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**THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY**  
**Graduate School of Media and Communications**

**COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA  
HOUSES IN UGANDA: CASE OF NEXT MEDIA SERVICES**

By

Arthur Matsiko  
553266

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Digital Journalism

Nairobi, Kenya

09/02/2024  
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APPROVAL PAGE

Aga Khan University  
Graduate School Of Media and Communications

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Digital Journalism.

Members of the Thesis Evaluation Committee appointed to examine the thesis of  
ARTHUR MATSIKO-553266, find it satisfactory and recommended that it be  
accepted.

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Prof. Nancy Booker,  
Dean,  
Chair, Thesis Evaluation Committee

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Emilly Comfort Maractho, PhD., Supervisor

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Member,  
Thesis Evaluation Committee

09/02/2024

## DECLARATION

**COVID-19 DISRUPTION AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA  
HOUSES IN UGANDA: THE CASE OF NEXT MEDIA SERVICES**

I, **ARTHUR MATSIKO-553266**, declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. The editorial assistance provided to me has in no way added to the substance of my thesis, which is the product of my research endeavours.

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Signature

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Date

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my fiancée.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of achieving this degree would have been impossible without many. Firstly, I would like to thank God and my lecturers for tirelessly supporting me throughout the entire journey of writing this research. Special appreciation goes to my supervisor Dr. Emilly Comfort Marachtho for guiding me, addressing my concerns and responding in real time to every written draft. I acknowledge Mr. Hesbon Owilla for his exceptional instructions during the course of my academic journey, and my gratitude goes to Mr. Alex Taremwa and Mr. Henry Kibira for ensuring that I received the necessary support and resources during my course.

## ABSTRACT

News production in the legacy media houses occurs in enclosed spaces. Editors, reporters, sub-editors, and news producers discuss and develop story ideas for production and dissemination on television, radio and print platforms. However, the Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant change in the traditional operation of the newsroom. This disruption interfered with the journalistic norms of story ideation, news sourcing, gatekeeping and distribution. Local and regional media organisations struggled through the Covid-19 pandemic because technological adoption mechanisms had long been dragged. By the time the pandemic hit Ugandan newsrooms, most media houses lacked fall-back plans, which led to several changes such as salary cuts, working in shifts, working from home, and downsizing. This study examined the nature of COVID-19 disruptions, their impact, and the coping strategies used by Next Media Services to deal with the interruption. This study used the Media Economics Theory to investigate the challenges and strategic mechanisms that this media house employed to remain viable in the industry. This research adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design with 19 journalists as the sample size. The study established that news consumers developed an urgency of staying informed, leading to increased consumption of digital news, especially in the digital age. The study established that the newsroom was the most affected department at Next Media Services. The researcher interviewed a series of staff, including 12 journalists and seven team members drawn from the marketing and sales department. The findings from the study also indicate that planning and story ideation meetings that were conducted daily were now adjusted to three times a week because journalists and editors were not meeting physically. Additionally, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread in the other parts of the world, audiences depended more on the online platforms for news and information updates.



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>CNN:</b>	Cable News Network
<b>COVID:</b>	Corona Virus Pandemic
<b>MDA's:</b>	Ministry Department and Agencies
<b>MOH:</b>	Ministry of Health
<b>MOJO:</b>	Mobile Journalism
<b>NMS:</b>	Next Media Services
<b>PPEs:</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>SOPs:</b>	Standard Operating Procedures
<b>TV:</b>	Television
<b>U.S:</b>	United States
<b>WHO:</b>	World Health Organisation

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

News production in legacy media houses occurs in enclosed spaces where editors, reporters, sub-editors and news producers sit to discuss and develop story ideas for production before distribution on different platforms such as television, radio and print (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019). Reporters are assigned to source news stories which they submit to sub-editors for correction and house style alignment before publishing or broadcasting. However, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, most media houses were forced into a dramatic sweep of change. The pandemic forced media managers to think more creatively and invest more into allowing journalists to work remotely increasing reliance on digital applications like Zoom, Google Meet, Twitter and WhatsApp for interviews, meetings and story idea generation (Mahon, 2021). The pandemic forced some media houses to close shop, others downsized especially those that heavily relied on advertising and sales because the political, commercial and social spheres were affected (Marc, 2021).

This disruption pushed media managers to develop better means of producing information as required, and invest more into using social media platforms by creating awareness campaigns through posters and infographics than before to combat the spread of fake news (Banaszynski, 2021). The occurrence of the pandemic and the alterations in traditional media operations affected news sourcing, packaging and distribution processes as audiences expected more frequent and timely information (Nguyen et al., 2022). This meant that journalists had to work faster and more

efficiently because of the demand for the real time news and information world over. Thus, the pandemic reaffirmed that the media is the main source of factual and credible information (Chibuwe et.al, 2022). In addition, audiences proved that they needed the media to authoritatively publish or explain particular topics to help them understand and ensure that precautionary measures.

## 1.2 Background to the Study

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant change in the traditional operation of the newsroom. This effect interfered with the journalistic norms of story ideation, news sourcing and distribution (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2021). For instance, most media houses opted for social media platforms, strengthening their presence by updating their audiences more often as events unfolded. Legacy media like print, television, and radio registered challenges that occasioned dependence on digital platforms for news production and dissemination (Simeu, 2021). Since the freedom of movement to meet sources was difficult due to the state-imposed lockdowns in most countries, most interviews and meetings had to be conducted using virtual platforms. However, audiences expected more information, which altered the news-seeking patterns (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

Media companies were forced to create sustainable policies to combat the disruptive financial and social constraints they faced. Globally, journalists faced more challenges in reporting figures because they appeared complex to explain and verify information especially with the spread of different conspiracy theories like the corona virus was manufactured as virus to end the African race, body steaming killed the virus, among others that circulated on several social media platforms (Radcliffe, Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2021). All these made audiences stick to legacy media platforms

to get the right information. To combat this, media houses in Uganda relied more on government social media accounts, Ministry Heads of Departments and Public Relations Officials. For instance, President Museveni and Dr Ruth Achieng, the Minister of Health, always used her Twitter platform to share information about the pandemic, the number of cases and the number of recoveries. This helped the media houses in sharing the correct information to the masses. According to Agley and Xiao (2021), there was misinformation about the virus, which forced journalists and media houses to strengthen their fact-checking procedures. This enabled the journalists and audiences to gain more knowledge about the pandemic (Garcia-Aviles, 2021).

Mayhew (2020) discovered that global print revenues would decrease due to the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. While some media houses managed to stay afloat, others shutdown due to financial constraints. Most media houses registered salary cuts, downsized employees, working remotely and in shifts, and scaled up on technology uptake (Heuva, 2022). Due to the pandemic, journalists and media organisations had to invest more in acquiring technological gadgets like the latest advanced smartphones for live reporting and soundproof equipment. For instance, journalist Larry Madowo, who worked with the British Broadcasting Corporation during the pandemic, shared a picture on social media as he was reporting live from home. The picture portrayed that he or the media house had invested in lighter equipment. Media houses adjusted to save costs on carrying equipment to the field, transport, and other expenses.

The pandemic was a unique occurrence which presented mental and diverse social challenges (Wahuyuni & Fitrah, 2022). To combat mental health breakdowns within the newsrooms, some media managers allowed journalists access to mental health experts since a public health crisis like Covid-19 raised “uncertainty” and insecure expectations about the future. This could have affected the efficiency of

journalists in their line of duty (Eisele et al., 2021). Additionally, editors were more open to coordinating with teams and handling various roles virtually. This was done by supporting them through constantly sharing their challenges, which built “emotional stability” (Garcia-Aviles, 2021). For example, at New Vision, the sub-editors and page designers would email their assigned pages and erect changes before meeting the editors to approve the pages, a process done online. If the editors found the pages aligned for production, messaging applications were used for communication.

In Brazil, media organisations improvised generating new revenue streams by hosting government educational programs (De Lima Santos et al., 2022). According to Jihyun et al., 2021, daytime television consumption increased during the first three months of the pandemic as audiences needed to know more about the crisis and how other countries were dealing with it.

Considering that the media plays an indispensable role in societal growth by availing vital information such as health-related matters to guide the citizenry during tough times like the pandemic, it is for this reason that media houses are sustained with reference to survival strategies. This is because if a similar pandemic occurs, media houses will have the ability and tenacity to adapt to change.

Walulya and Moges (2022) note that Covid-19 found Ugandan media houses grappling financially, pushing media managers into inventing mechanisms to stay afloat. Vision Group, which is both government- and privately-run, immediately shut down operations for three regional newspapers in the first 90 days of the pandemic. Since print media largely depends on sales and advertising, the imposed state lockdown led to a strong presence of online platforms by Uganda’s leading newspapers, Daily

Monitor and The New Vision availed free news access during the pandemic (Kyeyune, 2020).

Ugandan media houses played a major role in sharing accurate public health information about the pandemic. This was done through timely updates, and infographics that showed different means of standard operating procedures (SOPs) in combating the Covid-19 surge (Acme Team, 2021). As advertisers withdrew from media houses, maintaining a constant flow of revenue was cumbersome. Media houses depended more on verified information from the right sources since audiences accessed several digital platforms. The media's duty was to provide the right information to avoid anxiety and panic (Richmond, 2020).

Uganda announced the news of the first case of COVID-19 on March 16, 2020 (Olum & Bongomin, 2020). The Ministry of Health, through the Minister of Health, Dr Ruth Achieng, invited media outlet representatives and journalists to discuss the issue in detail. At the time, most media houses had switched programming, but the moment the announcement came, the event had to be live-streamed on YouTube channels. The media houses also updated their social media channels with the news, which is when press briefings became a constant for the public. As days progressed, media houses constantly updated their audiences on the cumulative infection statistics, the recoveries and prevention guidelines. Through this, a shift in social media and mobile device use increased. The public also saw an aspect of unity when media houses combined their productions and aired more Covid-19 prevention messages. The media industry was not prepared for this kind of shift, so some media houses closed while others had to halt the production processes of news content, particularly legacy media outlets.



This study, therefore, investigated the different copying strategies that Uganda's Next Media Services implemented during the Covid-19 disruption to remain operational and serve their cardinal role in the media industry.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The shift within the newsroom has been an ongoing debate especially in developing countries. This alteration has been affected by insufficient funds among other challenges (Mare, 2021). While local and regional media organisations struggled through the Covid-19 pandemic, international media houses faced minimal effects because of the earlier adjustments and/or changes made before the disruption (Băhnăreanu, 2020).

Global newsrooms have for long had technological adoption initiatives. For instance, in 2013 Aljazeera network a launched AJ+, a social media storytelling digital platform (Aljazeera, 2016). Sky Television as well started the "rolling news" initiative because the organisation management had predicted a rapid technological shift where audiences would need to access news wherever and when they want it (Ryley, 2014). According to Wemple (2016), CNN embarked on a digital expansion in 2016 and the organisation transitioned from distributing news content from the "traditional website" to other mobile platforms. When the pandemic struck, audiences were able to consume news via mobile applications.

Local and regional media organisations struggled through the Covid-19 pandemic because technological adoption mechanisms had for long been dragged. By the time the pandemic hit Ugandan newsrooms, most media houses lacked fall back plans which interfered and led to unexpected several salary cuts, working in shifts, working from home and downsizing.

Ugandan newsrooms that heavily depended on traditional journalistic modes of operation faced challenges during the pandemic (Adgate, 2021). It was difficult to adjust to the changes due to the outbreak. For instance, according to Mutente, (2022), papers like *The Kampala Sun*, *Red Pepper* had to shut down. National newspapers like the *New Vision* reduced salaries by up to 60% for some staff, while Daily Monitor reduced salaries by up to 35% for some employees. Despite efforts to sustain and operate newsrooms, how individual media houses coped with the pandemic and its impact was unclear. This study sought to examine the strategies adopted by Next Media Services as a case to provide insight into newsroom management during difficult times.

#### 1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study's general objective was to examine the Covid-19 coping strategies for media houses in Uganda. The study examined the Covid-19 disruptions and how media organisations sustained newsrooms during the pandemic.

##### *1.4.1 Specific Objectives*

1. To establish the nature of Covid-19 disruptions on Next Media Services.
2. To examine the impact of disruption of the Covid-19 on Next Media Services.
3. To establish the coping strategies used by Next Media Services in order to deal with the disruptions of Covid-19.

##### *1.4.2 Research Questions*

1. What was the nature of Covid-19 disruption on Next Media Services in Uganda?

2. What were the effects of Covid-19 disruption on the news operations of Next Media Services in Uganda?
3. What copying strategies did Next Media Services adopt in order to cope with the disruption of Covid-19?

### 1.5 Justification of the Study

Different studies have been conducted about the impact of the pandemic. For instance, in a 2022 cross-country study to examine the newsroom disruptions and opportunities presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, Chibuwe et al., 2022 discovered that the pandemic interfered with the news sourcing routines, which “compromised” the new production process. Quandt and Wal-Jorgensen (2021) discussed the impact of the pandemic as a significant and critical moment for digital journalism; the studies analyse and interrogate the implications of Covid-19 and what opportunities can be picked to rethink innovative journalism practices. Another study was conducted in Nigeria to examine how the media covered the pandemic. The study found that media houses covered the pandemic exclusively by providing the necessary information to audiences.

All these studies are important for media houses and the journalism world; however, there was a need to investigate the copying strategies that media houses applied during the pandemic. This study therefore, generated empirical evidence on the disruptions, implications and strategies employed in Ugandan newsrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic, which can be referred to in the event of a similar occurrence.

## 1.6 Significance of the study

It should be acknowledged that the survival of any media company depends on its ability to sustain itself financially, lest its independence is at stake, thereby compromising objectivity (Taremwa, 2021). Technological advancement has greatly influenced and altered the newsroom with automation (Hendrickx & Picone, 2022). It has mitigated access and news production by partially replacing the “human craft” or skill. Through analysing the copying strategies, this study will enable media practitioners to emulate strategies for their newsrooms in a similar crisis by providing reliable literature that will serve as reference points or manuals.

Communication scholars will use this study to create policies and strategies for crisis management, particularly on pandemics. This will be crucial because it will create an understanding of the strategies and mechanisms applied in crisis management, particularly for media houses.

## 1.7 Scope of the Study

The study focused on examining the strategies used by Next Media Services, a privately owned media organisation in Uganda, during the Covid-19 disruption. The media house runs several media outlets, including a communications firm. Before the pandemic, Next Media Services had embarked on an advanced digital strategy. Some of the outlets include Nile Post, an online news publication; Sanyuka TV which is the local TV station, NXT radio, NXT communications, Salaam TV and Nbs TV, and the Afro mobile application that contains digital news content from both Sanyuka TV and Nbs TV.

## 1.8 Limitations of the study

Since the study focused on copying strategies that could interest the researcher into seeking information about the company's financial issues during the specific period, which is an arguably sensitive part of any business entity, the researcher anticipated limited information from the target interviewees. To combat this, however, the researcher first sought an unofficial audience with the Next Media Services Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operations Officer, notifying both about this research project.

## 1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

**Technological shift:** A combination of innovation and journalism linkage between technology and journalism has transformed key aspects of contemporary news production, distribution, and consumption (Zamith & Barun, 2019). This study has used this term to discuss the implications of these key innovations and how they have disrupted the traditional operation of the newsroom.

**Digital platforms:** Ahmad et al., (2018) describe digital platforms as structures that add value to “technological systems” to serve as a foundation upon which complementary products, ideas and services can be advanced, used and shared. In the context of this study, this term has been operationalized to understand how newsrooms are taking advantage of these applications and programs for news production.

**Fact Checking:** Define the term fact-checking as the act of analyzing information or written reports, documents, data and information to ascertain their originality and ensure that the information is accurate and relevant for publication, viewership or consumption. Scholarship around fact-checking is now debated between

automated machines and human fact-checkers. The authors argue that automated fact checking may work faster, considering that it involves the use of machinery that has proven effective. However, there is no guarantee that the automated system will identify the correct information since most of the data is picked from a variety of data bases that could potentially give the wrong information (Nakov et al, 2021).

**Covid-19:** According to (Chen, Sung, & Yu-suin, 2020), this was an “outbreak” with a mystical “pneumonia” presenting symptoms of fever, dry cough, a running nose, loss of appetite, fatigue and occasional gastrointestinal symptoms. The disease was first reported in a Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan city, Hubei province in China, Uganda confirmed its first case on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020 after a 36-year-old male tested positive on arrival from a business trip in Dubai (Daily Monitor, 2020).

**Disruption:** This term has been operationalised with Terry (2020) definition to describe a sudden, unpredictable change that affects productive and successful organisational workflow. This sudden shift occurs when companies neglect or refuse to adapt to the rapid changes within the marketplace. In the context of this study, the word disruption is used to describe the sudden changes that occurred due to the pandemic.

**Infodemic:** According to the World Health Organisation (2020), the term infodemic refers to much information which may involve fake or “misleading” content distributed in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It instigates confusion and risk-taking habits that can affect the well-being of individuals. This term was coined during the COVID-19 outbreak after the WHO established that audiences failed to contain information from several sources that was either fake or factual. This study applied WHO’s definition to explain the impact of COVID-19.

**Strategy:** According to Barad (2017), a strategy is a purposeful set of aspirations, objectives or decisions set to achieve desired goals regardless of scarce or unpredictable resources. This study has used this term to discuss the specific measures or alternatives undertaken by Next Media Services and journalists during the disruption phase.

**Fake News:** is information that directly contradicts the right information. It is usually created with intentions to lie and create the wrong impression about an event, or particular information (Jaster & Lanuis, 2018). The viral spread of wrong information was predominantly caused by the need to feed users with the wrong information, creating fear. This term was commonly uttered by Former US president, Donald Trump who accused Fox News Media network of spreading lies about him (Chilliza, 2017). The term became popular during the early days of the pandemic. In the context of this study, it is used to mean false information that is oftenly used to spread misinformation and propaganda. Fake news tends to spread faster because it triggers emotions and causes confusion. This explains why several theories were used to cause fear among people during the pandemic. For instance, many people had been vaccinated, and several online users had started saying that the vaccines were expired and they had cancer-causing components.

**News gathering:** In the context of this study, it refers to the process of collecting relevant information from suitable, immediate and reliable sources like individuals, reports or studies to write a story (Diekerhof, 2021). This process involves sieving out the necessary information to obtain particular data that resonates with the specific information.

### 1.10 Summary

This chapter discusses the disruptions and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that Ugandan newsrooms witnessed. Among these are staff downsizing and working remotely. It further highlights that the technological transition in media houses is still constrained by lack of funds and insufficient technical staff. The chapter also defines the objectives and develops research questions to examine the disruptive changes affecting news gathering, processing, and distribution processes. In addition, the chapter explains the purpose, significance, justification and scope of the study.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an in-depth look at literature related to the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, its impacts and the strategies developed by newsrooms to cope with the changes therein. It focuses on literature in news gathering, news packaging and distribution and how the technological shift interfered with the traditional norms and practices of journalism. This chapter also gives an overview of how the strategies implemented by the newsroom are still applicable after the pandemic phase. This section also discusses the Media Economics Theory as a guide to the research process.

#### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

##### *2.2.1 Media Economics Theory*

This study uses the Media Economics Theory to investigate the challenges and strategic mechanisms media houses employ to remain viable in the media industry irrespective of disruptions. Robert Picard first used the media economics theory, which gained prominence in 1980. The author argues that media economics examines or explains how media professionals “meet the informational and entertainment” desires of consumers, “advertisers”, and the general public using the current “resources” (Doyle, 2013). Similarly, Albarran (2017) defines the Media Economics Theory as how media organisations operate across various levels of production at a global, national and personal scale in line with other international, technical, “regulatory and social aspects” (Walylya & Moges, 2022).

Media economics also centres on business strategy, international trade, pricing policies, competition and concentration of industries and how these factors affect the media and the ecosystems in which they operate. Doyle and Albarran's definitions of the theory reveal how media businesses can be affected by various factors in a given environment, just like the Covid-19 disruption. It is also worth noting that although media and communications have economic value aspects, media scholarship has conventionally been dominated by non-economic disciplines, yet the financial and resource constraints determine and influence the decisions taken by media operators (Doyle, 2013). Media Economics Theory is, therefore, divided in two: macro and micro-economics. Macroeconomics entails the general workflow of the economy and how it moves into a global aspect involving “foreign market investments” and cash flows (Rodrigo, 2015).

According to Owers et al. (2004), microeconomics consists of the influence of “individual economic units” regarding decision-making in line with “economic activity”. Therefore, this study focused on the media's micro economics in response to disruptions. The scholars further add that micro-economics deals with individual commercial parts to make decisions regarding their economic activity. Every society must address the economic questions, and these are:(i) What goods and services will be produced? For instance, media houses identified and changed the news content because of a shift in audience behaviour.

Casero-Ripolles and Termaticos (2021) note that an increase in news consumption forced media houses, especially broadcast media outlets, to broadcast timely updates about the pandemic. The need to stay constantly informed reduced anxiety because consumers gained more knowledge about the pandemic.

For example, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2020) established that 92% of news consumers in the United States purposively consumed news about the coronavirus, leading to a 32% increase at the beginning of the pandemic, while 2% said they did not seek information about the virus.

(ii) How will they be produced, and what technological adoptions are involved in producing the goods and services? Media houses strategically shifted to digital platforms and production due to the pandemic. As a result of this, newspapers like New Vision freely gave access to e-papers in the first months of the pandemic

(iii) How will the goods and services be distributed? Most media outlets utilised social media platforms during the pandemic to economically manage the crisis.

In economics, production involves the transition of raw materials or input into output. Firms are created, and production happens as firms produce a commodity for the same market. In the media context, firms are organised differently but are all involved in producing, packaging and distributing news content. According to Cunningham and Flew (2015), media economics theory is premised on the following assumptions: (1) Audiences are the center of discussion because they “engage” in “rational behaviour” to accumulate more benefits from interactions within the media marketplace. (2) Expectation in the marketplace, where the best or negotiable price is reached must enable or aid in the maximisation gains for the maker and audiences irrespective of the organisation's capacity. (3) Media firms seek to maximise profits, and every decision made within the media organisation seeks and finds opportunities for making gains. However, some organisations produce media content to expose evil acts like corruption and unfairness, among others. In a study by Carroll, the theory was used to establish how private households form expectations concerning their

consumption habits by critically looking at how consumers obtain their macroeconomic views from news media. To investigate the connection, he undertakes a frequency analysis by looking at articles from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that used the term inflation, and he concluded that sticky expectations from content consumers due to consistent news consumption (Boumans, Muller, & Stefan, 2022). In the context of this study, this theory was used to analyse how profit maximization and expectations are achieved by understanding the different sources of revenue applied at Next Media Services. Do consumers influence the nature of the content produced? If they do, to what extent do the decisions made by media managers affect the revenue process or generation within the media organisation?

Therefore, the Media Economics Theory helps media managers, practitioners and other stakeholders make economic value decisions, especially in the changing economic forces in the media environment, by creating content that is payable by the audiences. This, therefore, benefits the media house and, simultaneously, the audiences as they consume desirable content. The theory highlights that media is a marketplace where interactions and decisions can either increase profits or affect revenue generation. For instance, decisions on content can largely increase consumption, leading to making revenue by using pay walls, especially in investigative reports. Through the Media Economics Theory, the study establishes that advertising and hard copy sales, especially for print media, does not yield enough finances to sustain media organisations. It further aided the researcher in understanding the strategies used by Next Media Services to serve their audiences especially in a disruptive environment like the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is also worth noting that since the media business does not work in isolation, many other factors influence the production and dissemination of content for the

sustainability of the media business. Production and commercial firms are important economic aspects within the media context, but Doyle (2013) notes that the assumption that commercial media firms are established solely for profit gains is wrong because some media owners establish media firms for charity and communal service. The scholar further argues that all firms will not behave in the same way especially in crisis, irrespective of the size, resource viability and organisational structure because media houses have different financial and resource constraints. For instance, local newspapers like The Observer withheld operations for the first three months of the pandemic while Next Media Services continued operating by allowing staff to work in shifts.

During the disruption triggered by the pandemic, some media houses closed off while others downsized as a measure to minimize expenses. The theory is largely influenced by the day's questions in the specific locations/areas in which it was developed. The theory fails to address the effect of social and economic changes/disruptions which affect the media in different locations, yet content is a major product in the media's marketplace. Additionally, decisions of the theory are majorly based on where it first appeared rather than deliberate since other factors like technology and social-political aspects have greatly influenced and altered newsroom operation (Gerd & Kopper, 2006).

The theory also considers media as a marketplace and profit maximization can only be attained based on interactions and advertising sales. However, during crises, like the Covid-19 pandemic, sales were greatly affected as audiences were restricted from movement, leading to financial strains in media houses. Despite the cited weaknesses, the Media Economic Theory is well suited for this study as it succinctly enabled the researcher to examine the Covid-19 disruptions and coping strategies for media houses in Uganda. A case study was done on the Next Media Services. The

theory was be applied by analysing the profits gained from adverts and what other measures were undertaken to sustain the media house during the pandemic. The study identified whether a change in content impacted the advertising sales, which increased profits or did the media house strictly depend on adverts from government institutions to maximise profits?

## 2.3 General and Empirical Literature Review

### 2.3.1 *Covid-19 Disruptions in the Newsroom*

Globally, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, newsrooms were drastically altered by the danger of transmitting the virus. The traditional workflow of conducting fieldwork and being in the newsroom suddenly became risky for journalists (Radcliffe, 2020). To minimise risk, most media outlets shifted to remote work to interact with sources for specific stories. According to Mellado et al., (2021), sources are considered the most significant elements to back up news stories. Prior to the outbreak, journalists in Zimbabwe contacted specific sources for comments and opinions, but this changed as interviews and news productions were carried out via social media applications like WhatsApp, Zoom and Google Meet (Mungwari, Mapuranga, & Shipikai, 2022). Minimising face-to-face interviews increased social media use. Additionally, planning meetings to assign tasks were interrupted as journalists and editors executed this mostly through virtual phone calls (Tetani, 2021).

Media organisations in the U.S. and Europe adapted the incorporation of social media in the news-gathering process (Coddington & Lewis, 2023). Since the eruption of state-induced lockdown with strict regulations, sources and interviews were contacted through social media messaging applications like Twitter and WhatsApp in addition to social media sources, and audiences relied on media houses' social sites for

news (Kozuh & Caks, 2021). Social media sources provide significant, fast and affordable means for news makers to collect information, especially on developing stories or breaking news. They also help journalists reach inaccessible and increasingly trigger news stories (Leuven, Kruikemeier, Lecheler, & Hermans, 2018). Journalists can verify information through social media because governmental institutions and most other essential workers communicate via social media accounts. It is, therefore, easy to confirm the validity of information from credible accounts.

Mukhopadhyay (2020) observes that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most media houses which previously printed magazines and newspapers decided to publish only digitally, thereby losing revenues they were earning through advertisements while they published in print. Eventually, these challenges have forced most media managers, especially newspaper owners, to rethink measures they should take to sustain the printing sector. Journalists lost jobs in this economic meltdown that saw news media lose revenues.

The International Labour Organisation predicted a global loss of approximately 195 million jobs for full-time journalists. This was premised on sharp declines in revenue from advertising as reported by the Global Forum on Media Development, whose members saw a decline of 70 percent in advertising revenue, which was observed globally in 2020. For example, Mukhopadhyay (2020) cites a Greek journalist who reported working more but earning less at a newspaper company, whose owner owed her and colleagues about seven months' pay. With such an environment, journalists lost enthusiasm for their work, leading many out of the newsroom for other possible ventures.

In a study conducted by Dhanashree et al., (2021) to analyse media coverage of the COVID -19 pandemic, the scholars established that the media played a pivotal role in covering news about the pandemic, especially in its initial stages. In another study conducted by Musa and Salamatu (2020) to understand how media houses particularly print media and radio coverage on the pandemic, the study also established that the media had been reluctant in the initial stages. However, it later started covering the pandemic, and this acted as a combative strategy in reducing the spread of the virus. Even though media houses lacked proper strategies during the outbreak, they managed to pass on the relevant information to the masses, and this shows that they diligently executed their educational and informational role. A study by Goodness John (2023) showed that there was a high level of public knowledge and interest in media messages as 87.74% trusted the media's content. All this came at the cost of stringent budgets, shifts in work schedules and a high risk to their lives.

In the U.S. and Europe, journalists' uptake of social media in news sourcing is normal in newsrooms. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022 established that 87% of journalists apply social media in their day-to-day work; nearly "nine-in-ten" said that social sites positively encourage them to share stories and find sources for their assigned stories. In a comparative study to establish the uptake of social media usage in Tanzania and Zambia, Wanda and Gondwe (2021) found that most journalists used social sites to produce and promote their content. During crisis, Aelst et al., (2021) notes that audiences became more "information hungry" and users depended on online publishers for news content. Data from the European Union's statistical office Eurostat showed that news consumers between ages 17-74 read news via online publications (Ellerbeck, 2022). The Reuters Institute report of 2022 also showed that audiences access news content through social media compared to websites



and news Applications (Cheesman, 2022). This shows that journalist's work has been affected by the pandemic.

In African countries like South Africa, where the COVID-19 resurgence has risen compared to other countries, media organisations like the South African Broadcasting Corporation laid off 600 staff as a means of reducing contact to control the spread of the virus (Reuters, 2020). They were, however, faced with an audience that expected frequent updates and information, which constrained staff (Guttman, 2021).

In Nigeria, some journalists work from home and take salary cuts of up to 80 percent (Walulya & Moges, n.d.). On a sad note, Owolabi and Nkiruka (2022) reveal that the media industry in Nigeria lost seven practicing journalists to COVID-19 because they were vulnerable to the virus since their nature of work required them to make frequent movements to different places to gather information about the pandemic that claimed their lives. Meanwhile, 12 other active journalists tested positive for the virus and were admitted to different isolation facilities across the country. It was unfortunate for the media industry and individual journalists that even after recovering from COVID-19, some of them lost their jobs due to the hard economic environment meted to the industry by the pandemic that crumbled business and claimed millions of lives across the globe.

While lockdowns limited human movement, most media houses in Nigeria have since moved on to publish and broadcast (webcast) online to tap into the ever-growing online audience where most advertisers are phasing out of traditional media to spend on online advertisement. In fact, Nigeria's digital media market and audience are growing bigger (Owolabi & Opene-Nwantah, 2022).

According to De Bruin et al., (2021), news consumers developed an urgency of staying informed, leading to increased consumption of digital news, especially in the digital age. As the outbreak spread in other parts of the world, audiences depended more on online platforms for new updates (Nielsen, 2020). According to Santos and Mare (2021), newsrooms in South Africa have instituted social media and media convergence because they are more advanced and adopted digital media or transformation earlier than other African countries. For instance, in Nigeria, newsrooms struggled with complying with public health rules by prioritizing the publication of relevant health reports or news submission of reports online to limit physical presence in the newsrooms due to insufficient technological structures (Abubakre , 2021).

Like the rest of the world, East Africa experienced similar challenges as the Covid-19 virus gripped and disrupted newsrooms. In Kenya, the pandemic rendered more than 300 journalists jobless in 2020, whereas others had to accept a 50 per cent pay cut painfully. In neighbouring Tanzania, giant publisher Mwananchi Communications, which publishes *The Citizen*, *MwanaSport* and *Mwananchi* newspapers, terminated the contracts of 50 staff members in April 2020 due to the economic uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 (Walulya & Moges, 2022).

Due to socially distanced reporting, there was an increase in mental health issues, as indicated earlier. Some journalists in Kenya reported gaps “in terms of bonding, sharing ideas, and loneliness...” (Radcliffe, 2021, pp. 43). On the positive end, most research indicates that during COVID-19, the media became the most trusted source of information about the pandemic due to the updates the public always received through television and social media, irrespective of the economic frustrations the media owners had to endure.

In Uganda, for instance, *New Vision*'s subsidiary newspapers namely *Orumuri*, *Etop*, *Rupinyi* and the *Kampala Sun*, were closed after the outbreak strained the operations (Muhindo, 2020). *The Observer*, an analytical weekly newspaper, also suspended production after an imposed lockdown from the Ugandan government. *Red Pepper*, a sensational daily tabloid, was closed after financial constraints due to the pandemic (Kigambo, 2020).

Transition and change are inseparable from the newsroom during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic because there is a need to implement strategies that favour the sustainability of the news (Cisarova, 2023). These changes affect the journalistic practices, revenue collection models and general work life. For instance, Dralega (2022) notes that media houses, particularly print publishers in East Africa particularly Ugandan have suffered from low advertising revenue and the outbreak of the pandemic worsened this as most institutions were under lockdown, hard copy sales dropped because audiences accessed electronically generated papers at the comfort of their homes through mobile applications and websites (Mihelj et al., 2021). Therefore, media managers are pushed to downsize staff and journalists with multi-skills survived the downsizing such that organisations save on expenses among other challenges (Hare, 2022). In developed countries like the UK, employees that were laid off were given remittances to help them live by as the media organisations struggled through the pandemic and its effects (Pope & Hourston, 2022).

### *2.3.2 Impact of the Covid-19 disruption on newsrooms*

In developed nations like the U.S., Belgium, and Germany, media houses, especially newspapers, quickly adjusted to accepting state financial assistance during the pandemic to live by and pay staff salaries (European Federation of Journalists,

2020). Considering advertising was affected by a 60 per cent drop, which many media houses rely on, the initial months of the pandemic constrained operations as media managers lacked sustainability programmes for their workers, hence seeking aid from their governments Finneman et al., (2021). The scholars further add that as the outbreak spread globally, at least 30 newsrooms were shut down permanently in the U.S., while others merged due to financial constraints. Newsrooms had to rethink the usual and traditional criteria of work life within hours and days. In Uganda, many radio stations hired one employee to gather, edit and anchor the news. This was done to cut costs affected by the disruptions of the pandemic (Kigambo, 2020).

Like was the case globally, she writes that restricted human movements, such as the ban on leaving homes during the pandemic, saw a sharp decline in circulation and sales of hard copy magazines because the buyers could hardly access the newsstands and stores.

In the first half of 2020, magazines such as *Heat* had a 33 per cent fall in sales, followed by *Closer*, which saw a 27 per cent decline in sales. Meanwhile, not all magazines recorded declines. Publications such as *Olive*, a culinary magazine, recorded a 35 per cent growth – the biggest of all – while *BBC Easy Cook* registered 14 per cent. Sałek (2021) attributes this to the fact that since people were in lockdown with much time at home, they were always seeking activities to be involved in, and cooking was among the top.

Media organisations encourage their staff or employees to work remotely to stay afloat. This means that editors, graphic designers, and writers, among others, were allowed or asked to work within their confinement at home (Watterson, 2021). This health emergency emptied newsrooms by forcing employees to work in shifts; for

instance, a specific number of staff were allowed to work during the day, while others worked in the evening (Beheshti, 2021). This was done in line with the government and health regulations of social distancing, a regulation that was a containment measure of the virus. Working remotely introduced an online-based newsroom where coordination and communication was digitally carried out. For instance, according to Casero-Ripolles and Termaticos (2021), 19.6 per cent of Spanish journalists claimed to work from home before the pandemic.

Technological dependence increased during the disruption. It pushed many media houses to invest more into depending on technology and purchasing technological equipment and applications to ease workflow (Timmis & Ragoussis, 2022). Media organisations had to purchase technological gadgets and internet-enabled smartphones and load data bundles for journalists since most were working remotely (Chambaud, 2021). Newsrooms, therefore, had to employ technical employees to assist in using more sophisticated technological equipment and applications. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the newsroom required more technical workers than before.

In order to cope with COVID-19 and remain feasible during and after the pandemic, most news organisations designed products to suit the ever-increasing digital audience (Pavlik, 2021). In line with his observation are The Pew Research Center's findings about the increasing media usage during and after the pandemic. The research centre reveals that time spent on news sites increased by 46 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019, and the number of visits to news sites in 2020 has increased by 57 per cent compared with the previous year (Pavlik, 2021).

Additionally, the newsroom managers and journalists followed closely by checking the information sources and focusing on the quality of information as events

unfolded through Tweets and Facebook posts. This helped verify information since content curators used this to spread fake information (Child, 2020). Government institutions communicated mainly via social media applications, and media organisations depended on these platforms for verification. For example, the Ministry of health shared timely updates regarding the number of deaths countrywide and relevant information.

Journalists and media organisations also took advantage of citizen journalism during the pandemic. According to Murungi (2022), mobile smartphone use and accessing news during the state-imposed lockdown increased tremendously. This, therefore, increased the audience's access to content on various platforms at their convenience (Martinez-Costa et al., 2019).

Although recordings, particularly video footage, lacked professionalism, media houses saved on transport costs as audiences recorded and shared live events, contributing to the production of news by having "amateur" videos (Thorsten & Jackson, 2018). Witness accounts helped journalists report the right information authentically. Whereas misinformation surged and challenged journalism, Price and Antonova (2022) found that comprehensive reporting increased significantly worldwide, especially on online platforms.

The imposed national lockdowns increased an online clientele base since restrictions were imposed on movement by the public (Savage, 2020). While media houses made significant losses in hard copy sales, the disruption pushed media houses into investing more resources in news business models like subscriptions (Bogna, 2020). Newsrooms strengthened their online presence by sharing videos photos via digital platforms to help the public access information in various formats. Infographics

animations were created for awareness. At the pandemic's peak, Ugandan media houses reported live at the National Referral Hospital when the country registered a resurgence in deaths. Most media houses gained viewership during the pandemic because people were under home confinement (Nkonyeni, 2029). Audiences have switched to different diversified platforms to access information (Nielsen, 2020).

The disruption of the pandemic influenced the adoption of diversified digital media platforms in newsrooms forcing media outlets to the digital sphere (Pavlik, 2021). Legacy media outlets creatively seek to sustain the newsroom by selling branded products like T-shirts, pens, caps and umbrellas to make profits. For instance, in the U.S., a community newspaper printed T-shirts for the public in exchange for a paid subscription, which was used to cater to utility bills in the newsroom (Finneman et al., 2021). Additionally, technology, particularly social media, continues to allow audiences to stay engaged because of its diverse features, which allow the timely sharing of content through text, pictorials and videos. Diversifying enables and aids audience engagement by directly connecting media houses with audiences (Micheal, 2022).

### *2.3.3 Strategies employed to cope with COVID-19 disruptions by newsrooms.*

Crises alter how newsrooms operate by changing and significantly affecting the news gathering, production and distribution processes. Journalists or media managers chose to downsize the number of staff as a safety measure, and Trust, Tshuman, and Msimanga (2022) note that about 50 percent of South African journalists lost their jobs during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the New York Times, it was estimated that 36,000 media employees have been cut off or had a reduction in their payments (Lui, 2020). Freelance journalists and non-multi-skilled journalists lost

jobs as managers sought talented writers who were more skilled than their colleagues. In Sweden, media managers had to adjust from traditional “leadership habits” to newer versions of leading that involved virtual interactions, which involved working in shifts at different times (Ester, 2021).

While downsizing and layoffs were implemented to handle the disruption, many Ugandan local journalists and global news makers, especially freelancers, lost their jobs due to the pandemic (Miller , 2021). Media houses had to maintain those they found relevant for that specific period. Some media houses had to let go of the staff, while others simply stopped the production of specific newspaper pullouts and TV programs, and others rebranded to maintain their staff because the pandemic led to the destruction of advertising sales, which was a core revenue generation for most media houses (Heuva, 2022). For instance, some shows have emerged while others were halted. Those who survived the pandemic were still struggling but later closed shop.

Ghana’s news organizations, especially legacy media outlets like radio and print publications, also criticized different policies like using mojo(mobile journalism) and more social platforms in the ns production process (Boateng & Butasi, 2022). Many journalists were as well advised to work from home since it was during the lockdown. Because public safety was the government's duty, journalists and all frontline personnel had to take precautionary measures against the spread of the virus like they were encouraged to wear PPE’s and follow the Standard Operating Procedures (Walylya & Moges, 2022)).

Media houses or organisations are crucial in ensuring that the information shared is reliable (Happer & Greg, 2013)..However, as a result of the pandemic, the media lacked financial sustainability to continuously run their media organisations,



which led to and increased the need to pay for news content Ward-Liley & Whitwel (2020) note that this boosted the revenue within a media organisation. With the loss of revenue, media organisations had to devise means of managing their businesses through this entire pandemic. This was done by changing work schedules and suspending all ordinary working hours for the media organisations to fit into the pandemic's agenda. This allowed journalists to focus on the production of content and inform the public about the prevention alternatives, among other things.

A shift in content was evident, attributed to the technicalities involved in gathering and distributing the news content. Newsrooms resorted to producing relevant content and creating more awareness about the current situation because it was more important than the information relied upon to the public (Amaa Baad, 2022). For instance, NBS, constantly hosted talk shows that discussed various aspects of mental health, and these helped the public in combating fear and depression. Since the Uganda Police report had indicated that domestic violence cases had hiked during this period. Since audiences were restricted from movement, it was ideal for relevant communication on mental matters such that audiences could be reminded that the pandemic had to be faced with restrictions from the health workers and the government.

According to the New Vision, Uganda Police registered 3,000 domestic cases in one month of the pandemic (New Vision, 2020). Families, therefore, had to find ways to tolerate each other, considering that there were limited options but staying at home to avoid contracting the virus. Media houses, therefore, improvised by hosting panelists to discuss mental health matters and triggers, increasing their views as these round talks provided solutions for their audiences.

Salary cuts within the newsrooms became a sustainable means of managing the newsroom. For instance, Vision Group, whose subsidiaries are New Vision and Bukedde newspapers, cut staff salaries by 60 percent due to the impact of COVID-19 (Uganda Radio Network, 2020). Nation Media Group, which publishes Daily Monitor, announced a pay cut of salaries of up to 35% since the organisation suffered losses in the pandemic (Okello, 2020). This enabled the media house to financially support their staff and cover their monthly costs like Internet since many employees were working remotely.

Technological advances in the newsroom were adapted faster (Haenens et al., 2022). Since the disruptions required fast-paced newsrooms, media managers and journalists took advantage of the technologies that allowed news gathering and faster production procedures (Trewinnard, 2020). The investment was made into hiring technical gadgets, paid for using particular applications to keep the audiences apt with what was transpiring elsewhere. Innovations influence the transformation process as they affect perceptions and affect their performance (Arafat & Portezza, 2023). According to Hoak (2021), technological shifts and their related demands can drastically impact employee well-being; therefore, in times of rapid change, focusing on organizational support and employee stress becomes increasingly important for media managers to change routines. It is, therefore, important for standardized practices like working in shifts to allow quick and efficient progress within the newsroom to allow journalists to refresh and improve their mental health, as the newsroom has several issues that could trigger or lead to mental distress.

Media managers invest in journalists' safety by providing protective equipment, while others establish mental health units to help journalists cope with the emotional breakdown (Kodwo et al., 2022). The pandemic's impact on journalists led to

exhaustion and derail as some staff lost loved ones while others contracted the infection and they had to produce stories efficiently. For instance, reporting about the pandemic led to mental issues, particularly to health workers and journalists who were categorized as first responders during the pandemic (Osmann et al., 2021). A survey by Posetti et al., (2022) in 125 countries found that 62 percent of the 2,073 journalists said the workload was intense and 57 per cent feared contracting the virus. (Goktas, 2023) notes that journalists who cover conflicts, stories related to refugees, climate and natural disasters, hostility, insult and harassment face health disorders like “anxiety, depression, sleep and eating disorders, burnout, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder”.

A survey conducted by the Reuters Institute showed that journalists reporting on COVID-19 showed signs of anxiety and depression, according to the early results of a survey into the current state of journalists’ emotional well-being. As a result of this, media managers set established safe spaces to help journalists cope with mental health problems. For instance, the International Center for Journalists launched a mental health program for Arabic speaking journalists to “shed more light on the importance of mental health (ICFJ, 2022). This helped journalists share their experiences, and it helped those who had lost their loved ones.

Training journalists for creative solutions and transition are ways of improvising through crisis (Plate, 2020). The pandemic awakened the need for media outlets to provide training programs for journalists during crises, public health reporting and disruptions. It is important to invest and develop more skills in the new rooms to train media professionals how to “adapt to change” in an ever-evolving media landscape (Batte, 2022). Additionally, managing and adapting to change enables the workforce to swiftly embrace new nuances, and this can be done by changing

workforce infrastructures. This will combat the challenges of disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 2.4 Summary

This chapter examined how the Media Economics Theory strongly relates to and affects journalism as the fourth estate. It also discussed how news organisations created avenues for sustainability during the disruptions occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Newsrooms adapted to technology faster by investing more in social and digital applications. Technology is the new force of newsrooms, which all media organisations must embrace. Additionally, newsrooms that lack disruption strategies face challenges that affect their workflow.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research approach and methods employed to collect data and analyse the study's findings. It further describes the research design, population, target population, sample size, sampling technique and research instruments the researcher used. It also describes the data procedures and ethical considerations used in the study.

#### 3.2 Research Approach and Research Design

##### *3.2.1 Research Approach*

This research adopted a qualitative approach to examine the COVID-19 disruption strategies used by Next Media Services. The approach aided the researcher in explaining the mechanisms or copying strategies undertaken by Next Media Services during the COVID-19 disruption. A qualitative approach is used in understanding and acquiring insights into constructions of “reality.” Since this study sought to understand the intentions and reasons why the media organisation made specific choices, this approach aided the researcher in understanding how the copying strategies were achieved during the pandemic. Furthermore, management and journalists can only address these kinds of responses.

Creswell (2014) notes that qualitative studies involve emerging questions and procedures, and data is typically collected in the participants' setting and understanding. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of

rendering the complexity of a situation. This approach was suitable for this study because it explains the basis of the decisions made by Next Media Services Managers in choosing the different strategies suitable for operating the media house during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative approach is significant because it explains why the media house chose or used the specific techniques in the face of the Covid-19 disruption.

### *3.2.2 Research Design*

Boru (2017) defines a research design as gathering, assessing, interpreting and reporting data in a research study. A research design involves an overall workflow for collecting “the conceptual research problems with the suitable and observed or “empirical research” research design entails an arrangement of conditions for the collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with and the observed issues (Kothari , 2004). This study applied a case study because it requires a deeper understanding and “appreciation” of its original context (Crowe, 2010).

According to Heale and Twycross, (2017) a case study design refers to an extensive assessment of an individual(s), a collection or an organisation with the purpose of investigating and systematically describing in-depth data gathered relating to the different “variables”. Case study designs are applied when a study seeks to understand why and how questions are being asked, as the researcher has no control over an event or when the purpose of research is on a current issue (Yin, 2014). A case study was ideal for this study because it enabled the researcher to interrogate and identify the choices made by media managers, editors and journalists from Next Media

Services. The purpose of carrying out a case study lies in carefully investigating a single case to identify new relationship results (Ridder, 2017).

### 3.3 Population

Thacker (2020) defines a population as a complete cluster of individuals within specified characteristics for a particular study. In research, population considers the study's demographics, location and objectives. There are three media conglomerates: Vision Group, Nation Media Group and Next Media Services. This study focused on Next Media Services, a multimedia company that produces print, broadcast and digital content. NMS was ideal because the media organisation operates and owns different media outlets.

### 3.4 Target Population

This study specifically targeted media managers, editors and journalists from Next Media Services because all media outlets were operational during the pandemic.

### 3.5 Study Site

This study focused on Kampala. The media house under study is located in Uganda's capital. The respondents were journalists, editors and media managers at Next Media Services. Considering the nature of the journalists' work, interviews were scheduled according to the journalists' timelines. It is important to note that Next Media Services has regional bureaus nationwide. The company produces multimedia content on television, and radio and it runs an online newspaper known as The Nile Post. It also employs a larger portion of Uganda's multi-media journalists. The research targeted staff at Next Media Kampala because this is where the majority are based and serves as the headquarters of the media house. In addition, the media house was founded in

2007 and Kin Kariisa heads it. By 2015, an Islam-based television station called Salam TV was started, while Sanyuka, TV, a vernacular station mainly for sports, started operating. The media house operates 4 television stations, one radio station, an online newspaper and a corporate communications company -Next Media Communications.

### 3.6 Sample Size

According to Ajah and Masuku (2014), sampling entails a selection of a subset of people from within a group to “estimate” the characteristics of a whole population. Sample size enables the researcher to determine and draw important and correct conclusions. This study aimed to interview eight editors including assigning and subeditors, 10 field journalists/reporters, four marketing personnel, and three administrative managers and/or their assistants until saturation, and this established repetitive phrases or words from the respondents. Henrick and Kaiser (2022) define it as a place where collecting more information about an aspect yields the same information. The above sample size was ideal for this study because it comprises members from the entire news production and dissemination chain. For sufficiency and proper sorting of information, saturation is an essential principle in the research process. Qualitative studies require an adequate sample to “guarantee of research validity”, and it is through saturation that adequate research data is established.

### 3.7 Sampling Procedures

The study applied a purposive sampling technique for Next Media Services. Whitehead et al., (2020) note that purposive sampling is commonly applied when respondents are chosen in line with the specific question. It is created to give data where in-depth knowledge is required because respondents are selected based on exposure or



are known to have a particular in-depth knowledge about the information sought. Purposive Sampling was used to choose respondents who would share valuable or helpful information.

This kind of sampling was done on the assumption that different individuals may have contradicting and vital ideas regarding the questions raised (Campbell, et al., 2020). In this context, journalists, managers or staff were interviewed for this study because they experienced the disruption, and they were the ones who came up with copying strategies to sustain news production and the day-to-day operations of the media house. This study purposively sampled the particulars because the selected respondents actively produce and disseminate news content. They are also more knowledgeable and experienced to share important insights for this study.

### 3.8 Research Method

This research used interviews as a research method to collect and analyse data from the selected staff at Next Media Services. The researcher used one-on-one interviews, with open-ended questions, to gain understanding of every participant's experience during the Covid-19 disruption.

### 3.9 Data Generation/Collection Tools

The researcher employed interview guides from Next Media Services for journalists and media managers. For this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews because they follow a more flexible and interactive approach, and they are not necessarily dictated.

### 3.10 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher interviewed a series of staff, including 12 journalists, and seven team members drawn from the marketing or sales department because they participate in the distribution process at Next Media Services. After several interviews, the researcher identified a saturation point when all responses were similar, and the researcher proceeded with these responses.

### 3.11 Pre-testing of Data Generation Tools

The interview guide was pre-tested among a specific Next Media Services journalists group. The selected journalists were part of the targeted sample of participants for the study. The pre-test enabled the researcher to assess the clarity of the questions, and the researcher consulted with the supervisors if questions were unclear and invalid.

Also, the researcher tested the recording equipment before the main interviews. This required random voice recordings and extraction of the recordings from the device to the computer as a backup device. Although equipment failure can come unexpectedly, it can be avoided by being familiar with how the recorder works. This required checking the battery, testing the microphone, and familiarising oneself with the recording device to avoid disappointment and waste of time.

### 3.12 Validity and Reliability of Research Tools

Validity and reliability demonstrate the accuracy and reliability of the research process and its findings. On the one hand, reliability describes how a particular research tool can produce similar findings if employed in a different environment while studying a similar area.

On the other hand, validity looks into the study's objectives in comparison with the actual outcomes of the research. To validate the research tools for this study, the researcher gave a sample of questions to a quarter (7) of the respondents to ascertain their understanding of the questions.

### 3.13 Data Analysis and Presentation Plan

In qualitative research, data analysis refers to making sense of the gathered data whereby the researcher ensures that the data is consolidating with keen attention to the segments that may provide insight into the research questions (Butina, 2013). Analysing data requires the researcher to interpret whatever information was gathered in an attempt to make meanings from the themes.

Eventually, the meanings derived from the patterns become the study findings. Since this research is a narrative inquiry, it employed narrative analysis. The study used structural analysis focusing on how the story is told/narrated by the participant. The researcher interviewed the respondents and transcribed and categorized the responses based on themes that formed and explained the findings.

The researcher presented the data and findings in a written format. The process involved analysing and interpreting the narratives, and the data was arranged in themes and patterns that originated from the interviews. The researcher also used direct quotes from the participants without revealing their names and jurisdiction for evidence purposes.

### 3.14 Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought clearance from the Graduate School of Media and Communications, The Aga Khan University (AKU), after submitting a permit to conduct this research from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology

(UNCST). The researcher also asked permission from Next Media Services to conduct the interviews.

The researcher also sought permission from all participants through the consent form to outline the strategies of identity protection throughout this study. The findings were presented as a collective representative of the media landscape in a manner that will make it difficult to trace the information to an individual respondent. In addition, the interview recordings were accessed by the researcher and research defense panel for confidentiality.

### 3.15 Summary

This chapter discussed the research design, approach, population, sample size, sampling procedures, study site data analysis and presentation, Pre-testing of data generation tools, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations, of the research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION, AND INTERPRETATION

#### 4.1 Introduction

The study conducted in-depth interviews to collect data from Next Media Services Uganda journalists. The interviews were conducted with 19 respondents out of the 23 that had been selected purposively, which translates to an 80 percent response rate. The age group was between 24 and 40 years, and they had worked for the media organization for three to 20 years. They all had at least a bachelor's degree in journalism or communication. Of the 19 interviews, 12 were news reporters and 7 were sales and marketing executives or employees.

#### 4.2 Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

##### 4.2.2 Findings

###### 4.2.2.1 Establish the disruptions of Covid-19 on newsrooms

###### *Interrupted newsroom workflow*

The traditional workflow of conducting fieldwork, such as interviewing sources, filing stories, and editing news content for prime hours, suddenly became risky. To ensure that the journalists adhered to the safety precautions, the media organisation had to incur transport costs for their employees because movement was strictly prohibited at the pandemic's initial stages and later relaxed under specific conditions. The citizens were allowed to do so with proper identification if they were in a company vehicle and if they were in the 'essential workers' category. If the newsrooms had continued with the usual execution of duties, this would have been risky for the journalists, yet they were responsible for gathering and sharing the

information on prevention. This is reflected in the response of participant 6, who said that:

When Covid-19 hit, the newsroom changed in a short span of time. We had to work from home and this was challenging especially when you had to fact-check information. Before Covid-19, you would just walk to someone's desk and ask whatever you wanted. During the pandemic, the case was different.

Participant 2 also noted the same, stating that:

Getting a hold of a news source was difficult. Even when you returned from the field, it was difficult to inquire because we were working from home. So, asking questions had to be done via phone calls, WhatsApp messages, Twitter (now X) or Facebook. We had to find sources on the digital Apps.

Participant 19 also stated that:

The organisation of activities, departments and everything concerning the newsroom changed to suit the 'new normal. This came with various changes in the schedules, the process of meeting our bosses and the newsroom was empty and cold.

Participant 18 also said that:

News sourcing was disrupted, because physical contact was not allowed for fear of catching the disease, the news sources had to be interviewed via phone calls because it was the only appropriate thing to do at the time.

Participant 7 as well confessed that:

The sources that preferred physical meetings had no way of meeting me. It was a difficult time because most sources preferred meeting in person especially when they had to share sensitive and confidential information. Some sources are conservative that they would deny you an interview if it wasn't physical.

Participant 14 also stated that:

Before Covid-19, we used to have editorial meetings for assignment of stories and sharing story ideas. But during the pandemic these meetings never used to happen. You would just receive a message from the producer. Unless it was really necessary, but the daily 8am to 9am meetings were stopped.

Participant 1 stated that:

News reporters who are the foot soldiers suffered during the pandemic because some stories are better off done when a journalist is having a conversation with the source so that the pictures and audio is better but this was affected by the imposed lockdown on all individuals unless the sector they worked with was categorised as essential like us the journalists.

### *Working in Shifts*

The participants acknowledged that the pandemic greatly affected the newsroom and the sales department. Since the two departments work correlatively, the staff working the for two departments faced greater consequences as a result of the pandemic. Participant 4 confessed that the pandemic led to working in shifts because the company had to follow the Standard Operating Procedure (SOPs) but also media owners lacked a clear fallback position for the crisis at hand.

This was also stated by participant 13 who mentioned that:

The pandemic was the worst crisis for the newsroom. We had to work in shifts so that our bosses could cater for the transport costs, safety gears and also it was mandatory to follow the standard operating procedures. Working in shifts was quite hectic since it was my first time experiencing this because this was accompanied by a salary cut.

Participant 8 also stated that:

We had to work in shifts for us to manage, there was no other way out because we were struggling financially, since we weren't running any adverts, the shifts enabled the media company to spend less since there was little revenue coming in.

Participant 5 as well confessed that:

The organization had to think of better ways to make money to survive during the pandemic by making us work in shifts to avoid overcrowding, but also the shifts enabled us divide work amongst ourselves and beat deadlines.

Participant 4 also stated that:

The company had to terminate many permanent contracts and transition into freelance work so that people are paid for the work done, not merely employed, since we were now working in shifts.

Participant 16 equally said that:

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the company had to lay off workers and those who survived the layoff had to start working from home. Our homes became the new newsroom where we used to supervise ourselves to beat the 2:00pm deadline of filing in stories.

#### 4.2.2.2 The implications of the Covid-19 disruptions on Ugandan newsrooms

##### *Dropped revenues*

Media organisations have for long struggled with sustainable profit-making ventures. The pandemic worsened the situation because audiences were confined in their homes and it was difficult for them to move as a measure to combat the spread of the virus. With this came a strain of financial depreciation that affected the business side of the media organisation. Television advertisement dropped because the largest percentage of revenues came from cooperate organisations which were equally struggling to keep afloat. Participant 12 revealed this by stating that:

Those corporate organisations, non-governmental organisations contribute the biggest share to advertising revenue, the profits were affected because these organisations had to halt operations for some time, and the organisations also blamed this on lack of funds and these organisations are well known for being funded by donors.

Participant 17 also said the same:

TV commercial advertisement had to be given at discounts to attract and sustain those companies that had shown interest. Of course, companies completely slashed their advertisement budgets because it was pointless to advertise when the consumers had limited means of getting to the products and services, affecting the profit margin.

##### *Online applications*

This study established that the media organisation strengthened the use of available online platforms that were more efficient and convenient to use for the newsroom. Like most sectors, the newsrooms had to deal with the challenges by



focusing on their online presence which was the most reliable source of gathering and distributing information.

Participant 3 stated that:

Moving the news shop online was one of the options because with the Covid-19 disruption, audiences moved online and so accessing the news too had to move there. The organization introduced online access for news which was initially never there.

Participant 15 also observed and shared that:

I personally became familiar with digital applications because they had replaced the ordinary tools that we had been accustomed to. All those editing, audio, transcription applications had to be utilised at the moment because I had no choice but to learn how to use them since the newsroom had shifted into a confined workroom.

Participant 2 also confessed that:

The organization also opted for multi-media production or forms of storytelling to attract more audiences and also serve them on different affiliated platforms like websites. Because offering news in a variety of formats is something that has proved to be working to engage and attract more audiences. You do not know who is accessing what format, so if you provide all forms of media, you allow your audiences select from a variety of online applications.

Participant 9 as well shared the same sentiments by stating that:

Our newsroom embraced digital marketing and online digital platforms became popular and these were basically used for holding remote meetings because they were better than converging people in one room.

#### 4.2.2.3 Strategies used by newsrooms to cope with covid-19 disruptions

##### *Downsizing*

Just like all sectors, the newsroom had to improvise strategies to manage the unprecedented disruption. One of the main strategies was downsizing. The media organisation took a deliberate move to employ journalists or workers who would multi-task. For instance, participant 11 stated:

The pandemic proved one's stay in the newsroom. It was a difficult thing to do but it had to be done in order to sustain or run the newsroom. One of the things they looked at was whether a person would report, voice and then edit or carry out other relevant tasks. If it so happened that you could not do other tasks, then you risked being laid off. One had to multi-task in order to survive.

Participant 3 also said the same by stating that:

The pandemic was many things; it was disastrous, and we were working under tension because you never knew what was coming next. The bosses had to reduce on the number of people in the newsroom for obvious reasons, there was low revenue, the economy had started dwindling our finances, you could not juggle between two jobs. It was a difficult time for the bosses to reduce on the number of people but it was the only way out.

Participant 10 also confessed that:

To reduce on transport costs for the journalists and other employees, the company had to find company stickers for the vehicles. Since there was limited movement, they would pick us from home, then drop us to our respect stations or sources of interviews. This helped the company with incurring costs of giving us transport individually.

#### *Salary cuts*

The newsroom needed to reduce on staff salaries as participant 19 mentioned that:

The company had to deduct our salaries, the usual allowances had to be scrapped off so that the rest of the employees also got a share. The cuts didn't apply to everyone. Only those who received a specific sum of money experienced the salary cut.

Participant 5 as well said that:

Salary cuts were done to make ends meet. While it was a hard pill to swallow. It was one of the easiest things to do because the cost of expenses had to be managed.

#### *Adoption of technology*

Technology played a significant role in the pandemic. It was during this time that the employees had to adapt to the use of technology and also invest in learning how

to use these applications because it necessitated them to do so. For instance, participant 12 said that:

We had to quickly adapt to the use of technology because it made our work easier. For instance, we used to hold Zoom meetings, WhatsApp videos. We only needed WIFI connections or any internet source which the organisation catered for.

Participant 1 also mentioned that:

The zoom meetings have become the new normal, in fact even today, when you want to meet a source, most of them want to meet virtually and this in a way reduces the cost of transport the time spent on our potholed roads to meet sources. We had to do things virtually.

This was also stated by Participant 10 who clearly said that:

The shift in work schedules was necessary if the newsroom was to protect journalists and also remain relevant during the pandemic. If we had continued working the same during the pandemic, then the newsroom would not have survived the pandemic. The pandemic critically crippled the newsroom by interfering with our planning meetings which had to be done online on video apps like zoom or google meet.

Participant 18 also said that:

Using virtual meetings was necessary because it was the only way of protecting ourselves from catching the disease since we were among the frontline workers, responsible for updating the public.

#### 4.3 Summary of Key Findings

During the interviews, respondents revealed that the most affected department at Next Media Services was the newsroom because it was the centre for producing news content. It emerged that the pandemic interfered with the work schedules, where journalists had to source for news in the most convenient means by using their mobile phones or conducting WhatsApp videos. This was a move to protect journalists and their families. The findings also showed that planning and story ideation meetings that were conducted daily were now adjusted to thrice because journalists and

their superiors weren't meeting physically. As a result of the pandemic, the media organisation had to create favourable working hours to allow journalists work in shifts so that they could accommodate and handle newsroom tasks, this was also done as a protective measure in the event that one of the employees contracted the virus, it was easy to send them into isolation for quarantine. In addition, salaries were deducted to maintain all the staff and be in position to cover expenses related to the media organizations.

Since the disruption shocked the revenue streams, it was important for media houses to create sustainable means of the pandemic. However, not all media companies did this, especially those that employed freelancers; these halted their duties if they identified a person's skills were wanting. There was also a need to save on transportation costs by moving journalists in company cars. The media organization provided company vehicles to aid the easy movement of journalists. It was significant for the media house to invest in this because it ensured the journalist's safety and provided them with protective equipment. It also emerged that the use of technology applications was strengthened during the pandemic, which eased the journalists' workflow. Applications like Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp were used during the production, especially in the news-gathering process. The media also depended on social media platforms, especially for news sources and any other relevant announcements.

The drop in advertising revenue forced the media organisation to cut salaries for their employees while others were laid off. This was done to sustain the newsroom as a means of continuously operating the newsroom. The management found it necessary to do so by laying off some workers whose skill sets were not requisite in the organization. This enabled them to minimise costs or expenses incurred in terms of

paying salaries and other resourceful or essential items. The company also had to utilize digital platforms. For example, interviews were conducted via Zoom, Google Meet and other essential video call applications. This allowed the organisation to save on individual transport costs for their employees.

The daily operation of the newsroom forced media houses into conducting their work remotely. To protect the employees, they were forced to work from home because they needed to be protected from the virus, which could have been transmitted to their families as well. Hence, most of the work was done through phone calls, interviews, and other related means of gathering information that didn't involve physical contact. The company therefore, had to cover internet costs since the employees were working remotely in the comfort of their homes. The initiative of working in shifts was accompanied by salary cuts, which were done as an improvisation to minimize daily costs. The organisation had to cater to the needs of the workers by catering to their transport needs, especially for those that worked late. It was through shifts that the organisation minimized the spreading of the virus, but it was also important to maintain the standard operating procedures.

#### 4.4 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings gathered from the in-depth interviews with the 19 respondents from Next Media Services. From the findings, it emerged that the ordinary operation of the newsroom was affected by salary cuts, working shifts, and the company's reliance on technological applications for sourcing and distributing news content.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents discussions on the key findings of the disruptions of COVID-19 in newsrooms, the implications of these disruptions and the strategies the Next Media Services applied to cope with the COVID-19 disruptions. This section also discusses the conclusions from the study's findings and recommendations. This chapter also highlights other areas for further research.

#### 5.2 Discussions of Key Findings

##### *5.2.1 Establish the COVID-19 disruptions*

###### *Interrupted workflow of newsrooms*

This study discovered that during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the newsroom habits and schedules were altered, which challenged most journalists because the pandemic was a new 'thing' that many media managers and journalists had never experienced; hence the media organisations lacked contingent measures to manage and overcome the novel challenge. The process of news production and accessing news sources easily or swiftly was difficult because of the state-wide government-imposed lockdown instituted as a containment measure to insulate the public against the pandemic. Therefore, It was important for journalists to follow the rules and regulations or the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) during that time. As a result, journalists were required to undertake safety measures, and this saw the media house improvise by providing resources for working remotely and providing transport to their staff if they were required to work from their duty stations. This also

enabled the media managers to track their movement if one journalist contracted the disease, it was easy to trace them and either put them under quarantine or send them to a healthcare facility for treatment and or observation.

The newsroom departments and everything concerning the newsroom shifted to suit the new work schedules that involved changes and processes of meeting their superiors in regard to the assignment of topics for coverage. The newsroom, therefore, became empty as most journalists only came to their duty stations to cover news stories (Garcia-Aviles, 2021). News sourcing was also disrupted, since physical meetings were halted to combat the spread of the virus. The public was not allowed to get into physical contact for fear of catching the disease, and hence the news sources had to be interviewed via phone calls or through video calls because it was only fair to have them protected. This also saved on the costs of movement unless the sources were daring, and it necessitated them to meet; physical meetings were illegal at the time. The government required the public to practice social distancing to follow the SOPs.

Editorial meetings that were ordinary circumstances meant for the assignment of stories and sharing story ideas were not done by converging, but by meeting virtually or sending individual messages. The daily 8:00am to 9:00am meetings were minimal, yet these meetings are beneficial in allowing journalists share their thoughts in regard to assigned topics. Particular stories required better images and audio because some stories are better done when a journalist converses with the source so that the pictures and audio appear as captures by an amateur.

#### *Working in shifts and working remotely*

The study found that the pandemic highly affected the newsroom and the commercial department, similar to Miller (2021), who established that 6,154 news

organisations were closed off. Since the two departments work inter connectively, the staff in the two departments faced most of the consequences due to the pandemic forcing them to work in shifts and at times for longer hours because the company had to follow the SOPs. The media organisation could not risk putting their employees in danger, but also media owners lacked a clear fall back for the crisis at hand, so which ever mechanism was suggested was considered.

Working in shifts required the journalists and media managers to do so that their administrators or leaders could cater for safety gears that included safe face masks, recommended hand sanitisers and or face shields, especially when they were required to head to the field. Working in shifts was hectic since it was the first time for most journalists to experience this nature of disruption. It was among the ways the journalists managed since the media organisation was struggling financially (Walulya & Moges, 2022). The shifts, therefore, enabled the media company to spend less since little revenue was coming in. Therefore, the organisation had to utilise the option of working in shifts to avoid overcrowding, but the shifts enabled journalists to divide work amongst themselves and ably beat newsroom deadlines. The company also had to consider terminating many permanent contracts of some of the staff and later transition into employing freelance journalists so that they were chiefly paid for the service or work done not merely being employed but it also kept the teams productive, which in the end made most workers anxious about their job security. The media managers also encouraged working from home unless it necessitated them to be at their workstations, so they delivered work from home.

### *5.2.2 The implications of the Covid-19 disruptions on Ugandan newsrooms*

#### *Low revenue*



Media organisations have struggled with creating sustainable profit-making ventures for a while. The pandemic worsened the situation because audiences were confined in their homes and organisations especially commercial businesses didn't find it fit to invest more in the advertising budgets and it was difficult for the public to move as a measure of following the SOPs. With this came a strain of financial depreciation that affected the business side of the media organisation. Television advertisement dropped because the largest percentage of advertisement came from cooperate organisations that had to halt operations for some time, and the organisations also blamed this on lack of funds because most of them rely on donor funding.

To attract advertisement from such organisations, the media strengthened the TV commercial advertisement by giving discounts to those interested in continuing with their advertisement plans. Next Media Services also strengthened their online presence because it was one option because the disruption pushed audiences to online news sources. The organization strengthened their online platforms and in some cases introduced new features for audiences to gain online access to news content that was never present before the pandemic.

### *5.2.3 Strategies used by newsrooms to cope with the COVID-19 disruptions.*

#### *Downsizing of staff and expenses*

Like all sectors, the newsroom had to find strategies to manage the unprecedented disruption. One of the main strategies was downsizing. The media organisation deliberately employed journalists or workers who would multi-task because the newsroom needed to be sustained. They, therefore, considered the journalists' skill-set. Multitasking was used as a mechanism to help combat the pandemic's effects. The anxiety and stress that came along the fear of contracting the

pandemic required the media organisations to greatly consider the moves. The media managers had to reduce on the number of people in the newsroom because of the irreversible need to sustain the newsroom with the economic hard times that had started taking a toll on the finances of the media organisations. Since the organisation had to incur transport costs for the journalists, it was necessary to normalize the use of car company stickers for the vehicles. Therefore, they followed the SOPs (The Independent, 2020).

#### *Salary cuts*

The newsroom needed to reduce staff salaries so that Next Media Services could cater to all the employee's remunerations. The cuts greatly affected top management and the usual allowances had to be scrapped off so that the rest of the employees also got a share. Salary cuts were done to make ends meet (Krisch, 2020). While it was a hard pill to swallow, especially for persons that were directly affected, it was one of the strategies used to manage costs or expenses.

#### *Adoption of technology*

Technology was a significant catalyst in disseminating news content during the pandemic. It was during this time that the employees had to adopt to the use of technology and also invest in learning how to use these applications because it necessitated them to do so. Computer/smartphone applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Meet were used for meetings (Twinamukye, 2020). The use of internet and WIFI connections had to be catered for by the media house. The video and messaging applications became the new normal during the pandemic. The pandemic critically affected the newsroom by interfering with the planning meetings, which had to be done online using video applications. Virtual meetings were necessary because it was the only way to protect journalists and their news sources from catching

the disease since they were considered essential workers responsible for updating the public. The journalists were required to familiarize themselves with digital applications because they had replaced the ordinary tools they had been accustomed to. During this time, most digital platforms like Zoom also strengthened their presence, editing applications and messaging apps also gained higher high demand during this period. The pandemic forced journalists to learning and using online applications for editing and transcribing news for production. All this allowed the journalists to work in the confines of their homes which aided the production of news content.

Additionally, the use of multi-media production or forms of storytelling were implemented to attract more and fee their audiences because the pandemic showed that audiences spent more time online and on television than ever before. This means that the Next Media Services was able to cater for all audiences with the use of the aid of their affiliated platforms. The newsroom embraced digital marketing and online digital platforms became more popular.

### 5.3 Conclusion and Implications for Practice

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic pushed Next Media Services to think outside the box, promoting and investing in user-friendly digital applications. Due to the pandemic, it is clearly evident that media houses need to prepare for tough times by having contingent plans that do not necessarily involve laying off their employees. With this, the journalists will be able to work comfortably and not under anxiety and pressure that they could lose their jobs amid uncertainties. The Covid-19 disruption clearly showed that media houses lacked strategic policies or fallback plans in the event of similar crises.

It is, therefore, essential that media houses heavily invest in advanced technological applications and sustainable revenue mechanisms like opening doors for government institutions to hold talk shows at a fee and encourage discount fees for advertisement so that companies and other organisations can come aboard.

As technology continues to shape and affect the media ecosystem, media managers and journalists must continuously adapt to the new systems that will enable the media to stay afloat, with the unreliable advertising revenues. For instance, media houses should strongly consider the role of implementing or incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the newsroom structure. It should not only be used to carry out plagiarism checks, but it should also be implemented in the news room as an asset to help in the news production process and the training of journalists to improve their skills and stay relevant in the industry. With this, the local media organisations will be able to compete with global media houses which are miles away in terms of preparing for hard times as the Covid-19 pandemic occasioned those that struck in 2019. Even though global media outlets faced the hurdle of the pandemic, the effect was insignificant for their daily operations or sustainability.

With the aid of the media economics theory, this study was able to confirm that the media can be affected by the various factors or aspects like a pandemic. From the above observations, it's clearly evident that the media greatly thrives on the aspects of stability which are influential in guiding media managers in making relevant decisions that are beneficial for the media outlet. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, media managers decided to lay off some workers, reduce on salaries, encouraged work from home policies, among other measures. This was only done as a measure to mitigate the financial obstacles that the media house was facing at that moment.

Given that the media had to find sustainable financial mechanisms, it is important to recognise the role of the Media Economics Theory. The theory assumes that media firms seek to maximize profits and every decision made within the media is done to seek and find possible opportunities for making profits, was confirmed as the study established that the media house's decision to incur transport costs for the journalists during news coverage showed that this was done to reduce on the costs of transport because it was in favour of the media organisation who saved costs on individual travels in the process of covering events.

#### 5.4 Recommendations

Since the pandemic came with unprecedented effects, media organisations must create lasting solutions that will be able to sustain them in times of crisis. Key among these is the need to invest more in training journalists in advanced technology to ease the news production process. Although it cliché that teamwork has an important role in the smooth running of the media organisation, media organisations should also heavily consider the role of teamwork and resilience in times of crises.

Adopting advanced technology is central in every industry; therefore, media organizations must take advantage of the relevant and available technologies that can be incorporated into the newsroom for the better. Media houses should not do away with the old means of running the newsrooms. However, they should fuse the new and old ways so that the essence of journalism does not completely rely on technology. The new mechanisms can be used collaboratively with the traditional methods of journalism. This will instead ease and provide convenient means of news production. Since the pandemic encouraged media managers to think beyond the newsroom, this should drive them because the pandemic opened means of creating

lasting ventures to sustain the media house. Media organisations should always strive to create safe spaces for their journalists especially when pandemics and other financial issues take a toll on them. Journalists were depressed as a result of the pandemic.

### 5.5 Areas for Further Research

There is a need for a study to analyse the effectiveness of Covid-19 strategies in media houses. The study can focus on the effectiveness in implementing the strategies in Ugandan newsrooms in the event that similar disruptions occur in the future.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

My name is Arthur Matsiko. As a requirement for my Master of Arts Degree in Digital Journalism at The Aga Khan University, I am conducting a study about Covid-19 Disruptions and Coping Strategies for Media Houses in Uganda: Case of Next Media Services. I am kindly requesting you to answer the questions below, to the best of your knowledge. Please feel free to respond without fear because your responses will be used only for the purpose of this study. Feel free to ask me in case you are not able to respond with confidence.

#### Questions:

1. What were the forms of disruption experienced by the organisation during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What departments experienced the highest forms of disruption?
3. What new unprecedented disruptions occurred at Next Media Services?
4. To what extent did the disruption affect the newsroom?
5. What services and products were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?
6. To what extent did the disruption affect the activities and output of the organisation?
7. How did the departments overcome the challenges caused by the disruptions?
8. Did the organisation have a mitigation plan for disruption management? If you did, what strategies were employed to cope with the disruption?



## Appendix B: AKU Ethics Review Committee Approval Letter



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

*Graduate School of Media and Communications*

RHF: AKU-GSMC/ERC/2023/007

Date: September 18, 2023.

Dear Arthur Matsiko (Student No. 553266)

**RE: COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA HOUSES  
IN UGANDA: A CASE OF NEXT MEDIA SERVICES**

This is to inform you that Aga Khan University - Graduate School of Media and Communications Ethics Review Committee has reviewed and approved your above research proposal. Your approval period is September 18, 2023, to September 17, 2024, and your application's approval number is AKU-GSMC/ERC/2023/007.


This approval is subject to compliance with the following, under the supervision of your two supervisors:

1. Only the approved documents including the informed consent form and the data collection instruments will be used.
2. Any changes made on the approved documents that may increase the risks or affect the welfare or safety of the participants or compromise the integrity of the study must be reported to GSMC within the shortest time possible. The amended documents will be taken through a fresh review and the due process of approval.
3. In the event that the research cannot be completed within the one-year approved period, the researcher will request for renewal of approval 30 days prior to the end of the approved period.
4. The researcher will be required to submit a comprehensive progress report when applying for renewal of approval.
5. Submission of an executive summary report to the GSMC's Ethics Review Committee within 90 days of completion of the study.
6. Produce all the data collected using the approved tools as and when required by the Ethics Review Committee within the 90 days of completion of your study.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be required to obtain a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). You can access the application portal from the website on <https://www.nacosti.go.ke/>.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

  
Prof. Nancy Booker  
Dean

University Centre, 4th Floor, 3<sup>rd</sup> Parklands Avenue  
P.O. Box 30270 - 00100 G.P.O. Nairobi, Kenya  
Tel: +254 70 3740062/63, +254 (0) 752 800 055; +254 (0) 719 231 530  
Email Address: info.gsmc@aku.edu ; Website: [www.aku.edu](http://www.aku.edu)

## Appendix C: Introductory Letter from AKU



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY  
*Graduate School of Media and Communications*

The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

P. O. Box 6884  
Kampala

September 18, 2023

Dear Sir/Madam.

**ARTHUR MATSIKO (STUDENT NO. 553266)**


Arthur Matsiko is a registered student at the Aga Khan University, Graduate School of Media and Communications. He is enrolled in the Master of Arts in Digital Journalism Programme and has completed his course work. He is now working on his Master's thesis. Mr. Matsiko's topic is "**Covid-19 Disruptions and Coping Strategies for Media Houses in Uganda: A Case of Next Media Services.**"

The purpose of my writing is to request you to assist Mr. Matsiko complete this important academic exercise. Any information collected will be used solely for academic purposes. Upon completion of the research, Mr. Matsiko's thesis will be available at our library. He will also submit two hard copies and one soft copy in pdf of his completed work to your department.

We appreciate your support to our student towards his successful completion of his thesis research.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.


Yours sincerely,

  
Prof Nancy Booker  
Dean

## Appendix D: UNCST Research License

16th October, 2023

16<sup>th</sup> October, 2023.

 **UGANDA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
A Centre of Excellence in the Heart of Africa

UG-REC-026 Approval Version 4.0

Matsiko Arthur  
The Aga Khan University  
+256782936627  
Email: marthur448@gmail.com

**UG-REC-026 APPROVAL NOTICE**

To: Matsiko Arthur, Principal Investigator

Re: UCU-REC Application titled: COVID-19 disruptions and coping strategies for media houses in Uganda: A case of next media services.

**Application Number: UCUREC-2023-692**

Version: 4.0

Type:  INITIAL REVIEW  
 Protocol Amendment  
 Letter of Amendment (LOA)  
 Continuing Review  
 Material Transfer Agreement  
 Other, Specify:

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I am pleased to inform you that the UG-REC-026; UCUREC approved the above referenced application.

Approval of the research is for the period from 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2023, to 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2024.

This research is considered minimal risk category.  
As Principal Investigator of the research, you are responsible for fulfilling the following requirements of approval:

1. All co-investigators must be kept informed of the status of the research.
2. Changes, amendments, and additions to the protocol or the consent form must be submitted to the REC for re-review and approval prior to the activation of the changes. The REC application number assigned to the research should be cited in any correspondence.
3. Reports of unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or other must be submitted to the REC. New information that becomes available which could change the risk: benefit ratio must be submitted promptly for REC review.

UGANDA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY  
**APPROVED** 1 of 2  
INITIAL  
16 OCT 2024  
RESEARCH ETHICS  
COMMITTEE

A Centre of Excellence in the Heart of Africa

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 @Ugandachristianuniversity @UCUniversity, Founded by the Province of Church of Uganda, Chartered by the Government of Uganda.