

SAFETY ADVISORY AND TOOLS FOR MEDIA PRACTITIONERS

(Adapted by Kyetume Kasanga, Secretary to the Media Council of Uganda and Vice chairman of the East African Press Councils)

1. Introduction

As COVID-19, also known as novel coronavirus spreads internationally, so too does potentially harmful misinformation and disinformation. With countries all around the world grappling to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the need for resilient, independent, and accurate media is becoming increasingly apparent. Many media organisations have been working on projects to help prevent the spread of false information. We invite you to share any thoughts, resources, or tools that can contribute to the effort to combat the spread of misinformation around COVID-19.

Stay aware of the latest information on the COVID-19 outbreak. Most countries around the world have seen cases of COVID-19 and many are experiencing outbreaks. Authorities in China and some other countries have succeeded in slowing their outbreaks. However, the situation is unpredictable so check regularly for the latest news.

2. Protect yourself and others from COVID-19

You can reduce your chances of being infected or spreading COVID-19 by taking some simple precautions:

- Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Why? Either method kills viruses that may be on your hands.
- Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and others. Why? When someone coughs, sneezes, or speaks they spray small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth which may contain the virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including the COVID-19 virus if the person has the disease.
- Avoid going to crowded places. Why? Where people come together in crowds, you are more likely to come into close contact with someone that has COVID-19 and it is more difficult to maintain social distance.
- Wear a fabric mask. Why? Masks are a key tool in a comprehensive approach to the fight against COVID-19.

- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. Why? Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up viruses. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose or mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and infect you.
- Make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene. This means covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately and wash your hands. Why? Droplets spread virus. By following good respiratory hygiene, you protect the people around you from viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.
- Stay home and self-isolate even with minor symptoms such as cough, headache, mild fever, until you recover. Have someone bring you supplies. If you need to leave your house, wear a mask to avoid infecting others. Why? Avoiding contact with others will protect them from possible COVID-19 and other viruses.
- If you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical attention, but call by telephone in advance if possible and follow the directions of your local health authority. Why? National and local authorities will have the most up to date information on the situation in your area. Calling in advance will allow your health care provider to quickly direct you to the right health facility. This will also protect you and help prevent spread of viruses and other infections.
- Keep up to date on the latest information from trusted sources, such as World Health Organisation, your local and national health authorities. Why? Local and national authorities are best placed to advise on what people in your area should be doing to protect themselves.

3. Safe use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers

To protect yourself and others against COVID-19, clean your hands frequently and thoroughly. Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer or wash your hands with soap and water. If you use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, make sure you use and store it carefully.

- Keep alcohol-based hand sanitizers out of children's reach. Teach them how to apply the sanitizer and monitor its use.
- Apply a coin-sized amount on your hands. There is no need to use a large amount of the product.

- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose immediately after using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, as it can cause irritation.
- Hand sanitizers recommended to protect against COVID-19 are alcohol-based and therefore can be flammable. Do not use before handling fire or cooking.
- Under no circumstance, drink or let children swallow an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. It can be poisonous.
- Remember that washing your hands with soap and water is also effective against COVID-19.

The future of journalism is not just a casual matter; it is an imperative on us. Experts around the world have promised that the Covid-19 crisis, which has crippled nearly 4 billion people around the world, will radically change our lifestyles, the way we think, eat and behave. Information should never be confined. Information must remain a public good.

4. Staying Safe in the Field

Journalists who are planning to cover the COVID-19 pandemic should consider the following safety information:

(a) Pre-Assignment

- To minimize the risk of exposure, and wherever possible, phone or online interviews should continue to be carried out rather than in person.
- Older people and individuals with underlying health conditions such as diabetes or obesity are considered higher risk. **If you fall into such categories, you should avoid participating in any assignment that puts you in direct contact with the general public.** Consideration should also be given to any employees who are pregnant.
- You should discuss what plans your management team has in place to assist and support you should you fall ill while on assignment, taking into account the possibility of self-isolation and/or being grounded in a quarantine/lockdown zone for an extended period of time.

(b) Psychological Well-Being

- Even the most experienced journalists may struggle psychologically when reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Management should check in on their journalists on a regular basis to see how they are coping, and to offer guidance and support if and when necessary.
- Family members will likely be concerned and/or stressed if you plan to cover the COVID-19 outbreak. Have a discussion with them about the risks and their concerns. If necessary, set up a conversation between family members and the company medical advisers. Journalists say that when reporting on COVID-19, even family and friends have questioned the dangers, often reacting negatively. This can be dispiriting.
- Consider the potential psychological impact of reporting from a location or area affected by COVID-19, especially if reporting from a medical or isolation facility, or quarantine zone.

(c) Avoiding Infection & Infecting Others

Most countries are practicing social/physical distancing, though the recommended distance now varies depending on which country you are in. If reporting on location with the emergency services or visiting high-risk locations such as the following, inquire in advance about the necessary hygiene measures that are in place. **If in any doubt, do not visit.**

- Any kind of healthcare facility
- The home of a sick and/or elderly person, someone with health issues, or someone who may be pregnant
- A manufacturing plant where the risk of transmission is considered high, such as a meat processing factory
- A morgue, mortuary, crematorium, or funeral service
- A quarantine, isolation, or lockdown zone
- A densely packed urban dwelling (i.e. slum or favela)

- A refugee camp
- A prison or detention center with cases of COVID-19

(d) Standard recommendations to avoid infection include:

- Always try to interview people in an outside space. If you do need to interview indoors, select a location with some kind of airflow (e.g. open windows) and avoid small confined rooms or spaces
- Do not shake hands with, hug, or kiss anyone
- Try to stand at an angle to a subject during an interview rather than face-on, always maintaining the recommended safe physical distance
- **Wash your hands regularly, properly, and thoroughly, for at least 20 seconds at a time using hot water and soap.** Ensure hands are dried in the appropriate way.
- Use anti-bacterial gel or wipes if water and soap are not available, but always follow this up with a hand wash as soon as possible. (Health authorities recommend the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol.) **Do not substitute a regular hand washing routine by using hand sanitizer in its place.**
- Always cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing. If you cough or sneeze into a tissue, dispose of it immediately in a safe and appropriate manner, and remember to thoroughly wash your hands afterwards.
- Avoid touching your face, nose, mouth, ears, etc.
- Avoid drinking/eating from cups, crockery, or cutlery that may have come into contact with other people.
- All hair should be covered. Long hair should be tied up and tucked away.

- Remove all jewelry and watches before any assignment, noting that the virus can remain live on many different surface types for varying lengths of time.
- If you wear glasses, carefully clean them on a regular basis with hot water and soap.
- Avoid wearing contact lenses on assignment, if possible, due to the likelihood of touching your eyes and increasing your chances of infection.
- Consider what clothing you will wear, taking into account that certain fabrics can be wiped clean easier than others. All clothing should be carefully removed and washed at a high temperature with detergent after any assignment.
- If possible, try and avoid using cash on assignment, and ensure you clean your credit/debit cards, wallet, and/or purse on a regular basis. Avoid putting your hands into your pockets as much as possible.
- Consider your mode of transportation to and from the assignment. Avoid traveling on public transportation during peak travel periods, and make sure to use alcohol-based sanitizer on hands when disembarking.
- If traveling in a personal or company vehicle, be aware that an infected passenger could pass the virus onto the others inside the vehicle. Travel with the windows down to ensure good airflow throughout the vehicle, and consider the use of face masks while in the vehicle.
- Take regular breaks and be mindful of fatigue/energy levels, taking into account that tired individuals are more likely to make mistakes with their hygiene regime. Also factor in that individuals may have long distances to drive before and after work.
- **Always ensure your hands are washed thoroughly with hot water and soap before, during, and after leaving an affected area.**
- If you develop symptoms, especially fever or shortness of breath, consider how you will seek medical treatment. Most government health bodies now recommend self-quarantine to prevent the infection of others. If you are in a heavily infected area you will likely encounter

other COVID-19 infected patients at crowded treatment centers, therefore increasing your chances of exposure.

(e) Equipment Safety

- The potential to spread COVID-19 via contaminated equipment is real. A strict cleaning and disinfecting regime should be implemented and adhered to at all times:
- Use directional 'fish pole' microphones from a safe distance wherever possible. Clip microphones should only be used under controlled circumstances combined with the adherence to strict hygiene protocols.
- Microphone covers should be disinfected and washed at a high temperature with detergent at the end of every assignment. Try and avoid the 'wind muff' type covers if possible, which are harder to clean.
- Use low cost earpieces wherever possible and treat them as disposable, particularly for guests. Wipe down and disinfect all earpieces before and after use.
- Use long sight lenses to help maintain a safe distance on location.
- Wherever possible, use mobile equipment rather than those with cables.
- Consider how you will store your equipment on assignment. Don't leave anything lying around and put everything back in its case and close it (i.e. some kind of hard sided flight case, which is much easier to wipe down and keep clean).
- If possible and practical, put some kind of plastic wrapping/protection around equipment when using it. This will minimize the surface area of the equipment that could become contaminated, and will be easier to clean and disinfect.
- Carry fully charged spare batteries with you and avoid charging anything on site, as this is an additional item that could become contaminated.

- Always decontaminate all equipment with fast-acting antimicrobial wipes, followed by thorough cleaning, including but not limited to cell phones, tablets, leads, plugs, earphones, laptops, hard drives, cameras, press passes, and lanyards.
- Ensure all equipment is decontaminated again when returning it to base, making sure that those responsible for the equipment are made fully aware in advance and that they are trained in how to safely clean the equipment. Make sure that no equipment is just dumped and left lying around without being signed back in to the person responsible for cleaning.
- If using a vehicle for the assignment, ensure that the interior is given a thorough deep clean after any assignment, ideally by somebody who is properly trained. Particular attention should be paid to the door handles, steering wheel, gear stick, hand brake lever, wing mirrors, head rests, seat belts, dashboard, and window winders/catches/buttons.

(f) Cleaning Electrical Equipment

The following points offer some general guidance regarding the cleaning of electrical equipment. **Always ensure you have read the manufacturers guidelines before attempting any cleaning.**

- Always unplug/remove all power sources, devices, and cables.
- Keep any liquids away from your equipment, and do not use aerosol sprays, bleaches, and abrasives—these will almost certainly damage your equipment.
- Never spray any substance directly onto your device.
- Only use a nonabrasive, soft, lint-free cloth.
- Make the cloth damp or moist, but NOT wet. Add some soap to the cloth and rub it into the cloth with your hand.
- Thoroughly wipe the device down several times.
- Do not allow any moisture to get into any openings (such as charging sockets, earphone sockets, keyboards).

- Dry your device with a clean, dry, and soft cloth.
- Certain manufacturers recommend 70% isopropyl alcohol wipes for any hard and nonporous surfaces.
- If disinfecting your equipment always check with the manufacturer first, as disinfectants could damage your device.

(g) Medical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Safely putting on (donning) and taking off (doffing) any medical PPE (such as disposable gloves, face masks, protective aprons/overalls/bodysuits, and disposable shoe covers etc.) requires the strict observance of and adherence to best safety practices. Particular care should be taken when removing (doffing) PPE, as this is when the risk of cross contamination is highest, **so do not be complacent about these measures.** If in any doubt, seek expert guidance and training before going on any assignment.

- Ensure any PPE used is the correct size for you. Badly fitting PPE is liable to tear and/or restrict movement (if too tight), and may catch on objects like door handles and tear (if too loose).
- Always use reputable brands of medical PPE, paying attention to the minimum required safety specifications. Be aware of faulty items, as well as counterfeit products.
- Use protective gloves if working in or visiting an infected site such as a medical treatment facility. Note that nitrile gloves offer a higher degree of protection than latex. Wearing two pairs improves safety.
- If reporting from a high risk location such as a medical treatment facility, additional medical PPE such as a full bodysuit and full face mask will almost certainly be required.
- If wearing full body coveralls, ensure you use the restroom in advance of donning the PPE.
- Depending on the assignment, you may need to wear disposable footwear or use waterproof overshoes, both of which must be wiped/rinsed off as soon as you exit an affected location. If using waterproof overshoes, they should be disposed of in a safe manner before leaving the location.

- It is recommended that all medical PPE is donned/doffed under the supervision of a trained professional, taking into account that this may be the moment of exposure.
- **Never reuse single-use PPE such as gloves, bodysuits, aprons, or shoe covers. Any equipment that is to be reused must be properly decontaminated and sanitized.** Ensure all contaminated medical PPE is disposed of in the appropriate manner BEFORE leaving an affected site.

(h) Face Masks

The correct use of face masks is especially important for journalists who continue to report in the community, which might mean going into confined spaces, crowded places, and speaking with members of the public. You should be aware that the concentration of viral load in the air in such places will likely be significantly higher than normal, therefore increasing your chances of exposure.

Many countries now require and/or are advising the use of face coverings and/or face masks by the general public. Health authorities recommends that people wear multiple-layer **cloth face coverings—but not medical grade masks, which are in short supply**—to cover their nose and mouth in a community setting.

Unless used correctly, there are concerns that masks can actually become a source of infection. A recent study by the *Lancet* shows a detectable level of infectious virus still present on a surgical mask up to seven days after exposure. Based on this study, taking off or reusing a mask, or touching your face when wearing one, could mean risking infection.

If you do wear a mask you should follow the following advice:

- Ensure that the mask fits securely over the bridge of the nose and chin, minimizing gaps in the fit. Ensure any facial hair is kept to an absolute minimum to ensure a good tight seal to the face. Be aware that thick facial hair will prevent this from happening.
- Strict adherence to face mask safety is essential. **Avoid touching the front of the mask**, only ever remove it by the straps, and avoid adjusting the mask once on unless absolutely necessary. Wash hands immediately if they come into contact with the mask.

- Always wash hands with soap and water after removing the mask. If not possible, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol) but follow this up as soon as possible with a water and soap wash.
- Replace the mask with a new, clean, dry mask as soon as it becomes damp/humid.
- Remember that the use of a mask is only one part of personal protection, which must be accompanied by regularly washing your hands with hot water and soap and avoiding touching your facial area, including your eyes, mouth, ears, and nose.
- Be aware that face masks may be in short supply and/or subject to sharp price increases, depending on the location.

(i) Digital Security

- Be aware that journalists may face increased levels of online hostility in relation to their reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Governments and tech companies are increasingly using surveillance as a way to track the spread of COVID-19.
- Pause and think before you click on links or download documents containing information about COVID-19. Criminals are leveraging the current health crisis and panic to target individuals and organizations with sophisticated phishing attacks that could lead to malware being installed on your devices.
- Exercise caution when clicking on any COVID-19 related links on social media or in messaging apps, some of which may direct you to sites that infect devices with malware.
- Be aware of malicious apps that target individuals for ransom ware, such as COVID-19 Tracker.
- Maps showing up-to-date information on COVID-19 from reputable sources, such as the WHO, are reported to contain malware that could be used to steal passwords.

- Be cautious of information about COVID-19 shared through chats on messaging apps, which may contain fake news and hoaxes.
- Be aware that COVID-19 content on Facebook is now being moderated by artificial intelligence (AI) instead of human content checkers, which has led to legitimate content about the disease being removed in error.
- Be aware that with an increasing number of people working from home, services have been targeted by hackers.

(j) **Crime & Physical Security on Assignment**

- Journalists and media workers should be aware of increasing levels of anti-press sentiment and hostility toward them, including verbal harassment and physical assault while on assignment.
- The global economic outlook remains challenging, with people losing their jobs. The likelihood of an increase in criminal activity is real, particularly cybercrime.
- If you can travel for an international assignment, research the latest security situation in your destination. While the scale of unrest has decreased, there have been violent incidents and protests around the world since late February. Be aware that unrest could flare up again if lockdowns are re-imposed due to another wave.
- Many urban areas are much quieter than usual and police resources are stretched. There is a risk that criminals may take advantage of this situation. Some journalists report having been verbally harassed and criminally targeted, as well as assaulted, so do not take safety for granted.
- Be particularly careful if reporting from rural areas. People may be suspicious and/or angry toward 'outsiders' for fear that you could be bringing COVID-19 with you.
- Be aware of a potentially heavy-handed response from the police relating to COVID-19 lockdown measures, such as physical assault and the use of live ammunition, tear gas, and rubber bullets.
- If reporting from a prison or detention center, journalists should be alert to the dangers posed by inmates protesting and/or rioting regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

- Remain alert to the chances of looting and robbery, especially if lockdown measures are re-imposed and/or unemployment levels increase.

5. Post-Assignment

- Continually monitor your health for any signs of symptoms.
- You may need to self-isolate as a matter of course after any high-risk assignment. Please check the relevant government advice for clarity.
- Monitor the latest updates and information on COVID-19, as well as any quarantine and isolation procedures being implemented at both your origin and your destination.
- Depending on the rate of infection in the country, you should consider keeping a journal with names/numbers of individuals you come into close proximity with for 14 days after your return. This will help with possible contact tracing should you start showing symptoms.

If you develop symptoms, however mild, inform your management team. Work with them to take appropriate transportation from the endpoint of your assignment to your home. **Do not simply get in a taxi.**

- Do not leave your home for **at least 14 days** from when your symptoms started. Doing so will help protect others in your community while you are infectious
- Plan ahead and ask others for help. Ask your employer, friends, and family to get the supplies you need for you, and to leave them outside your front door.
- Stay the recommended safe distance away from other people in your home whenever possible.
- Sleep alone, if possible.
- If you share accommodation with others, an isolation period for all should be observed. Particular care needs to be taken when using the bathroom, toilet and kitchen facilities, so as to avoid cross contamination.

- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly for at least 20 seconds, using soap and water.
- Stay away from vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, as much as possible.
- You do not need to call the health authorities in your country to go into self-isolation, unless your symptoms noticeably worsen during the isolation period.