

# BUILDING CAPACITY OF JOURNALISTS IN RESPONSE TO COVID -19 IN SIERRA LEONE TRAINING MATERIAL

MRCG-SL



MEDIA REFORM COORDINATING GROUP AND THE  
SLAJ CORONA RESPONSE COMMITTEE

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## **WHY A TRAINING?**

The new Coronavirus (COVID-19) which has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is ravaging populations across the world. Sierra Leone was the last country in West Africa to report a confirmed case of the disease on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. The government has put in place stringent preventive measures, including banning flights in and out of the country and has declared a state of emergency which gives the government wide ranging powers to override fundamental rights so it can impose restrictions on movements, etc., as and when necessary. Currently, the focus is on ensuring that the spread of the virus is contained particularly now that the confirmed cases of the disease appear to be community infection.

One of the most important elements needed for the fight against the disease, is effective public information dissemination and public education in order to ensure the public adopts all the recommended health protocols. The experience with Ebola clearly indicates that this is the case. Currently, efforts are being made to achieve this, but they are inadequate. The media in Sierra Leone, under the leadership of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), has embarked on major public education and sensitization programmes through radio and television to complement the efforts of the government. The training to be organised by the MRCG in collaboration with the SLAJ Corona Response Committee (SLAJ-CRC) is to build the capacity of journalists in response to COVID -19 in Sierra Leone by improving their understanding to identify, check and debunk fake news on COVID-19 and equipping them with guidelines for reporting during emergencies. This will complement the communication objectives of the government, which are outlined in the National COVID-19 Communications Strategy.

The role of the media in the fight against and the containment of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone cannot be overemphasized and therefore the need for UNDP's support to address support required for the training of journalists. This funding will be critical for journalists to be trained to enable them to effectively carry out their core functions.

Notably, in order to achieve the objectives of the SLAJ media response to COVID-19, capacity building of journalists is an important component. This will enable Journalists to effectively generate and disseminate accurate information that will support public education on COVID-19. A major challenge that most Journalists are faced with is to be able to decipher what is credible or not amidst the plethora of information that is available on social media and other channels.

Currently there are over 60 Radio stations in the country and over 70 Newspapers; these are all outlets that disseminate information to the public. Misinformation from these outlets will have an adverse effect in the containment of the disease in the country.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The overall objective is to improve the capacity of journalists, reporters, DJs and presenters on reporting on and providing public education on COVID-19.

The key objectives of the media training are to:

- Train journalists on Facts and Key messages regarding COVID-19 to educate the public on action to be taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 into the country.
- Train journalists on understanding, identifying, checking and debunking fake news on COVID-19 and to effectively generate and disseminate accurate information that will support public education on COVID-19
- To train and provide journalists with the required ethical guidelines on reporting during emergencies as provided for in the IMC and SLAJ Codes and international reporting guidelines.
- To integrate COVID-19 into existing Radio & TV programs and newspaper publications to increase the level of awareness and understanding of COVID-19 by members of the public

### **The topics covered are:**

- Facts and Key messages for COVID-19
- 'Guidelines for reporting during emergencies'
- Topic: Understanding, identifying, checking and debunking fake news on COVID-19.
- Ethical guideline on reporting on COVID-19- IMC and SLAJ Codes/ Reporting Guidelines
- Integrating COVID-19 into Existing Radio & TV programs and newspaper publications

## FACTS AND KEY MESSAGES FOR COVID-19

### ABOUT CORONAVIRUS<sup>1</sup>

#### General messages

- The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new virus that can make people sick.
- Coronavirus is real and it is here in Sierra Leone.
- For updates and information about coronavirus in Sierra Leone, please visit the websites for Government of Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation Directorate of Health Security and Emergencies ([www.dhse.gov.sl](http://www.dhse.gov.sl)) and Ministry of Information and Communications ([www.mic.gov.sl](http://www.mic.gov.sl)).

#### Transmission

- Coronavirus spreads easily from person to person.
- When someone coughs or sneezes, they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain virus.
- If someone is close to a person with coronavirus who coughs or sneezes, they can breathe in the droplets and also get the sickness.
- Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up viruses that are on those surfaces. When your hand touches a virus and then you touch your eyes, nose or mouth, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.

#### Signs and symptoms

- Coronavirus can cause different types of signs and symptoms in people.
- The most common signs and symptoms include fever, tiredness, and cough.
- Sickness from coronavirus can range from not too serious to very serious and even death. For most people, sickness from coronavirus is not too serious.

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<sup>1</sup> GOSL Coronavirus Message Guide

- Older people and people who have health conditions like diabetes or heart disease are at higher risk of getting severe form of sickness from coronavirus.
- Some people who get coronavirus do not show signs and symptoms but can still spread the virus to others.
- Because some people do not show signs and symptoms of coronavirus, you cannot know for sure who has the virus. It is possible for you to have the virus and not know it.

### Survival and recovery

- For most people, coronavirus is not too serious.
- Most people who get sick from coronavirus recover.
- Currently, there is no marklate for the new coronavirus, but many of the symptoms can be treated.
- Getting early treatment can help protect your health and your chances of survival.

### Prevention

- Coronavirus spreads easily from person to person. That is why it is so important to wash our hands frequently with soap and water, keep an arms-stretched distance from others, wear a cloth mask, and call 117 right away if you get fever, tiredness, and cough.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
  - Washing our hands with soap and water frequently kills germs, including viruses, and is one of the best ways to keep healthy and help stop the spread of sickness.
- If there is no water, use hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol-based.
  - Using hand sanitizer kills germs, including viruses, that may be on your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
  - Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up germs, including viruses, that are on those surfaces. When your hand touches those germs and then you touch your eyes, nose or mouth, the germs can enter your body and can make you sick.
- Cough and sneeze into your upper arm or sleeve.
  - When you cough or sneeze, you spray small liquid droplets from your nose or mouth which can contain germs, including viruses.

- Coughing and sneezing into your upper arm or sleeve helps stop the droplets from spreading to others and onto surfaces.
- Wear a cloth mask if you are coughing or sneezing or you are caring for someone who is coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid close contact with any person who is coughing or sneezing.
  - When someone coughs or sneezes, they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain virus.
  - If you are too close to a person with coronavirus who coughs or sneezes, you can breathe in the droplets and also get the sickness.
- Avoid shaking hands. Use other non-contact ways of greeting others, such as a nod, wave, or bow.
  - Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up virus from those surfaces and spread it to other people through shaking hands. When your hand touches a virus and then you touch your eyes, nose or mouth, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.
- Avoid physical contact and keep safe distance (arms'-stretched length) from others at social and public gatherings.
  - Coronavirus spreads from person to person so avoiding places where there are many people close together will make it harder for the sickness to spread.
- Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces like doorknobs, toilets, tables and handrails with alcohol-based disinfectant or detergent.
  - Disinfecting surfaces kills viruses that are on those surfaces and helps stop the spread of sickness.

#### Use of cloth masks

- Cloth masks used alone do not stop the spread of coronavirus, but they can help when used together with other actions.
  - The most effective actions to protect yourself and others against coronavirus are to wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use hand sanitizer, cough and sneeze into your upper arm or sleeve, and keep a safe distance of at least 1 meter (arms'-stretched length) from others, especially any person who is coughing or sneezing.
- Wear a cloth face mask if you are coughing or sneezing, or you are caring for someone who is coughing or sneezing.
  - If you or a family member has fever, tiredness, and cough, call 117 right away.
- Some people who get coronavirus do not show signs and symptoms but can still spread the virus to others.

- Because some people do not show signs and symptoms of coronavirus, you cannot know for sure who has the virus. It is possible for you to have the virus and not know it. That is why wearing a cloth mask, even if you feel healthy, can help stop the spread of coronavirus to others.
- Masks made of cloth should be used by members of the public.
- Masks that you typically see worn by health workers in hospitals should only be used by health workers.
  - Currently, there are not enough masks around the world for all the health workers who need them. Health workers who care for coronavirus patients without the equipment to keep them safe can get the coronavirus and spread it to their families, coworkers, neighbors, and other patients.
- An effective cloth mask should:
  - Fit close against the face
  - Be held to the head by ties or ear loops
  - Use multiple layers of fabric
  - Allow for breathing without problem
  - Be able to be washed without damaging the mask
- There are different ways to make a cloth mask.
  - You can sew one yourself or give measurements to your tailor to make masks for you.
  - You can make one yourself that does not require sewing.
- It is important to know how to wear a cloth mask correctly and care for it safely.
  - Always wash a cloth mask before trying it on or wearing it.
  - Before putting on a cloth mask, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol-based.
  - Cover your mouth and nose with the cloth mask and make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask.
  - Tie the mask behind your head or place the elastic loops over your ears.
  - Make sure the mask fits well. Move it around using the ties or elastic loops to get the best fit. Do not touch the cloth part of the mask.
  - Once you have put on the cloth mask, do not touch your face again until you take it off.
    - If you touch the mask, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer.
  - Cloth masks should not be lowered when speaking, coughing or sneezing.

- To take off the mask safely, undo the ties or loops. Do not touch the front of mask or your eyes, nose and mouth. Carefully fold the cloth mask inside out and hold it by the ties or loops.
- Wash the cloth mask right away with soap and water or put it in a plastic by itself until you can wash it later. After removing the mask from the plastic, throw the plastic away.
- Dry the cloth mask well before using it again. Iron the cloth mask if possible.
- Use a fresh, clean cloth mask every day. If the mask gets damp from sweat or from talking or breathing, replace it with a clean dry one.
- It is good to have at least two cloth masks so you have a clean, dry one you can wear while the washed one dries.
- Masks should not be placed on young children under the age of two or any person who cannot remove it themselves or tell someone they need help.
- Do not share cloth masks with others.
- Place cloth masks that have tears, cuts, or holes in a plastic and throw away.

#### What to do if you have signs and symptoms

- If you have fever, tiredness, and cough, stay home and call 117 right away.
  - Getting early treatment can protect your family and loved ones from getting the sickness.
- If you have signs and symptoms while traveling, inform the transport staff so they can help you get the care you need.
  - Getting early treatment can protect and save lives.
- Currently, there is no marklate for the new coronavirus, but many of the symptoms can be treated.
- Most people recover from coronavirus and getting early treatment can help protect your health and your chances of survival.
- Getting early treatment can also protect your family and loved ones from getting the sickness.

#### Traveling to and from Sierra Leone

- If you plan to travel to any country where coronavirus is spreading, consider delaying your traveling until after the outbreak. If you must travel, it is important to follow advice for coronavirus prevention very closely to protect yourself and others.



- Avoid travel if you have a fever or cough.
- If you have signs and symptoms while traveling, inform the transport staff so they can help you get the care you need.
  - Getting early treatment can protect and save lives.
- If you have fever, tiredness, and cough, call 117 right away.
  - Make sure to tell the health worker or 117 if you or someone you know has traveled to another country in the last 14 days.
  - Getting early treatment can protect your family and loved ones from getting the sickness.
- If you have traveled to or transited through, within the last 14 days before arriving in Sierra Leone, any country with **50 or more** confirmed cases of coronavirus, you will be required to enter facility quarantine for up to 16 days.
- If you have traveled to or transited through, within the last 14 days before arriving in Sierra Leone, any country with **less than 50** confirmed cases of coronavirus, you will be required to home quarantine for up to 16 days.
  - Home quarantine means you must stay at home for up to 16 days and a surveillance officer will check on you every day. You must not leave your home at any point during that time.
- It is possible a person who has traveled to or transited through a country with ongoing spread of coronavirus may have come in contact with coronavirus and could carry the sickness into Sierra Leone.
- If a person gets sick from coronavirus once in Sierra Leone, they could spread the sickness to others. That is why it is important to have a way to monitor those travelers for up to 16 days before they move around in Sierra Leone.
- The length of time a person will spend in quarantine depends on how many days have passed since they traveled to or transited through a country with ongoing spread of coronavirus.
- Travelers in quarantine will be checked for signs and symptoms of coronavirus everyday by trained health workers.
- If a person in quarantine does not show signs and symptoms or test positive for coronavirus in the 16 days after they left the country with ongoing spread of coronavirus, the person can leave quarantine and continue their travel in Sierra Leone.
- If a person shows signs and symptoms of coronavirus while in quarantine, the person will be given the care that they need and tested for coronavirus.

## QUARANTINE

- Quarantine means separating a person or group of people who have come in contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus so that if you get the virus, you do not spread the virus to others.
- Some people who get coronavirus do not show signs and symptoms but can still spread the virus to others.
- Because some people do not show signs and symptoms, you cannot know for sure who has the virus. It is possible for you to have the virus and not know it.
- If health workers ask you to quarantine, it is important to do so.
- You are protecting your loved ones from coronavirus when you separate yourself from others until your quarantine period is over.
- When in quarantine, you are to remain within the compound until the health worker tells you it is safe to leave.
- A person who has been released from quarantine is not considered a risk for spreading coronavirus to others.
- A person is released from quarantine only after they have been checked by health workers for the required period of time and they did not get the sickness during that time.
- It is important for your health and the health of others to avoid all close contact with others while in quarantine. This means keeping at least 1 meter distance (arms'-stretched length) from others at all times. It is also good to wash your hands with soap and water frequently.
- Visitors are not allowed into the quarantine home. It is not safe to invite anyone into the quarantine home.
- Family and friends from outside are allowed to bring you food and other items. However, they should leave these items with the quarantine staff who will safely deliver them to you.
- Any delivered items that enter the quarantine home will not be allowed back out.
- Please share with the health workers information about any other health needs you have as soon as possible or when you enter quarantine. The health worker will take care of your ongoing health needs throughout your time in quarantine.
- Call 117 right away if you have any signs or symptoms.
- Others in your household should stay home until your signs and symptoms are checked by a health worker.

- It is good for everyone, especially those who have had contact with someone with coronavirus, to take actions to stop the possible spread of the sickness.
  - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
  - If there is no water, use hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol-based.
  - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
  - Cough and sneeze into your upper arm or sleeve.
  - Keep at least an arms-stretched distance from others.
  - If you are coughing or sneezing or you are caring for someone who is coughing or sneezing, wear a cloth mask.
  - Regularly clean surfaces like doorknobs, toilets, tables, handrails with disinfectant or detergent.
  - Do not eat from the same bowl or share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people in your house.
  - Open windows or use fans or air conditioners to allow for fresh air.
- Quarantine is the separation of persons who may have come in contact with a sickness but do not yet show signs and symptoms or know if they have the virus.
- Isolation separates sick people from healthy people to help stop the spread of sickness. Sick people are taken to a hospital where they can be tested and get the care they need.

## LOCKDOWN

- The coronavirus does not travel alone, it goes with people. By limiting the places you go, you limit the chances you and others will get and spread coronavirus. Let's obey the district lockdown and stay safe at home.
- The government has declared a 3-day lockdown to help stop the spread of coronavirus, and keep citizens safe.
- The government knows that lockdowns are very difficult and thanks you for the sacrifices you are making to help protect yourself, your family, and your neighbors.
- Sierra Leone has fought and won against Ebola before, and can fight and win against coronavirus too, if everyone works together. Every man, woman and child can make a difference.
- To stay safe while you are at home:
  - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
  - Regularly clean surfaces and items that more than one person might have touched, such as doorknobs, toilets, tables, handrails, and phone chargers, with disinfectant or detergent, or if you don't have these things, then soap and water.
  - Open windows or use fans or air conditioners to allow for fresh air.
  - Do not eat from the same bowl or share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people in your house.
  - While everyone is at home together, keep a physical distance of at least 1 meter (arms-stretched length) from any person who is coughing or sneezing.
  - Do not accept any visitors into your house (except health workers).
  - If you or a family member has fever, tiredness and cough, stay home and call 117 right away.
- Exercise at home, eat healthy food, take time to relax, and keep regular sleep routines.
- Keep in touch with your friends and family by phone or social media.
- During times of stress, pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Talking to people you trust can help.
- If you are worried about your any kind of sexual abuse or gender-based violence, call 116 for free.
- While staying at home is one of the best ways to help stop the spread of coronavirus, it is also important to still go to the hospital for regular health services. When we are healthy, our bodies can better fight coronavirus.

- Help look after each other. We can get through this together. If you have something to share with your neighbor such as water or food, please do so. Check in on friends and family via phone calls and social media, especially the elderly, those with health problems, and those who are vulnerable.
- The government is working through the ministries to provide national water supply and food to quarantined homes and vulnerable groups.
- If you have any issues in your community, please report them to Community Mobilizers working during the lockdown or the police.

## RUMORS, STIGMA AND MISINFORMATION

### Stigma of people suspected or confirmed to have coronavirus

- Let's save our society from coronavirus by not sharing personal details or photos of persons who have or may have coronavirus.
- Sharing a person's name, photo, location or other personal details without their consent is unlawful and can lead to stigma towards the person, their family and their community.
- Stigma and rumors put our safety at risk and make government response efforts more difficult.

### Misinformation and rumors

- Knowledge is power, but when information shared is not based on facts and evidence, it can spread rumors and cause fear, panic and even harm.
- It is important to always make sure information is from a trusted source before sharing.
  - Key trusted sources include the Government of Sierra Leone, World Health Organization (WHO), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
  - It is good to cross-check with the website of the source to make sure what is being shared is actually true.
- You can help others stay healthy and prevent coronavirus by sharing messages on coronavirus put out by the Government of Sierra Leone.

# UNDERSTANDING, IDENTIFYING, CHECKING AND DEBUNKING FAKE NEWS ON COVID 19

*Presented by*

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False information and fake news are the major issues of concern regarding public engagement about mitigating the transmission of COVID 19. I am going to facilitate a module on understanding fake news and the means of identifying false information as journalists and the professional ways of cross checking or debunking them. At the same time, I am going to talk about misinformation, which has been pervasive and is subsequently affecting public commitment to mitigating community transmission of COVID 19.

Rumours are a second form of misinformation. One popular conspiracy theory exists that the virus was developed as a means to wage a biological war against China. In China, a rumour spread that bioweapons research in a Wuhan laboratory resulted in the genetic engineering of COVID-19 that was then released. Such rumours may have even jeopardized the working relationship between Western scientists and their Chinese counterparts searching for a COVID-19 vaccine.

- **Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country
- **Misinformation:** Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm
- **Mal-information:** Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization or country.

No crisis can be resolved without accurate and reliable information. At all levels, from governments to individuals, the decisions we make can be a matter of life and death and must be based on facts and science.

UNESCO also observes as follows "Unreliable and false information is spreading around the world to such an extent, that some commentators are now referring to the new avalanche of misinformation that's accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'disinfodemic'."

Clearly speaking, untrue, exaggerated and dubious medical claims and hoaxes are other common forms of misinformation. Various unproven natural and traditional remedies were proffered as

cures to COVID-19, such as drinks that contained mint and spices like saffron and turmeric that spread in Iran through Twitter.

How to identify fake news? Fake news today comes in different formats; either as **written texts or videos, or audio recordings or cartoons or advertorials or other artistic designs**. Even some of what is considered today as fake news does not always come by way of straight forward claims. A number of times, too, what appears as fake news follows real news on life, people and society. Sometimes, a story intended as satire often ends up circulating as fact and as a story intended as factual can also end up as satire.

Why disinformation? Disinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding the global coronavirus pandemic have flooded the internet – often with an additional nudge from world leaders and celebrities – presenting a challenge for health authorities, social media platforms, journalists, fact-checkers and concerned citizens worldwide<sup>2</sup>.

Disinformation is a scourge of our era that tends to piggyback on any crisis, particularly a global one like the current pandemic: From conspiracy theories about how it began (in a Chinese or American lab?) and how it spreads (boosted by 5G networks?), to fake news about the reappearance of seldom viewed animals in ports and canals, to bogus remedies (some deadlier than the disease itself), the internet is awash with it. “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned in February.

The WHO defines an infodemic as “an over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it”.

A professional handling of Fake news calls for collaborative intervention. Again, UNESCO and stakeholders states “Fighting infodemics and misinformation is a joint effort,” says Aleksandra Kuzmanovic, social media manager with the WHO's department of communications. “In my role, I am in touch with Facebook, Twitter, Tencent, Pinterest, TikTok, and also my colleagues in the China office. When we see some questions or rumours spreading, we write it down, we go back to our risk communications colleagues and then they help us find evidence-based answers.”

In the current crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, media workers are as vital as other essential professionals.

Many factors are transforming the communications landscape, raising questions about the quality, impact and credibility of journalism.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/20200426-conspiracy-theories-and-fake-news-fighting-the-covid-19-infodemic>

At the same time, orchestrated campaigns are spreading untruths - disinformation, mal-information and misinformation - that are often unwittingly shared on social media.

UNESCO Beirut has developed a brochure offering you tips on how to spot fake news and misinformation:

#### HOW TO DEBUNK FAKE NEWS ABOUT COVID 19?

- Consider the Source
- Check the Author
- Check the Date
- Check for Biases
- Read Beyond

Through a vast amount of sources, ranging from obscure blogs over social media platforms to public figures, we have heard that malaria drugs, alcohol and fish-tank cleaning products could cure us of Covid-19. Apparently, the Pope and footballer Cristiano Ronaldo have both tested positive for the virus. And as for an explanation of where the virus originates from: it has been bred in Chinese, American or French labs, depending on where you believe the apocalypse comes from. Although social media giants like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have developed stricter policies on censoring and removing fake news, private Facebook groups and messages, undetected by algorithms, can still live on and spread.



# **GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING DURING EMERGENCIES (COVID 19)**

**By Mr. James Tamba Lebbie**

## **Introduction**

### ***Media Roles in Society: The Theoretical Basis for the Training***

Journalism has been guided by the enterprise, vision, and purpose of many individual editors, publishers, and journalists who have sought to record or influence the course of history with diverse motives. The press has also been a channel of communication for political and social activists.

From this perspective, Clifford G. Christians et al (2009) point out that the basic tasks of journalism in a democracy can be classified under three main headings:

1. The task of observing and informing primarily as a service to the public;
2. The task of participating in public life as an independent actor by way of critical comment, advice, advocacy, and expression of opinion; and
3. The task of providing a channel, forum or platform for pluralistic voices or sources to reach/make informed decisions/choices.

In terms of media roles also, there are alternative versions of role description, but the most typical list includes the following:

- ✓ Providing surveillance of the social environment;
- ✓ Forming opinion;
- ✓ Setting the agenda of public discussion;
- ✓ Acting as a watchdog in respect to political or economic power;
- ✓ Acting as messenger and public informant
- ✓ Playing an active participant part in social life

Alternatively, all those tasks can be collapsed into four broader roles of the media, which are labeled as: *monitorial*; *facilitative*; *radical*; and *collaborative*.

### **The Monitorial Role:**

The natural first role is that of a vigilant informer, which applies mainly to collecting and publishing information on behalf of sources and clients that include governments, commercial advertisers and private individuals. The aim of both sources and media are very diverse, including such goals as profit, social and political mission, and propaganda. The term “monitorial” includes the notion of providing advance intelligence, advice, warning, and everything of general utility for information seekers.

### **The Facilitative Role:**

As the main channel of public information, the news media are inevitably caught up in a wide range of political and social processes. They are relied on by other institutions for certain services in many areas, including politics, commerce, health, education and welfare. The media provide access for legitimate (and sometime illegitimate) claimants to public attention.

But they also make a virtue of the facilitative relationship, provided that it is voluntary and does not compromise their integrity, credibility, or independence. Consistent with the character of journalism’s roles, the news media do not merely report on civil society associations and activities, but support and strength them.

### ***The Collaborative Role:***

*Collaboration refers specifically to the relationship between the media and sources of political and economic power, primarily the state and its agencies. Historically, this was the natural first role for the press when employed by various institutions, including the emerging political parties as vehicles of democracy. Even today, under certain circumstances, the news media are called on to support civil or military authorities in defense of the social order against threats of crime, war, terrorism, and insurgency, as well as national and natural emergencies and disasters.*

*The claim to media cooperation can be more general and involve demands that journalism support the national interest or be patriotic and respect authority.*

### **The Radical Role:**

This role is at some distance from being facilitative and is a clear departure from collaboration with authority. The media enact this role when they provide a platform for views and voices that are critical of authority and the established order. They give support to drastic change and reform.

This role is the focus of attempts to suppress or limit media freedom and also provides the main justification for freedom of publication. Without the radical role, participatory democracy would not be possible.

The radical role of the media and journalism insists on the absolute equality and freedom of all members of a democratic society in a completely uncompromising way. Too often, in societies based on the competitive market principle, great imbalances of wealth, education, and access to information and communication are accepted as simply the rewards of personal initiative. Journalism in the radical role makes every effort to ensure that no injustice is ever tolerated. The radical democratic commitment works for the continual elimination of concentrations of social power to enable every person to participate equally in all societal decisions.

### **Reporting on Health Emergencies (Epidemics/Pandemics)**

Health pandemics are fast-moving news events that concern mass populations.

Unlike disasters or tragedies, the impact is not confined to a single location, or a group of victims. The potential for trauma exposure is present, yet unpredictable.

Communities and individuals can experience trauma from loss of loved ones, from being unable to access health care, from forced quarantine or isolation, and from associated events such as witnessing people being forcibly removed from their homes or other drastic measures taken by authorities to contain the virus (for example, authorities welding the doors of quarantined individuals in the early days of the crisis in Wuhan).

There may be other trauma exposure events that directly or indirectly occur as a result of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on communities can be so sudden and shocking that general resilience is tested. People who are not directly affected may still engage in psychologically unsafe behaviour, such as fighting over (often scarce) resources, or panic buying or panic travelling in order to return to family and friends, or ignoring social distancing requirements.

People who are already under significant stress, or have prior mental or physical health conditions, may experience heightened symptoms.

For reporters, media practitioners, editors, fact checkers, content moderators and all those covering the COVID-19 story, both the story itself and the logistics of covering it are changing daily, and in some cases hourly.

In the initial outbreak period, reporters were often reporting from location at the centre of an outbreak, leading to a potential compromise of their own personal safety.

As more and more countries go into lockdown to prevent community spread, *journalists need to discover home-based ways to find and report on stories*, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection - not to mention a sense not being "on" the story itself, since news practitioners know the importance of being on the scene whenever possible.

In addition, the fast-moving nature of the story means that decisions made with the best information at the time can lead to unforeseen consequences, or can become out of date and inaccurate quite rapidly. This requires relentless fact-checking, which can exacerbate stress for media practitioners. Content moderators and other online editors are also overwhelmed with information and must navigate the need for accuracy and responsiveness.

### **Tips on covering a pandemic**

#### **BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT:**

- If you are physically attending a scene, ensure you have as much protective equipment as necessary for the assignment.
- This includes, but is not limited to masks, wipes (for your equipment), and sometimes gloves, hand sanitiser, or soap and a towel.
- Try to get as much information as possible about the environment you are entering. ***Assume that anyone you visit may be, knowingly or not, carrying the virus.***
- Talk to your editor or manager if you do not feel comfortable with the protective equipment available to you.
- Those working online and in isolation – plan for breaks. Working from home means that personal time can get eaten up.
- This is a marathon, not a sprint, and you need to plan for this new way of working. Identify your social support – write down a list of times when you can have virtual check ins.

#### **DURING THE ASSIGNMENT:**

- In the field, remain vigilant about personal protection from surfaces or being in close proximity to others. Ensure that your equipment is wiped clean as soon as possible afterwards, even if it doesn't come into direct contact with others.
- Interviewing people affected by the virus – either online or in person – comes with its own set of specific challenges. People who have been diagnosed with the virus are likely to be experiencing extreme anxiety. In addition, they are likely to be forced into isolation from their loved ones, and this could lead to unexpected levels of distress and also the loss of important emotional regulating functions such as physical contact with loved ones. Therefore, interviewing should follow the basic principles of trauma-informed reporting, including the following:
  - Ensure consent is given for the interview, and provide as much information as possible about where the interview might appear.
  - Conduct interviews through distance tools (video conferencing) when possible. If you are in the same location as your interview subject, keep your physical distance. Compensate with more attention to eye-contact and other signs of connection and respect.

- Ask them to talk about what they want to tell you, rather than focusing only on the information you are looking for.
- Ask them to describe how they are managing, or what steps they are taking to look after themselves. Helping them draw these elements to conscious attention can create protective factors for an interviewee.
- End the interview by making sure there isn't anything else the person wants to say and providing your contact details for follow-up.

### *Look for non-obvious angles*

Big stories often end up with a number of common narratives that need to be followed up and reported on. In pandemics, these include:

- A running toll of diagnoses, recoveries and deaths
- Celebrity infections
- Healthcare access issues (including rationing)
- Quarantining and its consequences
- Community panic
- Conflicting health advice
- Political responses
- Economic responses
- Wellbeing and resilience

While these are important, keep an eye and ear out for the unexpected stories that you might otherwise miss if you decide in advance what the story is likely to be.

Be open to noticing, and reporting on, the moments of humour or human kindness connections that are also on display at times of community stress.

This is likely to increase your sense of control over the work you are doing from day to day, and give you a greater sense of creativity; both important elements of psychological resilience.

### ***Facts Checking:***

While all ethical news professionals check their facts, covering pandemics requires a greater vigilance and a willingness to return to previous reports and update them with new information when required.

This is particularly true of health advice; which can change quickly and result in your published story being wrong, even within a few hours.

Given that the community are making decisions based on public information, it is important to ensure that all accessible content is as accurate as possible, in an ongoing way.

### **AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT**

Make sure you get a chance to “switch off” the story; don’t spend your downtime scrolling Twitter or the news wires. You can catch up again when you start your next shift.

Create as much of a normal routine as possible. If you normally go to the gym, exercise from your room or home at around the same time of day. Watch your favourite TV shows. Continue the practices of parasympathetic system activation – breathing, relaxing, eating well and finding opportunities to laugh.

Write out a daily schedule.

Orderliness can help us feel a sense of control, which helps our wellbeing.

Connect with your loved ones. If you can’t do that in person due to being isolated or quarantined (or a long way away), do so via phone or video conferencing.

Connect with colleagues who are covering the same or similar stories. Share your experiences and listen to theirs.

Peer and social support is vital. Find ways to do it online and as always, be sure to inject some humour and kindness.

The End!

**References:**

Media Society (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) – David Croteau & William Hoynes

Media Systems in Society: Understanding Industries, Strategies & Power –  
Joseph Turow

<https://dartcenter.org/resources/tips-reporting-pandemics>



## **THE SIERRA LEONE ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS (SLAJ) CODE OF ETHICS ABRIDGED VERSION**

The SLAJ Code of Ethics is to address the ethical issues<sup>1</sup> facing Sierra Leone's journalism. It draws inspiration and conforms to most of the principles drawn from other Codes of Ethics and international best practices. It is to ensure that journalists adhere to the highest ethical standards, professional competence and good behaviour in performing their duties. This Code is to provide a guide to professional media practice, and it is therefore applicable to those practising journalism in Sierra Leone.

Conscious of our mission, vision, core values, responsibilities and duties as journalists, we, journalists in Sierra Leone, subscribe and give to ourselves this Code of Ethics. It is the duty of every journalist to adhere to and observe the provisions in the Code as set out in the various articles.

### **ARTICLE 1: FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Journalists shall at all times strive to uphold and defend the right of freedom of expression and information, the principle of media freedom and responsibility, and the right of the public to be informed.

### **ARTICLE 2: RESPECT FOR NATIONAL VALUES, PUBLIC INTEREST<sup>2</sup> AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Journalists shall help to promote national unity, universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, and peace. □ Journalists shall not publish or broadcast information promoting, supporting or encouraging violence, incitement or hatred, against religious or ethnic minorities and the socially excluded, including persons with disabilities.

### **ARTICLE 3: TRANSPARENCY/ACCOUNTABILITY**

Journalists shall not conceal their identities, including when seeking information through social media. Journalists shall be accountable to the public for the fairness and reliability of their reporting.

#### ARTICLE 4: TRUTH AND FACTS

Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.

The journalist shall at all times defend and abide by the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism. Journalists shall clearly distinguish between comments, opinions, conjecture and fact.

#### ARTICLE 5: ACCURACY, FAIRNESS AND BALANCE

Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting shall be the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust, confidence and respectability. Journalists shall be disciplined in their efforts to verify all facts and refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information.

#### ARTICLE 6: RIGHT OF REPLY/RETRACTION/CORRECTION/REJOINDER

When journalists make a mistake, whether in fact or in context, and regardless of the platform, they shall correct it promptly and in a transparent manner, acknowledging the nature of the error.

Journalists shall hold the right of reply as a cardinal rule of practice and an apology shall be published whenever appropriate.

#### ARTICLE 7: COPYRIGHT/PLAGIARISM

Where a journalist reproduces a work, be it in print, broadcast, art work or design, proper acknowledgement shall be accorded the author in line with the provisions of Sierra Leone's Copyright Act of 2011.

#### ARTICLE 8: PRIVACY

As a general rule, a journalist shall respect the privacy of individuals and their families unless the public interest is at stake.

#### ARTICLE 9: DEFAMATION

Journalists shall regard defamation, blackmail, libel and false and groundless accusations as grave professional offences.

#### ARTICLE 10: DEALING WITH SOURCES

Journalists shall normally identify sources of information. They may use unnamed sources when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect anonymity, the material gained from the confidential source is of strong public interest, and there is no other reasonable way to obtain the information. If that is done, journalists shall explain the need for anonymity.

#### ARTICLE 11: CONFIDENTIALITY/ NON-DISCLOSURE

Journalists shall observe the principle of confidentiality, which is not to disclose the source of information obtained in confidence. They are bound to protect confidential sources of information.

#### ARTICLE 12: SUBTERFUGE

Journalists shall avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional and open methods are not available or accessible, and the information is in the public interest.

#### ARTICLE 13: CONFLICT OF INTEREST, REWARD, GRATIFICATION AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

It shall be a professional misconduct if during the course of his/her duty, a journalist corruptly demands and receives monetary or material reward for publishing, broadcasting or suppressing his/her news or views. □ Journalists shall refuse gifts, favours, fees, free travel<sup>3</sup> and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility and reputation.

#### ARTICLE 15: DISCRIMINATION

Journalists shall refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, race, religion, sex, or to any physical or mental illness or disability.

#### ARTICLE 16: VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, CHILDREN AND MINORS

Journalists shall avoid identifying victims of sexual assault. □ Journalists shall not identify, either by name or picture, or interview children under the age of 18 who are involved in cases concerning sexual offences, crimes and rituals or alleged witchcraft either as victims, witnesses or defendants.

#### ARTICLE 17: PERSONAL GRIEF OR DISTRESS

In cases of personal grief or distress, journalists should exercise tact, deference and diplomacy in seeking information and publishing.

#### ARTICLE 18: DECENCY/ GOOD BEHAVIOUR

The journalism profession demands good appearance at all occasions. Therefore journalists shall always be properly and decently dressed, comport themselves in a manner that conforms with public taste and professional standards.

#### ARTICLE 19: DIGITAL MEDIA: SPECIAL ISSUES

Ethical practice does not change with the medium. Journalists are bound by the above principles no matter where their stories are published or broadcast.

#### ARTICLE 20: ENFORCEMENT OF THE CODE

The Complaints and Disciplinary Committee shall be responsible for interpreting the Code and recommending appropriate punishment for defaulting members to the Executive.

The Code shall be applicable to all those practising journalism in Sierra Leone, including members of SLAJ.

## **IMC CODE OF PRACTICE**

### ***The Code of Practice of the Independent Media Commission (IMC)***

The Independent Media Commission (IMC) was established pursuant to the enactment of the Independent Media Commission Act No. 12 of 2000. The Act provides for the “establishment of an autonomous body for the regulation of mass media institutions and for other matters connected therewith.

The objects for which the commission was established included:

“To promote a free and pluralistic media throughout Sierra Leone, to ensure that media institutions achieve the highest level of efficiency in the provision of media services... to protect the interest of the public against exploitation or abuse by media institutions...”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the IMC has a two fold mandate of protecting both the media and the public. They are to protect the freedom of the media, while at the same time protect the interests of the public against exploitation and undue abuse by the media.

The IMC’s role in protecting the media and the public was to be guaranteed and safeguarded through established statutory rules and regulations. Section 8(h) of the Act dealing with the functions of the Commission states that the IMC shall:

“Compile and adopt a comprehensive Media Code of Practice, in collaboration with SLAJ ... and to monitor the implementation of that Code throughout Sierra Leone.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Part 111, Section 8 of the IMC Act 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid (IMC Act, 2000)

Section 38 (1&2) of the IMC Act also support the above provision by noting that the Commission may by statutory instrument make regulations for the purpose of giving effect to this Act ...the Commission shall only make regulations after due consultation with SLAJ and other media practitioners associations.

The Code comprised provisions for the Print, Electronic, Advertising and Elections Coverage and Reporting. The Code was not silent on the implementation strategies of the objectives contained in the code.

The IMC Code of Practice has twenty (27) sections on the Print Media and eighteen (18) sections on the Electronic Media with various provisions ranging from Accuracy, Copyright, Opportunity to Reply, Privacy, Harassment, Reporting on Children, Misrepresentation, Dealing with Confidential Sources, Promoting Sierra Leonean Culture and Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), Proper Management of Phone-ins and live programmes.

The provisions on Accuracy for example states that newspapers and periodicals must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted materials including pictures and make all reasonable efforts to check and cross-check the accuracies of stories before publication.<sup>5</sup> But, because journalists are humans, and they can make mistakes, the IMC Code of Practice makes provision for Opportunity to Reply, “A fair opportunity to reply to inaccuracies must be given to individuals or organisations when reasonably called for”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> IMC Code of Practice 2007, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> IMC Code of Practice 2007, p.7