From Crisis to Opportunity - the Role of the Media in COVID 19 Era

EVENT SUMMARY

Online via Zoom
When: Wednesday, May 13, 2020 | 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM

Moderator
Dr. Bruria Adini | Head, Department of Emergency Management and Disaster Medicine, Tel Aviv University

Speakers
Fiona Mbabazi | Journalist, Rwanda Broadcasting Agency
Fara Mokhtar Sambe | Assistant Editor, La Gazette (Senegal)
Collins Mwai | Writer and Editor, The New Times Daily (Rwanda)
Alfredo Narváez | Science Journalist and PhD Student, Iberoamericana University
Adva Saldinger | Associate Editor, Devex
Gilad Shalmor | Reporter and Content Creator, Channel 12 News (Israel)

Event Description

In collaboration with SID Israel, SID-Washington co-hosted a transatlantic webinar to discuss the media's role during the COVID-19 crisis and to better understand all sides of the issue. Our panelists addressed questions such as:

• What is a journalist’s capacity to enhance transparency at a time when governments may choose to limit the flow of information?
• How does the media affect the public’s compliance with governmental directives?
• What is the responsibility of the media to publish unbiased, expert opinions that may not completely align with government policies?
Key Takeaways

1. The Importance of COVID-19 Media Coverage

Fiona Mbabazi (Rwanda Broadcasting Agency) understands the role of the media in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Rwanda and around the world. Ms. Mbabazi expressed her concern with Rwandan officials relaxing COVID-19 related restrictions, which has caused proper sanitary and social distancing practices to be abandoned. Being a reporter, Ms. Mbabazi feels an enormous sense of responsibility to report the severity of this crisis through her writing. She hopes her work will remind people to follow safety precautions even if government officials loosen certain restrictions.

2. COVID-19’s Impact on Social Inequality in Senegal

Fara Mokhtar Sambe (La Gazette, Senegal) drew attention to social inequality issues within Senegal in the midst of COVID-19, explaining the difference in services and care provided for those who can afford them. For example, Mr. Mokhtar Sambe highlighted those living in urban areas are more aware of the danger associated with COVID-19 and may have better access to resources compared to those residing in rural areas. Similar to Ms. Mbabazi, Mr. Mokhtar Sambe expressed concern around re-opening the economy too early, as it could lead to a second wave of outbreaks. As a reporter, Mr. Mokhtar Sambe also has felt an enormous responsibility now more than ever, as the Senegalese look to him to provide accurate information, particularly those who are in most dire need of it.

3. Government Funding during COVID-19 in Mexico

Alfredo Narváez (Iberoamericana University) is experiencing difficulties in conveying the severity of COVID-19 to citizens in Mexico. Mr. Narváez explained that many believe the outbreak lacks legitimacy. Those who live in higher income communities do not feel responsible for maintaining social distancing and quarantine orders because they are confident in their health care services. Mr. Narváez explained that across Mexico, few are lucky to feel confident in their health care services, and that the vast majority of citizens feel abandoned by their government during this time. According to Mr. Narváez, the Mexican government has not funneled enough funding into creating tests for citizens, resulting in many individuals being undiagnosed. Mr. Narváez explained that currently, there are 40,000 cases and 4,000 deaths. However, the numbers are likely much higher due to the lack of proper testing.
Creating Change Through Media Coverage

Gilad Shalmor (Channel 12 News, Israel) noticed that more individuals in Israel are dependent on legitimate media coverage during this time and are often tuning into news stations more often and longer throughout the day. Mr. Shalmor explained that one of his COVID-19 coverage breakthroughs occurred as he was covering a story in a local hospital one day and shared a story of a family being restricted from visiting their loved ones moments before their passing. The story sparked emotion across Israel, and soon enough hospitals began allowing loved ones to spend time with their sick family members while in the hospital. Mr. Shalmor highlighted that despite the tragedies of COVID-19, the media can be used positively to push for change and action during this time.

A Domestic Approach: The United States and COVID-19

Adva Saldinger (Devex) provided the American perspective, highlighting the progress the United States has made during the COVID-19 pandemic and sharing how Devex is working to report this news. Ms. Saldinger explained that normally, her work at Devex aims to connect current issues globally, but most of her recent reporting takes a more domestic approach. Ms. Saldinger has been monitoring bills and legislation passed by the U.S. Congress that provide relief and support to American citizens, but has noticed there is little mention and action regarding foreign aid. Due to this, current global development projects will likely be delayed.

Media Focus and Funding in Rwanda

Collins Mwai (The New Times Daily, Rwanda) highlighted his struggles in receiving funding for news coverage during this time. Mr. Mwai explained that much of the funding for media outlets and companies is based on advertisement revenues. However, advertising businesses in Rwanda are currently on hold due to remote work orders. As a result, Rwandan media outlets are forced to be selective in the stories they produce and fund. According to Mr. Mwai, only COVID-19 related content has been deemed essential, which has forced him to shift his writing style and topic interests.