Review Article

What the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light about journalism education in Zambia: A reflexive analysis of the transition to online teaching and learning

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper cogitates and reflects on some of the lessons learned about journalism and mass communication education in Zambia following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights specific observations from the experience of teaching journalism, mass communication and media studies courses in the wake of the globally menacing pandemic within the context of a country in the global South with limited resources and a traditional approach to journalism education. The paper combines thoughts from reflexive autoethnography based on professional positionality, buttressed by selected literature on teaching and learning in higher education during the pandemic, and insights from selected journalism educators in the country. The paper uncovers six critical reflection points or lessons pertinent to post-pandemic journalism education. These are: (a) there are still low levels of digital readiness in journalism schools; (b) distance education for journalism and mass communication is not easy but not at all impossible; (c) digital literacy for both faculty members and students in journalism schools must be scaled up; (d) persistent digital inequalities characterise higher education, including journalism education; (e) exceedingly low levels of training in science and health reporting/coverage are still prevalent; and lastly (f), there is need to rethink how student internships and attachment programs can best be conducted in times of crisis. In addition to these observations, the paper argues for a holistic approach to digital transformation to address many of these and other challenges. **Keywords:** journalism education, Zambia, University of Zambia, online learning, digital inequalities, digital transformation

INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) brought sudden and striking changes in different spheres of society. In the higher education sector, teaching and learning processes were significantly and structurally disrupted. Following the identification of the virus, its rapid spread in China since late 2019, and its subsequent classification as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, institutions of learning across the world had to conform to various national and international responses or strategies, such as widespread institutional shutdowns and the migration to online and distance formats. Faculties, departments, or schools in universities worldwide took different adaptive actions to mitigate the disruptions to the curriculum (Lufungulo et al., 2023; Sturgis & Lamb, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Like other fields in higher education, the pandemic severely affected journalism and mass communication education. The move to online or distance formats was a novel undertaking for several journalism programs worldwide. Faculty members in the field had the challenging experience of moving from a brick-and-mortar classroom, which has been the norm for decades, to online and digital spaces for remote teaching (Keith et al., 2022). This was primarily the case in the Zambian context. Like elsewhere, universities and colleges in Zambia closed their buildings to students and shifted to offering classes online. The pandemic hit when higher education institutions (HEIs) were implementing online learning facilities at different stages. As a result, the pandemic would have varying effects, and each institution would have a different experience of the shift to online learning.

While the pandemic's grip on society may have significantly reduced by publication, it is still important to reflect on some of the lessons our experience with teaching and learning during the pandemic has taught us. Several such lessons or annotations can be made from a journalism education (JE) perspective. This paper describes some of the

observations made, and lessons learned about JE in Zambia, as revealed during the pandemic. The paper does not discuss how effective online teaching or learning was in journalism and mass communication. Further, it does not analyse the effectiveness of the various learning platforms that facilitate online learning. An increasing number of studies have addressed this. Instead, the paper seeks to highlight some specific observations on what the pandemic has brought to light about JE (and the related field of mass communication) in times of crisis and beyond, as experienced in Zambia.

The paper bridges findings from a few studies about teaching and learning in higher education during the pandemic in Zambia with literature from around the world. It includes insights from journalism educators I purposefully contacted for their perspectives. Primarily, I use personal reflexive autoethnographic notes and experiences. This paper is opportune as it explains some areas of concern within journalism practice in Zambia. Furthermore, it highlights how the field can better plan, prepare, and respond to the next significant health or global crisis.

As Schwartzman (2020, p. 515) observes, "disruptions offer opportunities" and the experience of journalism educators during the pandemic opened "panoramas of possibilities" that include the opportunity to better prepare for future crises or scenarios. The observations and recommendations presented in this paper are but a fraction of the broader pool of ideas we can draw from on our way to preparing for the future.

Journalism Education, Online Learning, & Pandemic

Even before the pandemic, JE had been in flux, complicated by the changes in the profession mainly brought about by increased digitalisation, Web 2.0 and citizen or user-generated content. The declining role of the journalist in informing the public has led to an examination of the role of the reporter or media professional. We find ourselves questioning why we become journalists when anyone can report. JE has had to answer that question by providing dynamic training that prepares professionals for the fast-evolving yet somewhat precarious environment (see Banda et al., 2007; Chibbonta et al., 2022; Deuze, 2006; Manchishi et al., 2023).

For instance, the advent of digital technologies and their constant evolution and utility in the media industry has dramatically changed journalism. Journalism finds itself in constant transformation as the very nature of how it is practised has to balance between the old forms and the new ways (Deuze, 2006). The impact of this transformation has been the inevitable need for journalism curricula to evolve to capture, reflect, and move in tandem with the industry.

Interestingly, the adoption rate for digital technologies was slow and not without challenges in contexts such as Zambia and other African countries (Mare et al., 2023). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed this. Digitalisation was the order of the day. Even beyond the education sector, Beaunoyer et al. (2020) note that digital spaces became essential to maintaining daily life activities, education, work, services, or entertainment. Further, digital devices became even more central to maintaining social interaction and economic activity. Today, there is no denying that the pandemic did ignite, quicken and promote innovation (Dhawan, 2020). The adoption of

technologies was unprecedented and quick. Imaniah (2021) notes that the pandemic also prompted various "novelties in higher education that would usually take several years", outpacing regular and often bureaucratic policy and planning processes.

Various scholars have highlighted how the move to online teaching was particularly a challenge for courses in the field of journalism (and mass communication), especially in contexts, where there has been "less research on pedagogical approaches for online courses" and "high levels of authentic or experiential learning" (Delaney & Betts, 2022, p. 1512). In describing journalism studies, Nkoala and Matsilele (2023, p. 47) note that the field of study "is highly technologically driven" because students are trained to use the various tools (digital or otherwise) that "they will employ when they enter the profession." Further challenges related to the online instruction of journalism and mass communication courses have to do with the difficulty of teaching practical skills.

As different scholars have shown, JE is unique because, unlike other disciplines, it is based on experiential learning. There are several theoretical courses, but several more are distinct and very practical and depend on students developing the requisite skills to practice. The challenge is that skills such as audio or video editing, graphic and layout designing, and broadcast program production, as Keith et al. (2022) observe, require "equipment or software that many students may not have" and are often only available at departmental labs or studios. This challenge was further compounded by the fact that some forms of journalism instruction require "collaborative settings" primarily to simulate real newsrooms. In contrast, others take a more clinical, real-world approach (Keith et al., 2022).

Journalism Education in Zambia

JE has come a long way in Zambia. According to Banda et al. (2007), JE in Zambia is seen as training that helps prepare students to play a watchdog function, an aspect of the training that reflects US libertarian influence. Chibbonta et al. (2022) argue that the development of JE in Zambia has been linked to the growth of the country's journalism industry.

In Zambia's first (1964-1972) and second (1972-1990) republics, JE mainly was a preserve of the Evelyn Hone College until the University of Zambia (UNZA) introduced a journalism course under its extension program, and later in a new Bachelor of Mass Communication program in 1984. Over the years, JE options have steadily increased as the profession has grown. Currently, several universities and colleges offer journalism programs ranging from certificate programs to diploma and degree programs. Further, only a few HEIs offer postgraduate degrees in journalism and mass communication. UNZA's program, now called the Bachelor of Journalism and Media Studies, and the diploma program at Evelyn Hone College is still the most subscribed.

In contrast, the Zambia Institute of Mass Communication (ZAMCOM) and Mulungushi University programs follow closely behind. Notedly, these four institutions are all public-owned. Private institutions such as Rusangu University and Cavendish University also have popular journalism programs.

Following the move to liberalised policies in Zambia beginning in 1991, private media grew slowly and steadily in the 1990s. At the turn of the century, there was an exponential growth in the number of private media institutions in the country. With the current landscape of over 110 radio stations, over 40 television stations (Independent Broadcasting Authority [IBA], 2022), and several online and print newspapers, the demand for JE has been on the rise.

Journalism and mass communication programs in Zambia have traditionally followed the in-person model, often with the view that online or long-distance instruction comes with challenges related to access, resources and how to navigate the teaching of the more practical and hands-on components of the programs (Chibbonta et al., 2022). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the various gaps that exist within JE in the country. It is these gaps that inspire the ideas that this paper cogitates on.

METHODOLOGY: A REFLEXIVE NOTE

In this paper, I rely on autoethnographic reflexivity in the constructivist tradition. Reed-Danahay (2019) defines autoethnography as a self-narrative that places the self within a social context. Adams et al. 2017) define autoethnography as a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno"). The aim of autoethnography is to show "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). I apply autoethnography in this paper to highlight my experience of teaching journalism in Zambia during the pandemic.

Reflexivity involves a researcher being self-aware of how their personal beliefs, values, biases and attitudes, as well as the cultural, political, and social contexts they find themselves in, may affect how they understand and approach a study they embark on (Bryman, 2012; Payne & Payne, 2004). Reflexivity is about self-awareness, and it considers a researcher's standing in relation to the study and how their standing affects how they look at the study (Coolican, 2013; Palaganas et al., 2017). In this reflection, I use my positionality–where I stand concerning the subject–to make observations from an acknowledged subjective point of view informed by reviewed literature, the experience of sources and myself, and my overall closeness to the topic.

In 2020, when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, I clocked seven years as a full-time lecturer and ten years working within the Department of Media and Communication Studies (DMCS) (formerly Department of Mass Communication) at UNZA. I have taught journalism courses in this period and participated in various curriculum development or reviews and board of examiners meetings. Part of my experience has involved part-time tutoring and lecturing at other institutions within and outside Zambia, and I have moderated assessments for other institutions. My experience during this period (2020-2022) includes a year of being a part of a transitional process and two years of participating in teaching. The former allowed me to observe and interrogate the transition, and the latter allowed me to form a lived

experience and bolster or rearrange any earlier observations or opinions.

In putting together these reflections, I also drew from insights shared by five faculty members (three from my department at UNZA, one from Mulungushi University's journalism program, and another from ZAMCOM). I obtained their permission and fully disclosed my intention to write this article with their input. They are not identified on request but acknowledged, where their input is used. Coupled with my reflexive engagement with the subject, I mustered selected literature from research and news articles relevant to the subject and the context to form critical arguments.

RESULTS: A DISCUSSION ON SIX THEMES OF REFLECTION

Digital Readiness

The impact of digital technologies and the digital age on higher education has been tremendous and far-reaching. Within JE, these technologies have altered how journalism is taught because its practice has significantly changed with digitalisation. Given the centrality of digital technologies, the recent pandemic's consequence of moving to online or digital platforms revealed just how digital-ready some learning institutions were. Most journalism and mass communication departments had a low level of preparedness.

This experience demonstrates that journalism schools must begin developing and implementing digitalisation strategies to ensure that they can better transform their programs into ones that reflect the digital age we live in. Even though the shift to digital methods of instruction was mainly the result of an emergency, it did allow institutions to think about what is possible. However, a long-term, non-emergency approach must be taken.

While it was expected that students and lecturers would continue with the academic activities, it became clear that this would be a challenge at UNZA because students and faculty members alike did not have access to some of the specialised software or programs they needed to work. These are programs that are available or provided for in the curriculum. For instance, Adobe Premiere Pro, a video production program taught and used in various television production courses, was not accessible to some students because they would only use computers with the program on campus. Similarly, programs such as Corel Draw, used for the editing and layout class, and Adobe Audition for radio production were unavailable for most students outside campus.

Perhaps this allows us to think about adopting alternative software that we can use to achieve the same pedagogical goals. In this regard, it would be helpful for curricula to not only solely depend on programs available for purchase or accessible at the institution but also to include open-access software or software available as freeware. For instance, the software program Audacity becomes a suitable alternative for Adobe Audition as it is an open-source program available for free and allows students to learn and develop industry-demanded skills. Similarly, several free video editing and

layout programs are available online as open-source packages that can replace or be taught alongside the premium programs.

Additionally, the infrastructural issues that typify limited resource contexts, such as Zambia, may need to be addressed from both the supply side (the institutions) and the demand side (the students). There is a need to address the bottlenecks that affect digitalisation. On the supply side, one of the biggest challenges has been the lack of resources to invest in the needed infrastructure to improve the core teaching experience. For instance, one instructor at UNZA noted how the institution faced a severe bandwidth challenge that makes using internet-based applications "a nightmare". On the demand side, students are often left to find laptops and audiovisual equipment themselves. There must be a way of supporting students with essential tools as they enter the university system to smoothen their learning experience (Mphahlele et al., 2021).

Given this, Lufungulo et al. (2023) rightly argue that for online teaching to be successful in an education technology low-resource environment such as Zambia, there is a need to, among other things, provide primary information and communication technology (ICT) devices, internet connectivity and access to open educational resources. Further, it is essential for learning institutions to provide education technologies to lecturers and students to enhance the teaching and learning experience online. However, the lack of resources to provide for these often complicates the situation. External support, such as corporate sponsorships or project aid, becomes essential (Lufungulo et al., 2023).

Distance Education in Journalism Is Not Easy, but It Is Not Impossible

Another observation that arises from the pandemic experience has been the emergence of distance education as a viable alternative method of teaching or course delivery for journalism and mass communication courses. While various studies have shown how and why distance education can succeed or fail, very few have engaged with the subject as it relates to JE. Therefore, when it came to implementing distance education methods during the pandemic, there were very few places to look to inform decision-making or learn from, at the least.

The creation and scaling up of distance learning strategies, such as online learning, were a sector-wide reaction to the massive interruption of teaching and learning caused by the pandemic. During the period, UNZA looked to two systems, one implemented by Astria Learning, a commercial e-learning system, and the localised version of the open-source learning management system (LMS) modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment (Moodle). Both programs were in place before the pandemic but were not popular. Astria was used by students in distance and graduate school programs, while Moodle was introduced in 2012 to support learning for full-time and distance programs (Chewe, 2018). Despite its introduction, the platform did not receive buy-in from the faculty and students at the main campus. For instance, Chewe (2018) examined the perceptions of faculty members at UNZA towards implementing Moodle at the institution. The study revealed that the platform had low adoption levels as a mode of instruction. The study also demonstrated that faculty

members were willing to participate in programs that would help them possess the required skills to use Moodle. However, participation was often meagre even when these training opportunities were created. Chewe (2018) concluded that implementing programs such as Moodle in course design needed to be well-planned and communicated to faculty. Unfortunately, the coming of the pandemic only increased adoption but with very little to no planning and strategy.

While online distance education is an important innovation, it has become a challenge for faculty in various higher education disciplines (Mansbach & Austin, 2018). Its interest has only risen over the years, and the pandemic outbreak allowed faculties with a previously more cautious, reserved, or judicious approach to embracing it much faster. This transition to online education did not occur without a challenge for almost all disciplines, and journalism and mass communication education were not spared. According to Morreale et al. (2021, p. 117), pedagogists in communication disciplines such as journalism and mass communication have had to face the challenge of "figuring out how to competently teach what may be considered inherently face-to-face subjects in an online environment" while also being concerned about how to maintain "the richness of the face-to-face classroom and ensuring high-quality teaching and learning."

At UNZA, where a thriving distance learning framework exists under the auspices of the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), journalism courses are conspicuously absent. In contrast, Mulungushi University has a thriving distance learning program that is popular among practising journalists and other media workers with a previous diploma or certificate-level qualification. One may wonder, "What has made this Mulungushi distance program successful?" According to a faculty member in the journalism department at Mulungushi, part of the success lies in the flexible approach to the program that students find manageable since most of them are from industry and often have to balance school with work schedules. Further, the lecturer noted that Mulungushi has invested in ensuring that the electronic systems, including the student information system and the institution's Moodle, work efficiently to give students and potential students confidence. This efficiency ensures that physical contact is only during residential schools, making the transition during the pandemic less complicated.

The COVID-19 pandemic elevated distance education's place in the world. Ismaili and El Moutaouakil (2023) argue that the world will likely continue embracing distance learning in higher education following the pandemic period experience. It is also likely that different universities will adopt different strategies going forward. Having a fully operationalised distance program requires planning, resources and skills, which some institutions or journalism departments still do not have. Bhattacharya et al. (2022) and Lufungulo et al. (2023) found that institutional support and how faculty members can accept and adopt new technology was crucial for innovations' success. This calls for respective situational analysis and consultative processes from various stakeholders.

Literature has demonstrated that for online education to be efficient, it must be the result of purposeful planning, teaching and organisation that is grounded in understanding the local contexts and innovation, which will lead to the

growth of quality teaching and learning experiences (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Imaniah, 2021). However, the experience in countries such as Zambia, and most definitely within the journalism programs was that there was no opportunity to design, plan and implement any such programs. Unsurprisingly, there was a visible rejection of the move to online in some universities when they could choose once the pandemic began showing signs of decline.

There is a need to effectively discuss the potential of developing capacities to provide distance learning in the journalism program at UNZA. From the pandemic, it has been clear that using online platforms has been helpful. However, the challenge remains with practical courses that require hands-on learning. One way around this could be to restrict such courses to residential school sessions, extended physical learning periods, or blocks meant to achieve intense practical learning.

Currently, blended learning seems to be the way forward for teaching in the future. This means that online elements, despite the rejection seen in some circles, will still be a more significant part of journalism and mass communication's teaching and learning experience (Nyarko & Serwornoo, 2022; Osepashvili, 2022). The implication here is that the online aspects of blended learning must be improved. Blended learning will require a great balance between the hybrid modes. For instance, a corpus of journalism educators from around the world, recently brought together by the World Journalism Education Council (WJEC) at its 2022 online conference, discussed the subject of online teaching and observed and concluded that there are some ways that the online experience can be enhanced (Thomson et al., 2022). These include the interactive components such as feedback segments and feedback options, polling features, incorporating emojis, voice notes and using asynchronous formats at times.

Educators must constantly seek to improve their teaching and assessment styles to draw students into the experience. This may also include adjusting timing or scheduling and occasionally including audiovisual content, such as short-form videos, to keep the interest high. Overall, the learning platform and its experience must be attractive and easy to use, and course delivery skills must be improved. Holly et al. (2008) propose the need to provide a more stimulating environment significantly different from traditional education. Further, content revision, continued skills development, and capacity building must be implemented to improve proficiency.

The experience of journalism educators at UNZA highlights a lack of training in delivering effectively in any circumstance. While the move to online distance learning was inevitable, there is, perhaps, a need for further studies to examine the move's impact in more specific terms.

Digital Literacy for Faculty Members & Students Must Be Scaled Up

Shortly after the decision to move education to online spaces, it became clear that many of our students and faculty members still lacked digital literacy skills. Some first-year students (having only reported in February, a month before the lockdown) were just beginning to learn to use some of the digital tools they needed. Apart from their smartphone

experience, some had minimal experience with these digital technologies and platforms. I would argue that this is emblematic of a more significant situation in Zambia, where digital literacy is still very low.

While there is no specific data to back this claim, we can look at internet access data to make an inference. The Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority's (ZICTA) national ICT data shows Zambia had 10,357,442 mobile internet subscribers in 2021 out of a population of 18.4 million people (ZICTA, 2021). Though this number seemed impressive, it was primarily the result of mobile internet subscriptions and the use of multiple SIM cards by individuals who often hoped to enjoy the benefits of one mobile network over the other at a given time. Mobile internet accounts for most of the access in Zambia. This has been driven by factors such as lowered mobile broadband data costs and the spread of cheap, easy-to-use internet-capable mobile handsets (Mambwe, 2014). Zambia's internet penetration rate was about 56% by 2021 (ZICTA, 2021). This means the chances of students on lockdown having internet access at home were still slightly above 50%. These figures can thus help explain the low levels of digital literacy.

Various scholars and experts have defined the term "digital literacy" differently over the years. For Gee (2009, p. 141), digital literacies can be thought of as varied ways of utilising digital tools in different sociocultural practices. This makes digital literacies important for social and cultural living as they are increasingly a part of everyday life. The need for digital literacy or literacies in higher education cannot be overemphasised. Different scholars have highlighted how central digital literacy has become to education (Goodfellow & Lea, 2013; Williamson et al., 2020). For JE, perhaps even more than other fields within the social sciences and humanities, digital literacy has become crucial for both staff and students. The ever-changing digital landscape requires that educators prepare students with the skills to use new technologies and the capacity to adapt to changes quickly. With the unprecedented levels of convergence that have taken place in media over the last 20 years, digital literacy in journalism, media, and communication programs has become more critical than ever before.

Digital literacy and digital media skills are critical competencies for a successful online teaching and learning experience (Keith et al., 2022). The experience or observation from UNZA is that the level of competency in digital literacy and digital media skills is, at most, relatively low and varies considerably. UNZA has a third-year course in Digital Journalism, which relies on a level of digital competence. However, its placement in the program assumes that students will have a level of digital literacy by then. From experience, this is not always the case. No audit has ever been undertaken to find out exactly what level of competence both faculty and students could be at, a situation that must not remain the same.

While staff occasionally have opportunities to upgrade their skills and technical know-how, students are often left out. Therefore, journalism schools must take up the challenge of orienting their students towards skills acquisition and providing the means for this process to be continuous (sadly, even faculty members in the journalism program at UNZA have

not had the opportunity to participate in any training or skills-building activity courtesy of the institution). It should not be surprising that those students were also untrained and unprepared when the pandemic hit. All this was further compounded by the fact that many tools used to facilitate learning were not tailored to specific teaching needs. So, while Moodle was beneficial at UNZA, it did not cater to the specific needs of programmmes with practical courses such as journalism and mass communication.

I would argue that digital literacy aims to foster and achieve inclusivity in education provision. The recent experience demonstrates that digital illiteracy significantly excluded learners in all fields, not just JE–a situation that must be corrected. We cannot ignore the added benefit of having these skills for students entering the job and entrepreneurial market. Additionally, as Patrick et al. (2021, p. 6) correctly posit, it is vital for instructors or facilitators to be aware of "students' prior knowledge, competencies, previous technological predisposition to learning, that is, computer anxiety or digital literacy and capabilities." This, too, will make a difference.

In summary, there is a need to support educators in achieving competence to help them in their teaching tasks. Having the right skills, knowledge, and attitudes makes the difference. Skills can determine the rate of progress and the level of acceptance. However, the current skills gaps can range from basic computer and internet literacy to using university resources such as those provided by the library and the chosen LMSs. The critical question to ponder here is: what is the value of having the technology if it cannot be used and understood due to a lack of competence by the educator?

Persistent Digital Inequalities

Related to the conversation on digital literacy is the persistent challenge of digital inequalities. Before discussing any literacy or training programs, it is crucial to understand and address the inherent digital inequalities that characterise societies such as Zambia. Around Africa and the world, some still find themselves unable to access and benefit from the advantages of digital technologies. According to Beaunoyer et al. (2020, p. 7), the "COVID-19 pandemic represents the first large-scale event for which digital inequalities became a major factor of vulnerability." Patrick et al. (2021) argue that the pandemic brought to bear the (vertical and horizontal) inequalities in policy response and effect on the part of states, governments and students. What makes all this worth considering is that structural challenges within the university and the country tend to promote inequality (Matsilele & Nkoala, 2022).

The lack of resources to purchase technologies such as LMS software and devices or internet access continues to be a significant source of difference among universities worldwide. To put it into context, Zambia has significant social and economic disparities that underlie the digital inequalities. Access to computers, software, the internet, and other digital technologies is still challenging for most Zambians (Mphahlele et al., 2021). While the coming of affordable (and often lower quality) smartphones and the push to have network operators lower their mobile data costs have helped catapult some people in the lower-income groups into the digital age, there are still many more who are disadvantaged due to many structural challenges. These include high poverty levels (due to low or no incomes), historical economic access inequalities (rural vs. urban), elections-centric or politically focused approaches to development, and others. The move to online teaching following the pandemic was not advantageous for every learner. Those with the accessibility challenges described above were immediately left out. This is because the only place some had access to a computer and the internet was on campus (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Demirbilek, 2014).

The lack of access among journalism students significantly disadvantaged those without the means. Some fell behind in their assignments, and others had to find alternative means to enable them to participate in the learning activities. Unfortunately, it was mostly the same students who experienced these inequalities who also had challenges accessing the designated LMS due to non-payment of school fees. One lecturer from MCS department at UNZA noted how those students who did not have access to Moodle platform often depended on friends to share any learning materials with them and submitted their assignments using other means such as email. This grim reality should not be ignored in the future.

Most of these factors come down to the issue of institutional resource base or capacity. In regions, where universities are well-resourced, different solutions were observed. For instance, the University of Cape Town in South Africa facilitated the purchase of internet data packages for students who needed them during the lockdowns. Internet service providers (ISPs) also zero-rated access to learning platforms and websites. These measures helped mitigate the resource gap that could have easily made the experience even more difficult. While some ISPs in Zambia made this provision, no documented coordination of this support from a policy level seems to exist.

In discussing the problem of digital inequalities, Williamson et al. (2020, p. 110) ask an important question that must be considered in this discussion on JE: "How can young people and their families be supported to use technology in the home?" By asking this, the researchers acknowledge that digital inequality is tied to some economic disadvantage that affects families and that rather than just empowering the students, their families must also be included because they may also lack digital skills.

The prolonged existence of inequalities in access to digital technologies further perpetuates inequalities in benefits, participation and appreciation (Nkoala & Matsilele, 2023). Maintaining a *status quo* of digital inequalities in education creates a vicious cycle of reduced academic participation and comprehension, leading to poor performance and perhaps rejection of technologies altogether. Ultimately, it is exclusionary and an abrogation of the right that every learner must enjoy.

As educators, we must find ways to help empower our key stakeholders–the students and their families. One way can be identifying these students or families and using our access to lobby for technological aid, including providing them with computers and other technology resources. Efforts to create community hubs, where computers and the internet are provided must also be supported (e.g., by volunteering to offer

training or developing simple courses for these hubs). Further, we can support and participate in media and digital literacy programs targeting K-12 schools and their communities.

Low Levels of Training in Science & Health Reporting/Coverage

Another important observation from the pandemic has been Zambia's low levels of science and health reporting education. In this context, it seems science and health reporting are placed at the backburner in terms of importance and interest. The curriculum at UNZA includes a course called Science and Technology Reporting, and another called Strategic Communication for Health and Development. The former course is essential in giving the basic information on how to cover general science-related stories. At the same time, the latter focuses on developing, implementing, and evaluating health communication campaigns. From this, we can see that there is not much to look at in terms of the journalism curriculum regarding the coverage of pandemics. Outside UNZA, the situation at other institutions is similar, with science reporting often assimilating into specialised or beat reporting courses.

Because of this problem, it is not surprising that when it comes to actual journalism practice, most scientific news stories may only be covered if they are determined to be newsworthy, and this coverage is quite often filled with inaccuracy, sensational gloom and doom language, and significantly problematic framing (Bucchi, 2014; Fjæstad, 2007) Further, stories in these fields often only receive attention when they feature voices of those with political or economic power, and even in such cases, policies are never thoroughly questioned and there is a lack of depth (de Lange, 2013; Hamusokwe et al., 2022).

While it is essential to acknowledge that most journalists do not have science backgrounds, it is also a fair argument to aver that part of the problem stems from the low levels of scientific reporting education at tertiary institutions. All this is further complicated by the fact that much of the scientific reporting comes from Western countries with very Western perspectives. Despite the known importance, there has not been a strong case for its growth from the scientific community, the audiences, and the media in Zambia. Why this is the case is unclear and should be the subject of future research. Health reporting seems to be better, but this does not detract from the argument above, and more can be done. Aid and developmental agencies working on specialised health challenges have often supported health reporting training. Outside these, the gaps are persistent, and the pandemic has again brought to light an otherwise almost ignored situation.

Student Internships or Industrial Attachments

One of the emerging conversations in light of the pandemic is the need to rethink or improve how to conduct journalism student attachments during times of crisis. The pandemic presented a challenge for many journalism schools because the industrial attachment period is a mainstay of the curriculum. Navigating a way around this proved to be a challenge in that sending our students to work was no longer about following a curriculum but a decision that parents and guardians may have vetoed because doing so posed a serious risk to the students'

lives. The concerns were valid, given the pandemic. On the opposite end of this scenario were media companies and newsrooms, which also required the input of interns. As Msimanga et al. (2020, p. 61) note, the pandemic "restructured" this long-held practice in journalism and mass communication, leaving us to think about what to do when the next major crisis strikes.

The need to think about alternative ways through which the purpose of the internships can be achieved cannot be overemphasised. The internships are critical in developing media workers, but their format has remained unchanged for a very long time. Perhaps our experience with the pandemic can allow us to assess what else we can do to enable students to obtain the needed experience without risking their lives. For example, utilising the on-campus media platforms, such as a campus radio station or newspaper, to prepare them adequately for work without actual industry placements could become optional. The challenge that emerges is that not every journalism school has school-based media outlets. Another option would be to facilitate remote working options for students with their chosen media houses.

I find myself handicapped in thinking about this aspect of the Zambian experience with JE. It is perhaps the next frontier of innovation and thought for the sector.

CONCLUSIONS: A CALL FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The thoughts shared in this paper highlight various critical issues that concern JE in Zambia (and other countries with similar socioeconomic contextual arrangements). The pandemic was, in my view, an eye-opener to those in the field. The post-pandemic period is an opportune time to consider how we can improve and contextualise JE.

A throughline that can be made across the various thoughts shared in this paper is the need for digital transformation. Scholars, technology writers, and thinkers have elucidated the concept of digital transformation in various ways. For this paper, we use Gobble's (2018) ideas on the concept. Gobble (2018, p. 66) argues that digital transformation "is the profound transformation of business activities and organisations, processes, competencies, and models for the maximum transformation of the changes and opportunities of a technology mix and its accelerated impact on society, in a strategic and prioritised way". This definition encompasses planned, continued and well-funded digitalisation approaches that address present-day and anticipate future needs. It also entails a holistic approach.

While the COVID-19 outbreak did lead to increased digitalisation, as highlighted in the paper, it has not necessarily led to a sustained transformation in the Zambian context. We saw a shift to online learning but calling it a digital transformation is not enough. As various studies have shown, we saw more Emergency Response Teaching (ERT) or instruction merely a reaction to the pandemic meant to allow teaching and learning to continue. The transformation will only occur once all the pieces or elements of a functioning system are in place. Online teaching and learning alone are not

enough. At the core of transformation is the idea that higher education sectors are consistently driven by information technology systems that ensure that teaching, learning and communication thrive and consistently improve.

Nevertheless, online pedagogy in various programs, including journalism and mass communication, has created conveniences in education provision and has helped societies prevail over some of the challenges associated with traditional physical modes of instruction. However, many of the benefits of online pedagogy are often clouded by some challenges observed in this paper, such as the persistent digital inequalities that are still dominant.

This paper detailed some observations and lessons learned about JE in Zambia following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it highlighted particular observations on what the pandemic has brought to light about JE (and the field of mass communication) in times of crisis, as experienced in Zambia. I put together thoughts from reflexive autoethnography based on my professional positionality, buttressed by selected literature on teaching and learning in higher education during the pandemic and insights from educators. To summarise, the following are the six points of reflection or lessons:

a. Many learning institutions offering JE programs have low digital readiness levels, a reality that must significantly change.

b. Distance education for journalism and mass communication programs may be challenging, but it is not impossible.

c. There is a need to scale up digital literacy for journalism faculty members and students.

d. Digital inequalities are still persistent in providing higher education, including JE.

e. Significant and concerningly low training levels in science and health reporting/coverage exist.

f. There is a need to rethink how student internship and attachment programs can be conducted in times of crisis.

JE must consider these and other concerns to stay relevant. There is a need for further exploration, research and improvement in this sector. Digital transformation in journalism and mass communication education must be "the new normal", and for it to be achieved, it will take more than an emergency response or a reactive approach. The need for buy-in from faculty, students, the industry and other stakeholders cannot be ignored. There is immense potential for JE, and looking forward, it looks exciting.

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