newspapers in the Kingdom of Eswatini, namely, the *Times of Eswatini* and the *Eswatini Observer* between January and June 2020. The mainstream print media in Eswatini is dominated by two key national publishing groups: Times of Swaziland Group of Newspaper (owned by the Loffler family) and the Swazi Observer Group of Newspapers (owned by Tibiyo Taka Ngwane) (Simelane, 1995; Mbingo, 2017; MISA, 2020). The Times of Swaziland Group of Newspapers are the publishers of the *Times of Eswatini* (daily Newspaper), *Swazi News* (Saturday weekly), the *Times on Sunday* and *What's Happening* (tourist newspaper). The Swazi Observer Group of Newspapers publishes the *Eswatini Observer* (daily newspaper), *Observer on Saturday* and the *Sunday Observer*. This study purposively chose these two mainstream newspapers for examination: the *Times of Eswatini* (analysis combined *Swazi News* [Saturday] and the *Times on Sunday*) and the *Eswatini Observer* and *Observer on Saturday* and *Observer on Sunday*. The paper uses Cohen's (1972) thesis of moral panics to unpack the social, health and media panics that underpinned the response to the coronavirus in Eswatini. Framing and discourse analyses are used in the examination of news stories. The key to this study is how the coverage and re/presentation evolved as 'new facts' about the virus emerged. From being re/presented in a distanced form to becoming a localised scare, the travelling of the virus in space and time and its profile in the newspapers are examined. When the virus began to enjoy widespread coverage, news stories focused on virus incidence and later started paying attention to the internal evolution of the virus and how the government was responding to it. The analysis shows that political indexing sustained the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to political and official indexing, media coverage largely reproduced the views of those in power, especially the construction of lockdown regulations as rational and legitimate. The key to note is that health journalism pays less attention to health scares that are seen to be happening 'elsewhere'. However, once the problems become local, the news value of proximity enables journalists to provide extensive coverage. In addition, the coverage of pandemics begins with increased coverage and panic, followed by constant attention and after some time, the stories leave the front pages as journalism fatigue kicks in.

Communicating the COVID-19 pandemic: a review of available literature

The media are important in communicating the COVID-19 pandemic. The news media act as the primary source of public

information (Gitlin, 1980) and the information provided is important in shaping the public's knowledge and perceptions about the coronavirus. De Coninck et al. (2020) argue that the "public's reliance on news media coverage to convey accurate information increases during times of uncertainty and crisis" (p.151). Due to the proliferation of fake news and misinformation on social media, De Coninck et al. (2020) see the mainstream news media as "important platforms for informing the public". Research into media coverage and representation of the COVID-19 pandemic is evolving. Available research has mostly focused on media coverage in the global North, leaving a gap in knowledge about media coverage in the global South, especially Africa.

Furthermore, the available studies have seldom used framing and discourse analysis but rather have been mostly concerned with the quantity of coverage. Basch et al. (2020) examined the content of news videos posted online and found that among the key topics mentioned, death, the spread of the virus and pandemic-induced anxieties were mentioned the most compared to prevention information. In their conclusion, they noted that the media, by giving attention to negative aspects of the pandemic, failed to provide useful information about prevention. Information about prevention would have helped people with coping strategies and in their development of health-sustaining behaviours (Basch et al., 2020). Gozzi et al. (2020) explored how media coverage and epidemic progression influenced public attention and response. Interesting to note from their results is that public attention and response were determined and driven mostly by media coverage of the pandemic and not necessarily the spread of the virus itself. Moreso, news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was seen as linked to virus incidence. Essentially, they found that as the incidence increased so did media attention. In Eswatini, as the results in this paper show, the news media coverage of the pandemic increased in relation to increases in virus incidence, especially local incidence.

This paper avers that the news media have had considerable power to shape people's perceptions and attitudes about the virus. Motta et al. (2020) examined how the right-leaning media (conservative) in the United States covered COVID-19 through frames of denial, scepticism and blame-shifting and in the process enabled the spread of misinformation. Their study notes that public perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic are linked to political party ideologies where most Democrats showed concern about the virus earlier than the Republicans (especially those who relied on news channels such Fox News). The authors blame these partisan perceptions on the misinformation propagated by the conservative right-leaning media. Factually incorrect information was seen to be more accepted if it came from trusted sources especially the mainstream news media such as Fox News. Similar observations are made by Bursztyn et al. (2020) who argue that misinformation spread by the right-leaning media was believed by audiences who relied on such sources for news. Chock and Kim (2020, p. 1180) concur with these views by noting that in the "early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. conservative news downplayed the threat of the virus". The preponderance of misinformation by the conservative news media could be linked to the White House and especially the then United States President, Donald Trump's passivisation of the virus in the early stages. In their study of how media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted financial markets' behaviour, Haroon and Rizvi (2020) observe that media coverage of the pandemic generated "overwhelming panic" and this correlated with the volatility in the financial markets (p.1). This paper is an attempt to contribute towards an understanding of how the news media have covered and represented the pandemic but focusing on newspapers in Eswatini.

Methodology

This article aligns with a philosophical position that the world is socially constructed and the social forces/formations that gain discursive hegemony are successful in making their ideas about the world common sense ideas. This paper examines how the coverage and re/representation of the coronavirus pandemic evolved over time in two Eswatini mainstream newspapers, i.e., the *Times of Eswatini* and the *Eswatini Observer*. These two newspapers are important as they reach across the country, are the two mainstream quality newspapers in the country and thus have the power to set and shape discursive agendas in the country. Examining how they cover/ed and re/represented the coronavirus pandemic is central to understanding how the subject became constructed and what implications those constructions could have on how the country responded to the virus. The amount of attention given to a subject helps to show whether the subject is important or not and at what moments. This is also useful in tracing critical discourse moments (Carvalho, 2008) and understanding the drivers of coverage. Framing analysis and re/presentation draws attention to the fact that the media construct reality through news management techniques that include selection, priming and framing. The way the media selects what to cover and what not to cover, the actors and their roles in stories help in setting the agenda for public discourse.

Newspaper articles for analysis were selected through a rigorous multiphase ‘search and select’ processes on the online repositories of the two newspapers. Advanced search tools were used to limit results to the timeframe, subject and a specific newspaper. The stories should have been published in either of the two newspapers and published between January 1 and June 30, 2020. The 1st of January 2020 was chosen to see whether local newspapers paid attention to the virus outbreak in Wuhan, China. While the spread of the coronavirus had not yet been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, the virus’ potential to spread and lethality were already making international headlines. The 30th of June was seen as allowing an analysis of the virus spread into the country and how the media coverage and representation evolved over time. The words “coronavirus” or “COVID-19” were used to filter out unnecessary search returns. Having aggregated all the stories matching this criterion, the next level involved a scan-type reading (Carvalho, 2007) of the story headline and sub-headline to establish if COVID-19 was a central theme. Only those stories where COVID-19 was a central theme were downloaded for analysis. This data collection process yielded 926 stories where the coronavirus was a central theme. NVIVO 12 was used as an analytical tool where stories were classified according to the month of publication and newspaper and coded according to nodes developed through pilot data analysis. These nodes acted as the frames and themes. Framing analysis was applied as an analytical and interpretation intervention to the coded texts. To get the broad quantitative data, where one needed to establish the issue/frame salience through quantification, the coded texts were used as reference counts and these counts were converted into meaningful numbers and percentages. The data quantification process allowed for the broad appreciation of the issues that gained much prominence in the coverage and allowed for comparisons to be made between the two publications. In addition, the sources that are referenced more in the news can be regarded as discourse actors who have the power to set the agenda and also define issues for everyone else.

The spiral of coverage

The coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini newspapers developed from being a distanced (McManus, 2000) subject

(with less attention and whenever attention was given, it was seen as a problem happening elsewhere) to a localised problem. Despite COVID-19 becoming a major global news media issue in mid-January, the subject did not get discursive salience in the Eswatini mainstream newspapers. In January, the *Eswatini Observer* had two stories about the virus while the *Times of Eswatini* did not have any story. As agenda-setting institutions, the news media in Eswatini passivised the pandemic by their failure to make the subject salient in their coverage. In February, when the subject began to enjoy notable media coverage in the country, only the *Eswatini Observer* managed to dedicate some space to the subject. The poor coverage, especially by the *Times of Eswatini*, helped in the construction of the COVID-19 pandemic as a distant problem. From the distanced media coverage, it can be said that the perception that was being sold was that Eswatini was ‘safe’.

The news media, by their selection and framing of public issues, are powerful in deciding what the public discusses and renders important. The news media construct for their audiences what is important and how to ‘talk about’ issues raised. This is comparable to Bernard Cohen’s (1963, p. 13) logic that while the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” and in doing so, the media influences “the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p.177). As the coronavirus began to travel to the global South in February 2020, the news media in Eswatini began to pay attention to ‘this killer’ virus through localised constructions. Images of the ‘killer’ disease from China were invoked and contracting the virus was equal to ‘dying’ because there is no cure for the virus. The virus was constructed as an outsider that was brought in by ‘travellers’ from China. The spread of the virus across the world prompted the government of Eswatini to screen travellers from China at ports of entry. The news media also created an environment of suspicion, especially in relation to travellers from China and later ‘all those from outside’ Eswatini. For example, stories such as “Near-panic as the student arrives from China” (Sifiso Dlamini, *Eswatini Observer*, 31 January 2020) promoted stigma and disassociation. The labelling of the virus as having strong Chinese links actively constructed the virus as a Chinese invader who was supposed to be resisted at all costs. Consequently, the media constructed the ‘us’ and ‘them’ bipolar distinctions where the ‘local non-travellers’ were to protect themselves against the arriving ‘other’ outside travellers.

However, as the first case was reported in South Africa on 5 March 2020, a localised discourse emerged. The *Times of Eswatini* reported that “South Africa’s confirmation of the second case of coronavirus yesterday poses a great risk to Eswatini” (Mfanukhona Nkambule, “Eswatini now at great risk of coronavirus”, 8 March 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic became re/presented from a panic position. Analogous to Stan Cohen’s (1972) moral panic theory, the virus becomes an existential threat in the media. Following the initial reports about the virus in South Africa, Eswatini witnessed a spiral in news coverage with the stories evolving from being a Chinese problem—into a response to a travelling virus that had found its way into the global South. More importantly, as the South African president Cyril Ramaphosa began to hold press conferences in South Africa outlining response measures, the government in Eswatini began to follow suit. It is important to observe that due to political indexing, the stories in March 2020 were indexed to government officials and politicians who held press conferences and parliamentary discussions.

The number of stories rose significantly between March and May and began stagnating around the end of May and June. It is safe to conclude that this is linked to journalism fatigue and also

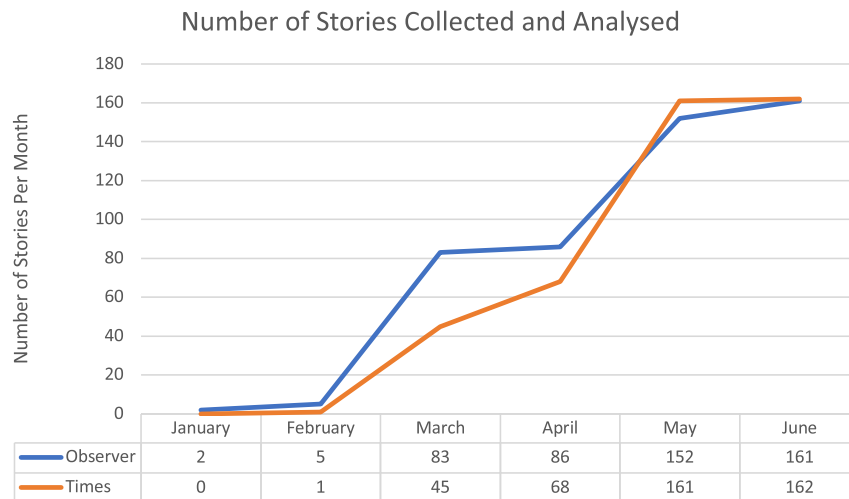


Fig. 1 Frequency and patterns of coverage. The chart shows the frequency and patterns of coverage between January and June 2020. Coverage was low in January but peaked as the virus was detected in South Africa and finally in Eswatini.

stagnating political statements about the virus. Figure 1 shows the frequency and patterns of coverage between January and June 2020.

Once the virus was detected in Eswatini on 13 March, news headlines depicted a nation in a state of despair and panic. The discourse moved from distanciation towards localisation. The newspapers created a moral-health panic where the virus was constructed as an ‘outsider’, an ‘invader’ and a ‘killer’. In the story “Eswatini records the first case of coronavirus” (Zwelihle Sukati, *Eswatini Observer*, 14 March 2020), the coronavirus was portrayed as a ‘local’ problem: “In what will come as very disturbing news, the ministry of health of the Kingdom of Eswatini has confirmed its first case of COVID-19, a condition caused by coronavirus.... Even worse is the fact that the ministry is waiting for laboratory results of 12 other suspected cases”. In writing about the increase in the number of coronavirus positive people, the newspapers described the increases through language that suggested panic. For example, headlines such as “COVID-19 Cases Hit 500” and “COVID-19 Cases Shoot to 700” became common as the newspapers attempted to paint the increase in cases as being ‘out of hand’ and thus the country was, by implication, failing to contain the virus. The panics, I argue, were not limited to the newspapers only, but in a public language where the Manzini region, because of high COVID-19 cases, was nicknamed Wuhan-lite (The coronavirus broke out from Wuhan City in the Hubei province in China). The panicky news coverage can be attributed to how the coronavirus was constructed by the international media: it was easily spread, caused breathing problems, and had a higher mortality rate. The construction and re/presentation of the coronavirus in Eswatini newspapers through panic and despair should be understood in the context of journalism under panic where the journalists themselves could have been panicking, especially when there was no cure or therapy for the ‘infected’.

COVID-19 coverage: exploring issue/frame salience

From the 13th of March when the first COVID-19 case was confirmed, the news media increased their coverage of this ‘developing and evolving problem’. The coverage, while having started by paying attention to ‘new infections’ locally, also began to pay attention to how the government responded to the outbreak of the virus. The analysis of issue-attention across the two newspapers (Figs. 2 and 3) shows that newspapers paid much

attention to government interventions (social distancing guidelines, the declaration of the state of emergency, hospital preparedness, economic interventions and social welfare), the impact of the virus on sports and culture, the human impacts of the virus (deaths, spread of cases, unemployment, starvation), the impact of the virus on education and lastly the impact of the virus on the economy. As shown in Figs. 2 and 3, government interventions were given much discursive salience across the two newspapers. Out of the 926 news stories analysed, 348 focused on government interventions, 131 focused on human impacts, 87 on the impact on sports, 50 on economic impacts, and 39 on impacts on education. In the category of interventions, social distancing and lockdown regulations were referenced a total of 405 times in both newspapers. The key discourse sponsors of the social distancing regulations were the prime minister, the minister of health, the minister of commerce and the police. Newspaper coverage of the human impact frame was dominated by the ‘local infections’ sub-frame. A total of 187 references to ‘new infections’ were made in both newspapers (*Eswatini Observer* 94 and *Times of Eswatini* 93). Amid an evolving pandemic, journalists from both newspapers afforded more space to stories on interventions. This could be explained by the need to highlight what the government was doing to address the health scare. Again, more press conferences from the government, especially the Ministry of Health and the prime minister’s office produced considerable news content that the journalists could not ignore. Most of the stories on interventions (legislation, education, sports and the economy) used government officials as discourse actors.

Drawing from McCombs and Shaw (1972), the issues that are given prominence are those that the news media deem to be most important. For example, sports seem to be an important aspect of news production. In both newspapers, attention towards COVID-19 impacts on sports is more than the attention given to education and economic impacts. In total, 87 stories (54 *Eswatini Observer* and 33 *Times of Eswatini*) were dedicated to impacts on sports compared to the 39 (18 *Eswatini Observer* and 21 *Times of Eswatini*) given to education and 50 afforded to the economy (31 *Eswatini Observer* and 19 *Times of Eswatini*). Using the logic of the agenda-setting theory, it can be argued that newspapers prioritised enabling conversations about COVID-19 impacts on sports over education and the economy—and by so doing constructed sport (football) as an important aspect of public discourse. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that “In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play

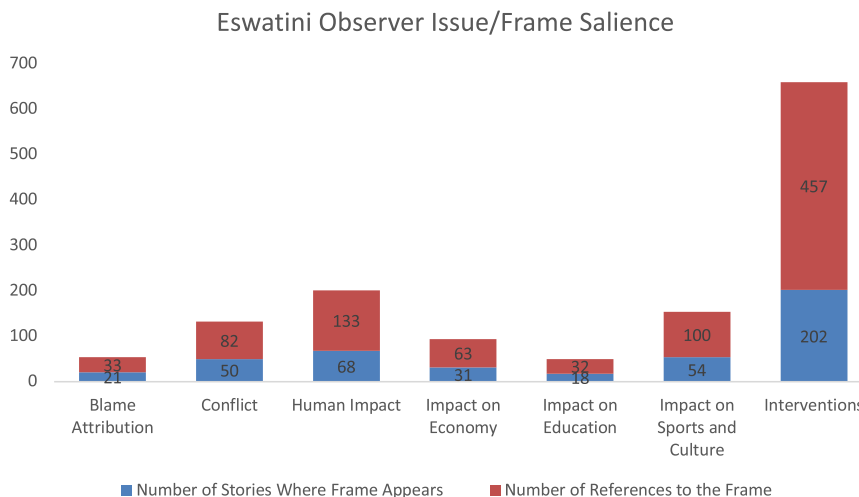


Fig. 2 Eswatini observer issue/frame salience. The chart shows the salience given to different issues in the Eswatini Observer. It shows that newspapers paid much attention to government interventions, the impact of the virus on sports and culture, the human impacts of the virus, and the impact of the virus on education and lastly the impact of the virus on the economy.

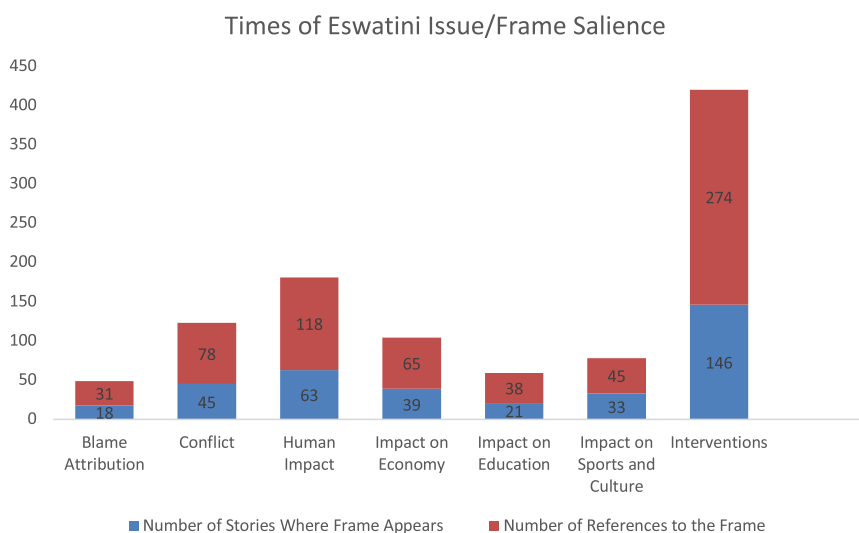


Fig. 3 Times of Eswatini issue/frame salience. The chart shows the salience given to different issues in the Times of Eswatini. It shows that newspapers paid much attention to government interventions, the impact of the virus on sports and culture, the human impacts of the virus, and the impact of the virus on education and lastly the impact of the virus on the economy.

an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (p. 176).

Political-official indexing: the mediated hegemony of political/official actors

The news media relied upon government and health experts for the construction and re/presentation of the COVID-19 pandemic story in Eswatini. Newspapers largely gave the government the primary definitional power—and thus official views defined the COVID-19 problem and set the agenda for the public discussion. The subject was therefore discussed within the terms set by the primary discourse actors. Out of the 763 references to sources identified by their names (government and official sources, business sources and other sources), it is important to observe that government and official sources accounted for 61 per cent (466), business sources 10 per cent (79) and other sources 29 per

cent (218). Corresponding to Bennett (1990), the sourcing patterns across the two newspapers indexed political and official sources and by implication amplified the ideas and voices of those in power. The most prominent sources were government officials, trade unionists and football officials (the minister of health, the prime minister, the minister of commerce, the health director in the ministry of health, teachers’ union, and the nurses’ union). The level of political indexing included the use of trade union leaders to delegitimise several claims made by the government. While the *Eswatini Observer* largely used government and official sources in its construction of coronavirus stories, it was observed that the *Times of Eswatini* relied on government and official sources but much less when compared with the *Eswatini Observer*. To politicise the COVID-19 story, the *Times of Eswatini* brought in critical views and largely relied on ‘anonymous sources’ who delegitimised most of the government claims. Figure 4 shows how the two newspapers used sources in their news construction. The differences in sourcing patterns could be attributed to newspaper ownership patterns. While the *Times of Eswatini* is

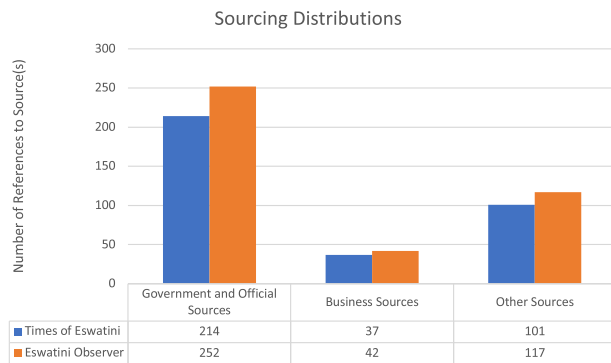


Fig. 4 Sourcing patterns and distribution. The figure shows that the *Eswatini Observer* largely used government and official sources in its construction of coronavirus stories. On the other hand, the *Times of Eswatini* relied on government and official sources but much less when compared with the *Eswatini Observer*.

fully privately owned, the *Eswatini Observer* is owned by *Tibiyo TakaNgwane*, a royal investment trust. Simelane (1995) and Mbingo (2017) have alluded to problems seen in separating the newspaper from the state, especially because of its editorial policy and failure to report on anything negative about the state.

Intervening to neutralise the invading virus

The government of Eswatini adopted several interventions to address the coronavirus ‘scourge’. Most of these interventions were aimed at minimising the spread of the virus. Containing the spread was key in eliminating the problem. In this section, this paper pays attention to the prevention discourse and argues that the news media also framed prevention as a key strategy in addressing the problem. Out of the 731 references (*Eswatini Observer* 457 and *Times of Eswatini* 274) to interventions in news stories by both publications, 405 of the references were on prevention (social distancing, wearing face masks, washing hands, the national emergency regulations, testing, screen, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine). Less attention was given to measures to resuscitate the economy, treatment, and preparedness and social welfare interventions.

‘Policing the crises’: prevention through lockdown(s) and compliance language. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Eswatini introduced several measures that were meant to reduce or minimise the spread of the virus. These included putting in place social distancing measures (closing of schools, banning of gatherings of more than 20 people, enforcement of wearing of face masks in public, closure of non-essential businesses and also restriction of travel). Generally, these measures found support and were reproduced and automatised by the news media. King Mswati III, through the then prime minister Ambrose Dlamini, declared a national emergency as a way of mobilising efforts to contain the spread of the virus. The prime minister was quoted noting: “Having assessed the magnitude and severity of the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic the world over, I have been commanded to declare a national emergency in the Kingdom of Eswatini with immediate effect for a period not exceeding two months” (Sibongile Sukati, “King declares national emergency”, *Times of Eswatini*, 18 March 2020). The *Eswatini Observer* also reported on the declaration of the national emergency. In the story “COVID-19 the chickens have come home to roost”, (Samkelo Mahlalela, 20 March 2020), the declaration was seen as a positive step to “curb the spread of the novel virus”. The regulations such as the banning of social gatherings, closure of schools, banning of international travel and

the closure of most businesses were understood by the news story as “aimed at slowing the transmission of the disease”.

The national emergency allowed for the deployment of all security forces and civil servants in the fight against the virus. The *Times of Eswatini*, in support of the lockdown noted: “Eswatini has declared a national emergency following the relentless spread of the coronavirus across the world”. Interesting here is how the newspaper used language that actively legitimised and naturalised the national emergency. The measures were thus seen as good because they were meant to stop “the relentless spread” of the virus. The national emergency was accompanied by the prime minister’s pronouncement of a partial lockdown, for example, the story “King commands Eswatini’s partial lockdown,” (*Times of Eswatini*, 25 March 2020). The prime minister was indirectly quoted clarifying that the lockdown was to last 20 days and was to target “selected sectors of the economy to curtail the spread of the coronavirus”. At the expiry of this initial lockdown period newspapers also uncritically reproduced the government decision to extend the lockdown by 21 days. In the story “Lockdown extended by 3 weeks” (Sibongile Sukati, *Times of Eswatini*, 16 April 2020) the prime minister described the extension as necessary because “This will ensure that we balance the health interests and economic stability of the kingdom”.

While the government of Eswatini attempted to prevent the spread of the coronavirus through enforcing a lockdown to ensure social distancing, those who broke the lockdown and social distancing regulations were represented in the news media as irresponsible. The media became part of the policing system through the reproduction of information that was meant to ensure compliance with government regulations. The media, it is argued, wholly legitimised the social distancing regulations with no attempt to accommodate debate on the effects of the regulations on other freedoms and rights. The media portrayed those who defied the lockdown regulations as social deviants who were putting the ‘nation’ at greater risk of ‘infection’ by the enemy (the coronavirus). Those who defied the King’s orders were doing so regardless of the ‘menacing spread’ and terror caused by the coronavirus across the world. The newspapers used the numbers of infected people globally to demoralise and delegitimise the actions of those who defied lockdown measures. Those who defied the regulations were ‘opening up’ the nation to the attack by the virus. Their actions were constructed not only as disrespectful to the King but also as irresponsible and endangering society. The fight against the virus was characterised by militarised language. This was a major feature across countries. The French President Emmanuel Macron and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa are some of the global leaders who described the coronavirus as an invader befitting of a military response. An *Eswatini Observer* editorial (Alec Lushaba, “Lord heal our land,” 30 March 2020) averred that “This is war! Kindly adhere to the wisdom of the Commander, His Majesty King Mswati III”.

The materiality of the warfare language is manifested in how the news media uncritically accepted and reproduced the shutdown measures. At the state level, the deployment of security forces and the enactment of COVID-19 regulations which imposed restrictions on freedom of movement and expression was in line with the war tone adopted by the government and also their international peers. The news media reproduced the government interventions by constructing them as common sense and thus immune to criticism or other alternatives. A one-dimensional conformational discourse acquired a hegemonic status that could not be questioned because it was the right decision to take. This created a state of unconscious subordination. Susan Sontag (1989) encouraged researchers to understand the metaphoric language of illnesses together with the bio-medical

and other interventions linked to ‘addressing’ the illness. Sontag saw most illnesses as expressed through metaphors and thus saw language as central in how illnesses were perceived and lived. These metaphors could be used to shame and blame the disease and the ‘diseased’ (Craig, 2020), thereby alienating the ‘undesirable other’. David Craig argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterised through war metaphors. As shown earlier in this section, different discourse actors metaphorically constructed the pandemic as an enemy, an invader and in response, war measures were needed to resist it.

In response to the virus, the government encouraged people to stay at home and be in self-isolation. It was safer to be at home than to face the enemy outside. Synonymous with real curfews, staying at home shielded society from the dangers of direct confrontation with the virus. As Craig correctly argued, these war metaphors used by politicians and leaders and reproduced by the news media are “strategically designed to valorise self-reliance and the integrity of the private home, instead of the more suspect quarantine, a term that conjures up imprisonment Covid-ian war metaphors marshal us to valorise ‘front-line workers’—those deemed ‘essential’ to the medical, economic, social, and of course, political establishment” (2020, p. 3). In Eswatini, these war metaphors became useful in buying consent and subordination from the public.

The lockdown regulations proclaimed under the national emergency also allowed some degree of a surveillance state to be in operation. The newspapers amplified the call for those who defied lockdown regulations to be reported to the police. Stories such as “Call 999 if you notice a party” (Nonduduzo Kunene, *Eswatini Observer*, 27 April 2020) quoted the National Commissioner of the police, William Dlamini warning that “hosting of parties or any gathering is strictly prohibited”. In the same story, the minister of health Lizzie Nkosi echoed the warning from the police and “instructed members of the public to stop hosting parties or any gathering of any sort as they contribute immensely to the spread of coronavirus”. Those who defied the regulations were arrested and several headlines were published with the numbers of people who had been arrested. This could have worked in ‘sending a message’ to would-be offenders that the police were in an intolerant mood. In the story “34 arrested for defying lockdown”, (Delisa Thwala, *Eswatini Observer*, 30 March 2020) the police spokesperson was indirectly quoted as having said: “this was just the beginning” of a crackdown on those not respecting the lockdown.

The lockdown regulations also banned public transporters from carrying people during the day except for people offering essential services. In the story “5000 commuters left stranded in Manzini,” (Sifiso Nhlabatsi, *Eswatini Observer*, 31 March 2020) the newspaper discourse was in support of the police operations in banning transporters from entering towns: “law enforcers made sure that people adhered to the directive by Prime Minister Ambrose Mandvulo Dlamini to stay at home”. The story noted further that “By 9.30 a.m. the police and officers from His Majesty’s Correctional Services were chucking out public transport vehicles from Manzini Bus rank”. The security operations across the country were moralised in the *Eswatini Observer* as a way of making sure that people adhered to lockdown regulations. For example, the story “No-nonsense security forces turn them back” by Bongiwe Dlamini (*Eswatini Observer*, 28 April 2020), dichotomously represented those who broke the regulations as ‘irresponsible’ villains whose actions put the health of the ‘nation’ in danger. This group of deviants was acting in opposition to the ‘well-behaved’ ‘us who complied’. The construction of antithetical ‘them’ who were being ‘turned back’ by the vigilant and “no-nonsense security forces” helped in labelling those whose behaviour was not in line with the law.

Through newspaper discourse, the security forces were praised for staging “strategic roadblocks where motorists and pedestrians’ reasons for wanting to enter the city were scrutinised”. According to this news discourse, getting into town was primarily non-essential but a ‘want’.

The *Times of Eswatini* also criticised the defiance of lockdown regulations. In the story “COPS break lockdown rules, catch COVID-19”, (Welcome Dlamini, 14 June 2020) the newspaper noted that while the police officers were expected to uphold the law and contain the spread of the virus, some officers had “violated rules put in place to ensure such” and in “the process, the officers contracted the coronavirus”. The language used in the story suggests that defying the lockdown directly contributed to one’s ‘infection’ and those who contracted the virus while breaking rules were not to be sympathised with. A police memo quoted in the story noted that the police National Commissioner was disappointed by the conduct and subsequent infection of the police officers. The memo noted “This headquarters has learnt with dismay that some officers have tested positive to the COVID-19 epidemic. Despite this official command, further investigations, known as contact-tracing as done by the Ministry of Health indicates that the positive cases were officers infected while in their homes yet they are expected to be at their respective camps in compliance to the above-quoted signal”. The church also encouraged authorities to “close down” any church gatherings that violated the lockdown regulations (Stanley Khumalo, “Defiant churches must be closed, leaders arrested,” *Times of Eswatini*, 19 March 2020). The story directly quoted Bishop Stephen Masilela warning: “Suspend all church services, conferences and camps that will be attended by more than 50 people”. Several news stories were dedicated to documenting culprits who defied lockdown regulations. One such headline is “Govt closes 52 businesses over compliance” which celebrated the government for acting morally by protecting the ‘nation’ against ‘misfits’ (Ashmond Nzima, *Times of Eswatini*, 5 June 2015).

The lockdown regulations also encompassed an attempt to stamp out ‘fake news’ and misinformation. Spreading fake news became punishable by law and those who spread the news were seen as breaking the regulations. The emergence of the coronavirus in December 2019 was accompanied by the emergence of what the World Health Organization director-general, Tedros Adhanom called ‘infodemics’. The term was used to describe misinformation and fake news that characterised social and media communications. Myths and untruths were spread regarding the nature of the virus, who was at risk and how lethal it was. In Eswatini, social media was also awash with myths and misinformation regarding the virus. The mainstream media’s role in such a crucial time became that of providing credible information. However, since it was key for the media to play the gatekeepers’ role and minimise the spread of misinformation, it became apparent that governments also used the COVID-19 scourge to label unfavourable information as fake news and this dampened the possibilities of transparency in how governments handled the pandemic. The news media, in a bid to provide credible news, became official mouthpieces of governments in service of the state. In a state of social chaos, it is understandable how the media gave in to officials. In Eswatini, the news media positioned themselves as credible gatekeepers against false information. Stories warning of the proliferation of fake news became common headlines and newspapers at certain moments also attempted to debunk the misinformation and fake news. In the story “Stop spreading coronavirus misinformation” by Nonduduzo Kunene (*Eswatini Observer*, 11 March 2020), the ministry of Health “condemned misleading reports about suspected and confirmed coronavirus cases in the country”.

The Director of Health Services in the Ministry of Health, Dr. Vusi Magagula was quoted warning that the fake news “were causing unnecessary fear and panic to the nation”. While the need to guard against fake news is noble, central to note is that the news media largely gave the government the primary power to define the ‘truth’ and therefore anything not coming from the government automatically became false. In this story, people were warned to only believe what came from the government as Magagula argued that “only him and the minister of health would announce to the nation about cases of coronavirus”. The minister of health was indirectly represented decrying the spread of fake information about COVID-19 in the country: “Minister Nkosi also noted that there were people who kept on posting false information on social media platforms regarding COVID-19, where she mentioned that it was only the ministry that would communicate with the public on the results of the suspected cases” (Khetsiwe Khumalo, “2 coronavirus suspects results out today”, *Eswatini Observer*, 13 March 2020). This is the dilemma of misinformation as the media struggles to juggle the information jungle. Relying on the government for the ‘truth’ creates a patronised and unwelcome regime of truth that is one-dimensional and carries the definitions and aspirations of those actors who have the power to define issues for the public and have unhinged access to forms of public discourse such as newspapers.

A nation in faith: prevention through prayer and fasting. One key feature of the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini was prevention and healing through prayer and fasting. As a solution to the virus, unlike secular countries, it is interesting to note that prayer and fasting were part of the prevention and treatment discourses in the country. The government, through a directive from King Mswati III, encouraged the nation to fast and pray. A national day of fasting and prayer was put aside on 28 March (Bongumusa Simelane, “King Calls for National prayer”, *Eswatini Observer*, 26 March 2020). These discourses were amplified by drawing from religious leaders who were given the primary definitional power in some news media stories. Headlines and entire stories were dedicated to the prayer and fasting discourses. For example, the editorial “Lord heal our land” (Alec Lushaba, *Eswatini Observer*, 30 March 2020), noted that prayer was the utmost solution to ‘beating’ the coronavirus. Alec Lushaba, the *Eswatini Observer* News Editor, in the same editorial, noted that “We are praying to God to protect the country against what we are seeing in the well-developed economies in Italy, England, Spain, the United States of America and what is already happening to our next-door neighbour the Republic of South Africa”. The story “Money will not save the world from COVID-19” (Nonduduzo Kunene, *Eswatini Observer*, 30 March 2020) also reproduced the prayer as solution discourse.

At a prayer service organised by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Nation Church was indirectly represented in the *Eswatini Observer* noting that “the nation, as well as the whole world, will only be saved by God from coronavirus not money”. The newspaper wholly reproduced the views of the Nation Church, without seeking alternative worldviews. The story used the church leaders as primary discourse sponsors. For example, the story indirectly quoted the church’s Archbishop Samson Hlatshwayo arguing that “His Majesty King Mswati III and the nation are protected by God, hence he called for the national fasting as well prayer against COVID-19”. Discourse works by reproduction and the views that are reproduced by the news media, albeit without questioning are framed and constructed as common sense. In this instance, the views of the church were automatised and normalised through discourse translation. The interests of the church were constructed as ‘national interests’. The referral to aspects of

‘protection’ by Archbishop Hlatshwayo in the story is done in a way that gives him the power to speak and ‘intercede’ on behalf of everyone. As a religious institution, the church acquired the discursive power to speak on behalf of everyone, i.e., God’s flock, that needed protection from the invisible ‘foreign invading virus’. The legitimisation and automatised of prayer as a rescue package were achieved through the structures of news and structures of discourse where only affirmative discourse actors were given the primary definitional power. This story had three sources and all of them ideologically agreed on the role of prayer and fasting as key in fighting COVID-19. All three sources (as discourse actors) are church leaders and pastors. This is also typical of how the news media frame issues by subjectively selecting discourse participants. As Stuart Hall et al. (1978) noted, only the discourse actors who are given access to the means of public discourse define (for everyone) issues and their views become hegemonic and acquire a common-sense level.

Conclusion

The coverage and re/presentation of the coronavirus pandemic by two mainstream newspapers in the Kingdom of Eswatini, namely, the *Times of Eswatini* and the *Eswatini Observer* between January and June 2020 have been examined and discussed. Drawing from Cohen’s (1972) thesis of moral panics, the paper unpacked the social, health and media panics that underpinned the response to the coronavirus in Eswatini. Basing on frame analysis and discourse analysis, the paper shows that the coverage and re/presentation evolved as ‘new facts’ about the virus emerged. From being re/presented in a distanced form to becoming a localised scare, the travelling of the virus in space and time and its profile in the newspapers were examined. The analysis indicates that once the virus was detected in Eswatini on 13 March 2020, news headlines depicted a nation in a state of despair and panic. The discourse moved from distanciation towards localisation. The newspapers created a moral-health panic where the virus was constructed as an ‘outsider’, an ‘invader’ and a ‘killer’. The news media increased their coverage of this ‘developing and evolving problem’. The frequency of coverage stagnated in May and June as journalism fatigue kicked in and also the number of press conferences from the government on the virus decreased. The findings highlight how the news media to a greater extent relied on official government sources in their coverage of the pandemic. The government sources were given primary definitional power over the COVID-19 pandemic narratives and their views set the agenda for how the issue was to be discussed, understood and from which frames. This was achieved by indexing government officials and politicians who held press conferences and parliamentary discussions. The key point to note is that health journalism pays less attention to health scares that are seen to be happening ‘elsewhere’. However, once the problems become local, the news value of proximity enables journalists to provide extensive coverage. In addition, the coverage of pandemics begins with increased coverage and panic, followed by constant attention and after some time, the stories leave the front pages as journalism fatigue kicks in. Conclusively, it can be noted that the coverage paid attention to ‘new infections’ locally, as well as emergency and hospital preparedness, economic interventions and social welfare. However, the coverage largely reproduced the views of those in power, especially in the construction of lockdown regulations as rational and legitimate.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to big file sizes but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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