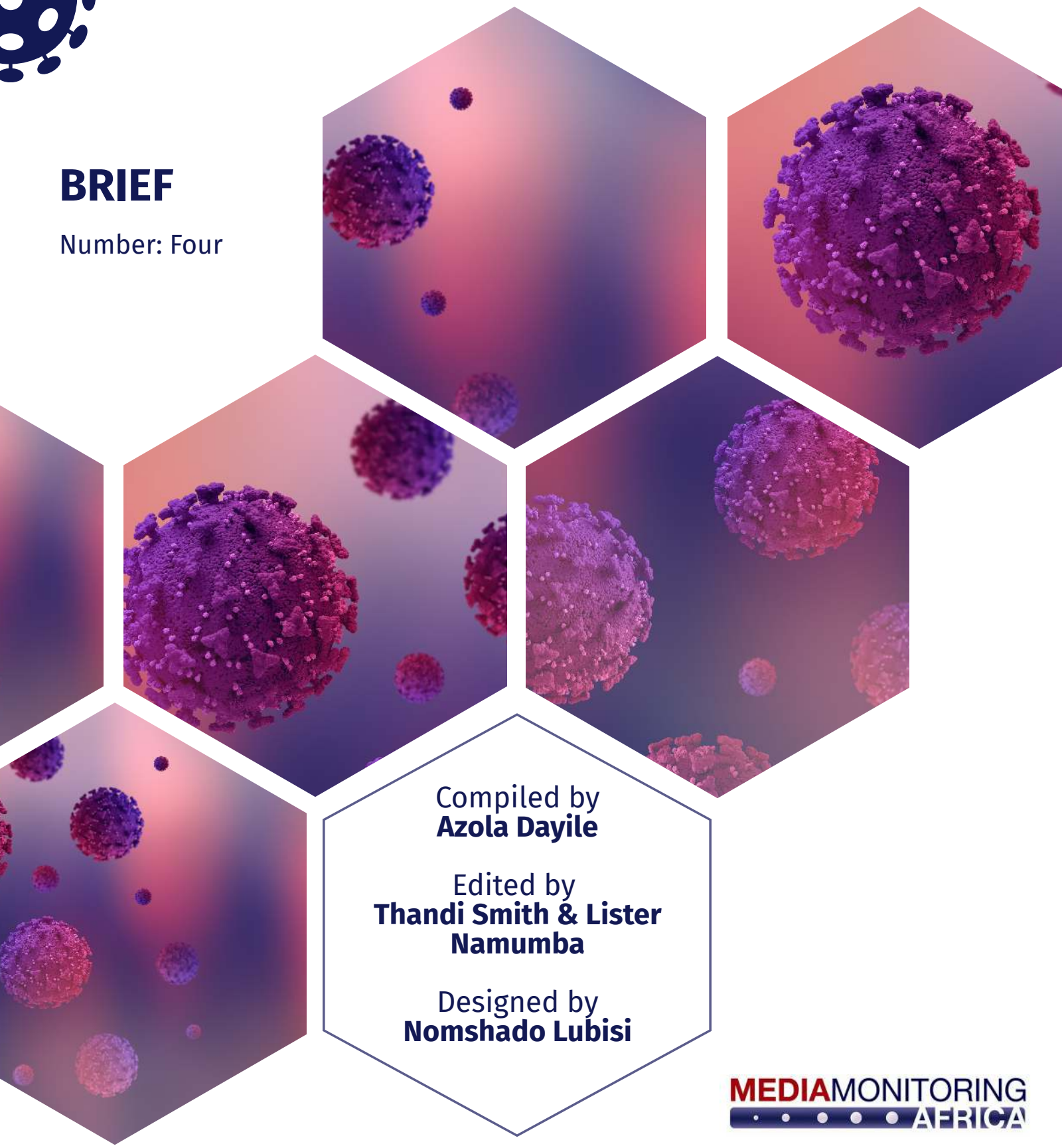
ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 MEDIA COVERAGE

BRIEF

Number: Four



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Introduction

In democratic societies, the media ought to play the important role of being a watchdog and holding those in positions of power and influence accountable. In the case of South Africa where there is further anxiety and confusion as a result of the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown,[1] the media is responsible for dissemination of information between the government and citizens, keeping them informed of government's response and initiatives to control, curb and combat the virus, as well as other important issues and government functions during a pandemic. Moreover, the public not only expects the media to report on the daily rates of infections, deaths and recoveries, but to further unpack and help the public understand the ongoing shifts and changes relating to the virus, including the psychosocial and socio-economic impact it has had or can have on the people.

In efforts to analyse the media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is undertaking bi-monthly brief analyses, looking at trends around who gets to speak or whose voice is amplified in the coverage, undercurrents on gender and race representations and, the collective number of articles published over the different days. This is to arrive at a data-driven view and understanding of how the media has and continues to report on the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown and, who the agenda setters are.[2]

In the analyses already undertaken by MMA in this series, some of the findings were that black male personalities spoke or were accessed the most in media coverage. The results further reveal that these male personalities were mainly prominent South African government officials occupying high office, including among others, the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, the Minister of Health, Dr. Zweli Mkhize, the Minister of Finance, Tito Mboweni and Bheki Cele who is the Minister of Police. It was found that this was mainly due to the ongoing communication and public engagement by the government in relation to the virus, whether it be on new infections, deaths or recoveries and general lockdown regulations.

A further recurring trend is that very little voice was given to experts and/or ordinary citizens on the ground who are most affected by the pandemic and lockdown in this period. It must be noted however that the voice of experts has over the last three analyses, increased from the first analysis where this voice didn't even make it to the top ten, to 4th place in brief two and 5th place in the third brief.

[1] Ebrahim, Z (2020) Anxiety, overeating and under-exercising - the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown on SA. *Health24* [Internet], 29 May 2020. Available from <https://www.health24.com/Medical/Infectious-diseases/Coronavirus/anxiety-overeating-a
under-exercising-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-lockdown-on-sa-20200528-4> [Accessed 19 June 2020]
[2] MMA has a tool to determine who sets the agenda in media coverage. Click this to access it

Methodology

For the purpose of this brief, the monitoring period covered is 14 days, from the 17th of May until the 30th of May, 2020. Dexter,[3] an in-house online monitoring tool was used. This tool gathered and analysed the data using keywords, “Coronavirus”, “Quarantine”, “Lockdown”, “Covid-19” and “Pandemic”. The tool scraped media content from the websites of over 50 news media sites.[4] Using machine learning, we then worked with the data to help extract key indicators, including sources and entities. The data is searchable across a range of parameters. We then identified the relevant stories as all those that related to the pandemic, particularly in South Africa, where a national state of disaster has been declared. These were, but not limited to, items that specifically spoke to Covid-19 and the lockdown.

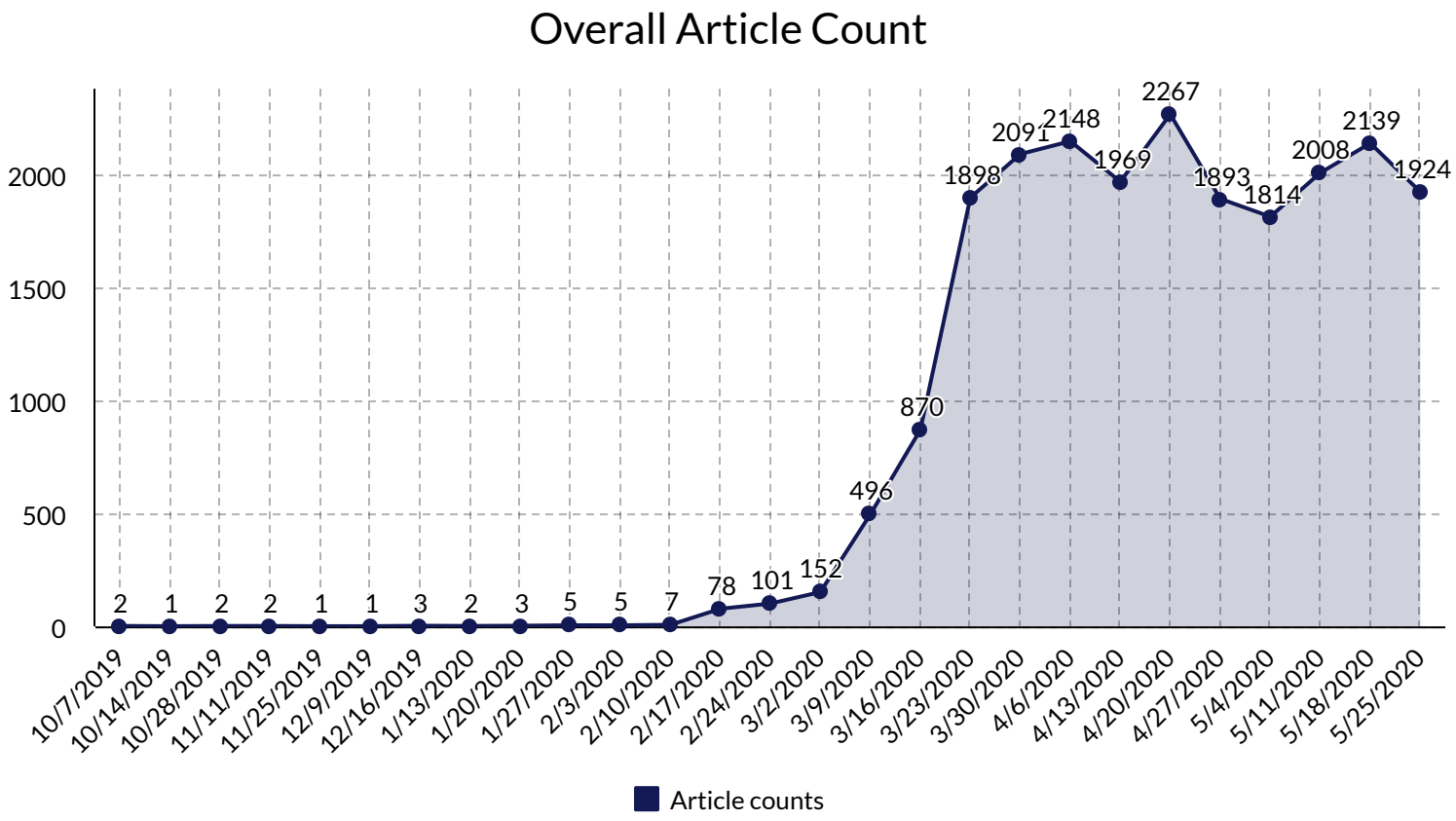
Importantly, we excluded any items that discussed similar topics but were not related to the coronavirus, and more particularly Covid-19. The results in this brief are an analysis of the dataset in the two-week period where a total number of 3, 295 articles were collected and analysed, a decrease from the 4, 130 articles in the last monitoring period.
We have included a new graph that has both values for the total number of news articles published versus the number of articles published on Covid-19. The idea is to gauge the amount of coverage for Covid-19 out of the total coverage.

DEXTER
MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[3] Access to Dexter can be granted upon request.
[4] Business Day, Cape Argus, The Citizen, City Press, Daily Dispatch, Daily Maverick, Daily Sun, Die Burger, The Herald, Grocott's Mail, IOL, M&G, News24, Saturday Star, Sowetan, The Sunday Independent, Sunday Times, Sunday World, The Times, Weekend Argus, Weekend Dispatch, Cape Times, The Mercury, The Post (SA), Sunday Tribune, The Witness, Sunday Sun, SABC Online News, Fin24, Eyewitness News, eNCA Online, Moneyweb, The Daily Vox, Ground Up, The Conversation, Die Laevelder, Zoutnet, Zoutpansberger, Engineering News, Financial Mail, Polokwane Observer, Politics Web, Biz Community, Construction Review, Mining Review, Mining Technology, Mining Weekly, My Broadband, Rand Daily Mail, SA Construction News, Business-Tech, RNEWS, Africa-Newsroom, Channel Africa, amaBhungane, New Frame, The Media Online, Pretoria Live

Article Count

In undertaking this brief analysis for the specified period, we also looked at data from the last quarter of 2019 to help demonstrate how the story grew. This is around the time when the Covid-19 pandemic started grabbing international headlines, with positive cases being reported in Wuhan.[5] The graph below shows the continued extensive coverage afforded to the Covid-19 crisis by South African news media publications.



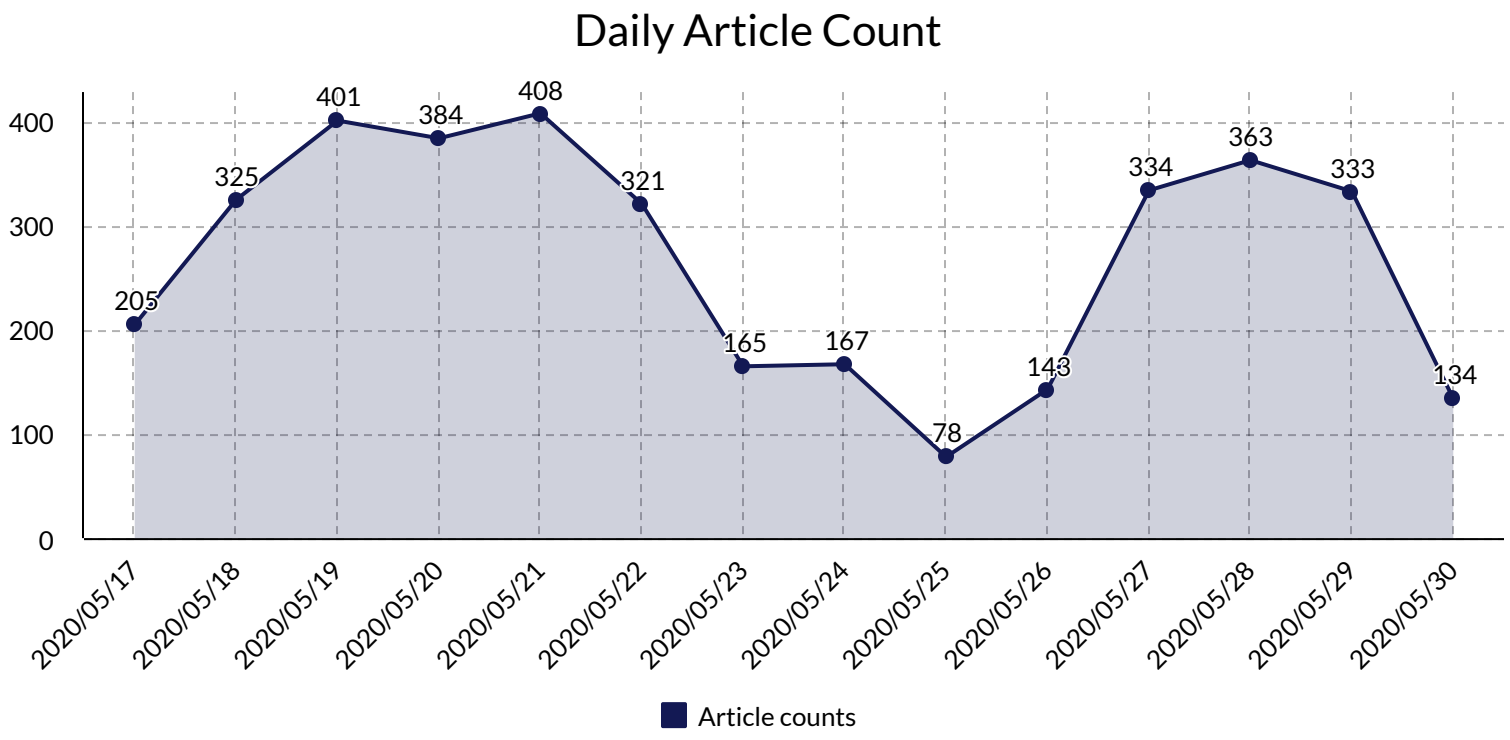
"Please note that there may be a slight difference in the overall article count comparison to the previous briefs. This is due to the nature of the data collection and the slight difference does not have an impact on the overall trends seen over the period"

While the trend suggests a slight decrease from the week of the 20th of April at 2, 267 stories to 1, 814 in the week of the 11th of May, there has been sustained high intensity coverage since March, a feat that is to be commended.[6] However, with the shrinking of newsrooms due to budget cuts resulting in fewer journalists, we are not seeing a greater diversity of public interest topics being covered, other than stories on the pandemic. This trend can be seen in the graph which shows a comparison of coverage of Covid-19 stories versus other stories showing how media have shifted significant resources to the coverage of Covid 19.

[5] AFP (2019) China probes pneumonia outbreak amid SARS fears. *Citizen Live* [Internet], 31 December 2019. Available from https://citizen.co.za/news/news-world/2223356/china-probes-pneumonia-outbreak-amid-sars-fears/ [Accessed 12 July 2020]

[6] As noted previously, ordinarily with big stories or events, there tends to be a typical bell curve, whereas the story breaks, there is a sharp increase in the number of stories, then it peaks, and we see a generally sharp decline. This is typical for big issues like national elections where the coverage peaks around the day of voting and then declines sharply once results are announced. The shape of the graph above is therefore indicative not only of the scale of the crisis but also how it continues to dominate coverage with a steady and ongoing high level of stories

Daily Count



The daily article count graph above reveals a similar trend found in the previous brief analyses where there are peaks and troughs in the daily coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic by the media in South Africa. On the 21st of May, South Africa recorded its highest number of articles published that spoke unto the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown during the monitoring period. This was due to heavy news reportage about healthcare workers testing positive for Covid-19 and hospital beds filling up rapidly, as well as the rising job losses in the country as a result of the pandemic.[7]

As noted in brief three, South African media has further been reporting on international issues relating to Covid-19, and the United States of America (USA) has been the one international context privileged by news publications here. This has likely to do with the USA having the highest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 and the controversial utterances by their president, Donald Trump in relation to the pandemic.[8] This has also contributed to the rise in articles on and about the pandemic by South African publications during this and the previous period analysed. It must be noted that a lot of coverage during this monitoring period was centred around Dr. Glenda Gray, President of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). Dr. Gray who reportedly sits on

[7] Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change. (2020) South Africa's 24-hour trend report – 21 May 2020. *Daily Maverick* [Internet], 22 May 2020. Available from: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-05-22-south-africas-24-hour-trend-report-21-may-2020> [Accessed 12 July 2020]

[8] Heavey, S. & Caspani, M. (2020) US states plow ahead with reopening; Trump warns death toll could hit 100,000. *DispatchLive* [Internet], 4 May 2020. Available from: <https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2020-05-04-us-states-plow-ahead-with-reopening-trump-warns-death-toll-could-hit-100000/> [Accessed 29 May 2020]

the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19, made some remarks over government's lockdown regulations calling them "unscientific". Gray also commented on the "increase" in cases of malnutrition in children at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital.[9] These comments which were later clarified by the doctor,[10] put Dr. Gray in the spotlight and led to an investigation into the damage the comments may have caused by the SAMRC, who later issued a statement saying the Council "did not find any transgression" on the part of Dr. Gray.[11] The comments by the doctor caused a lot of controversy and this grabbed a lot of media attention.

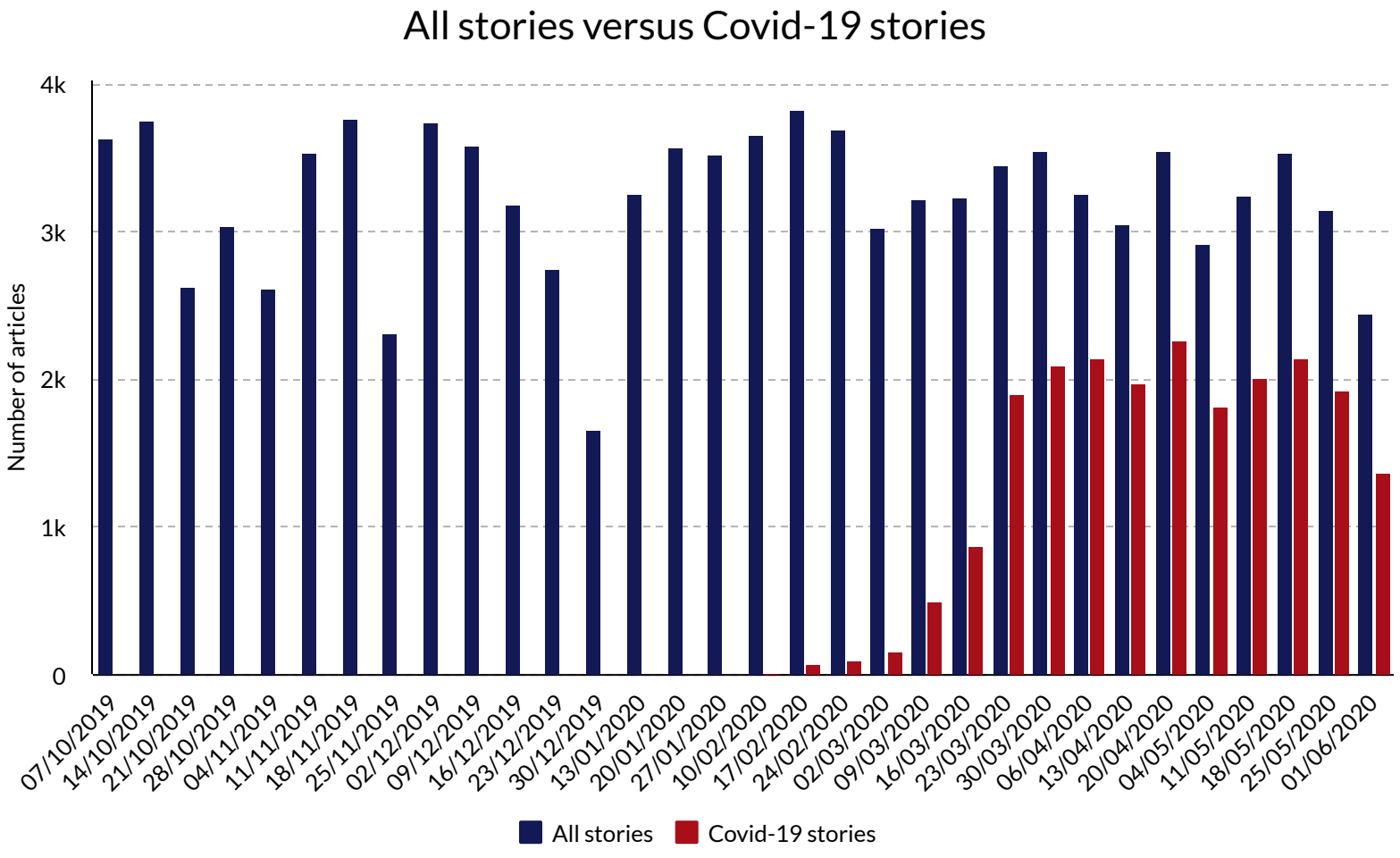
Interestingly, it also raised a number of discussions about the media's own role and how they were covering the Covid-19 crisis. One of the key arguments was what reasonable steps need to be taken by media to verify information when it is being provided by an expert. Ideally all experts would be checked by others for verification but where resources have been reduced there was an argument of pragmatism and balance as to when experts need to also be checked.

[9] Evans, S. & Karrim, A. (2020) EXCLUSIVE | Unscientific and nonsensical: Top scientist slams government's lockdown strategy. *News24* [Internet], 16 May 2020. Available from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/unscientific-and-nonsensical-top-scientific-adviser-slams-governments-lockdown-strategy-20200516> [Accessed 12 July 2020]

[10] Evans, S. & Karrim, A. (2020) EXCLUSIVE | Unscientific and nonsensical: Top scientist slams government's lockdown strategy. *News24* [Internet], 16 May 2020. Available from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/unscientific-and-nonsensical-top-scientific-adviser-slams-governments-lockdown-strategy-20200516> [Accessed 12 July 2020]

[11] Evans, S. et al. (2020) Glenda Gray 'grateful for support' as SAMRC calls off investigation into her lockdown criticism. *News24* [Internet], 26 May 2020. Available from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/glenda-gray-grateful-for-support-as-samrc-calls-off-investigation-into-her-lockdown-criticism-20200526> [Accessed 12 July 2020]

All stories versus Covid-19 stories



The graph runs until the week ending 1st of June 2020

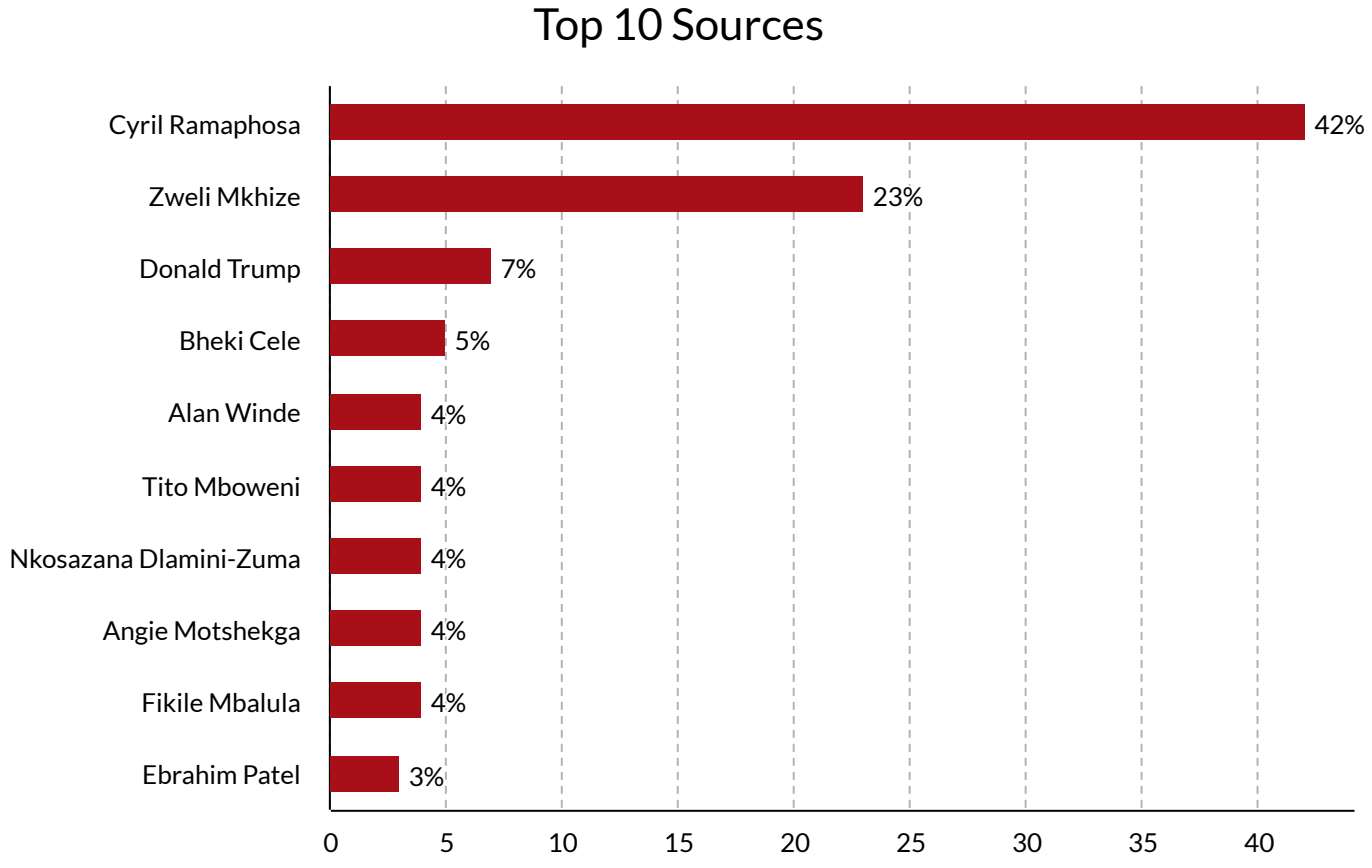
To gauge the amount of coverage for Covid-19 out of the total general coverage and determine trends, we have included a new graph that has both the values for the total number of all articles published versus the number of articles published on Covid-19. What can be deduced from the graph above is that from the last quarter of 2019 when news of the Covid-19 broke out internationally, there was minimal, close to zero news stories published in South Africa that spoke unto the virus.

An example would be that between the week ending on the 2nd of December, 2019 and the week ending on the 30th of December, 2019, there were only four stories on the Coronavirus out of 11, 172 news stories, a percentage of only 0.03. Stories on Covid-19 only began to pick up in the first quarter of 2020, with 2, 507 articles out of 20, 741 news stories between the week ending on the 13th of January, 2020 and the week ending on the 23rd of March, peaking at 13%. What becomes clear is how the news agenda is dominated by Covid-19 articles, where the majority of stories being reported in our media were about Covid-19.

Whose voice do we hear in the media?

A good indicator in showing who gets to speak and on what issues, is by looking at the sources accessed by journalists and media practitioners in their news coverage. When analysing the coverage to determine trends in representation, looking at who/which sources were accessed is of utmost importance as it shows us how in-depth, balanced and fair a news story is and whether there is diversity of views and perspectives, as ethical journalism principles dictate. Moreover, it provides media practitioners and outlets the opportunity to empower by giving voice to those who have been silenced, overlooked and/or misrepresented in coverage in terms of voice.

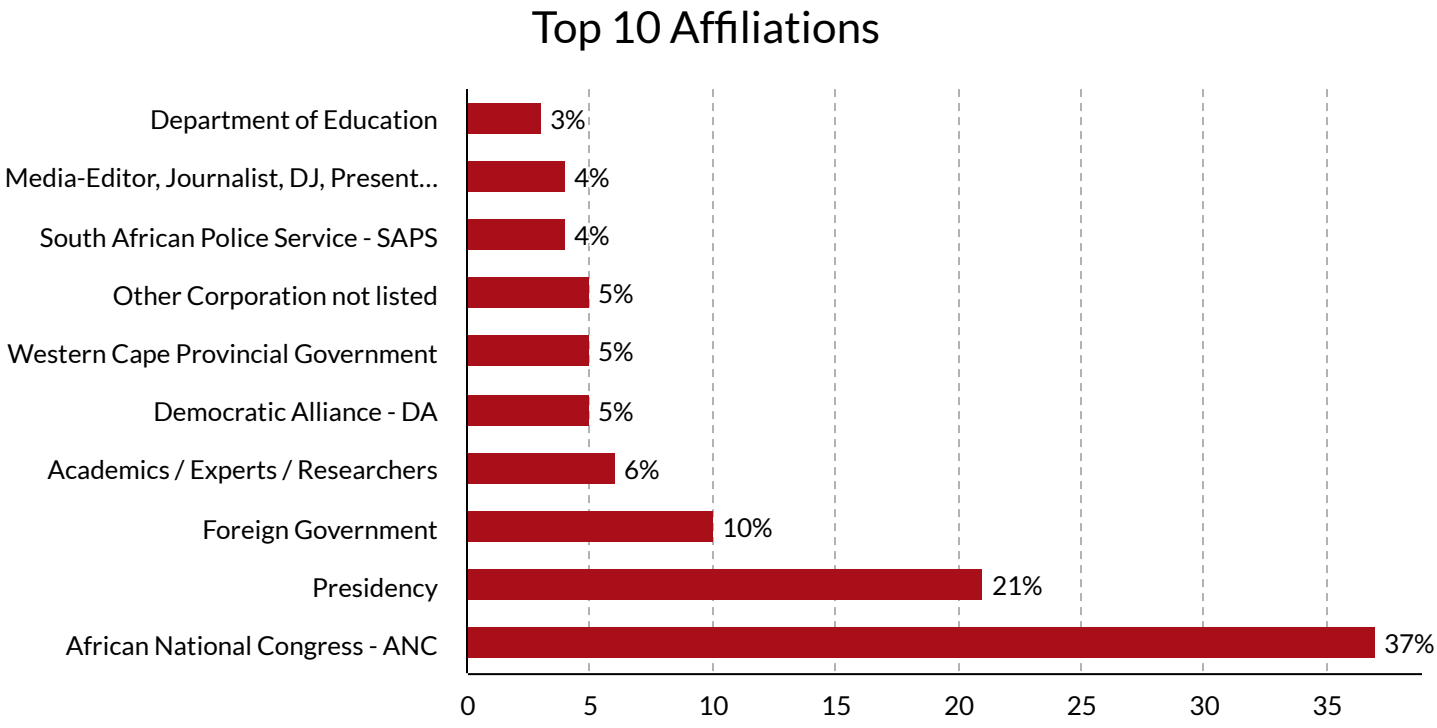
Looking at the source breakdown on the graph below (these are instances where the person is quoted directly or indirectly), it is clear that those who have been interviewed and/or quoted the most by the media are high-ranking government officials, with President Cyril Ramaphosa leading at 40% of the overall share of voice, down by a 14% margin from the results in the previous analysis. This is mostly due to an 11% hike of Health Minister, Zweli Mkhize's share of voice, standing at 22% while previously he was only accessed 11% out of the overall share of voice. Mkhize's spike is a consequence of growing criticism and debates around his department's response to Covid-19 and his vocal position on Dr. Glenda Gray and her comments on government's lockdown regulations.



In this monitoring period, we see a return of Trade and Industry Minister, Ebrahim Patel (3%) and Police Minister, Bheki Cele (5%) who did not feature on the top 10 list for the previous brief. This indicates that them and their respective departments were again newsmakers in the studied period, with questions around economic relief initiatives and security and policing under lockdown regulations.

While the issues in the previous study appeared to relate more to education, health and socio-economic relief initiatives, this brief tends to be slanted towards issues of trade and economics, health as well as lockdown regulations and laws as noted in earlier briefs. Western Cape Premier, Alan Winde makes the top 10 list again with 4% of the share of voice still while his leader in the Democratic Alliance, John Steenhuisen slips further down the list, outside of the top 10 even though his share of voice remains the same at 2%. Similar to the previous reports, this is due to calls by their party, the DA, for President Cyril Ramaphosa to end the lockdown and open the economy.

Affiliations

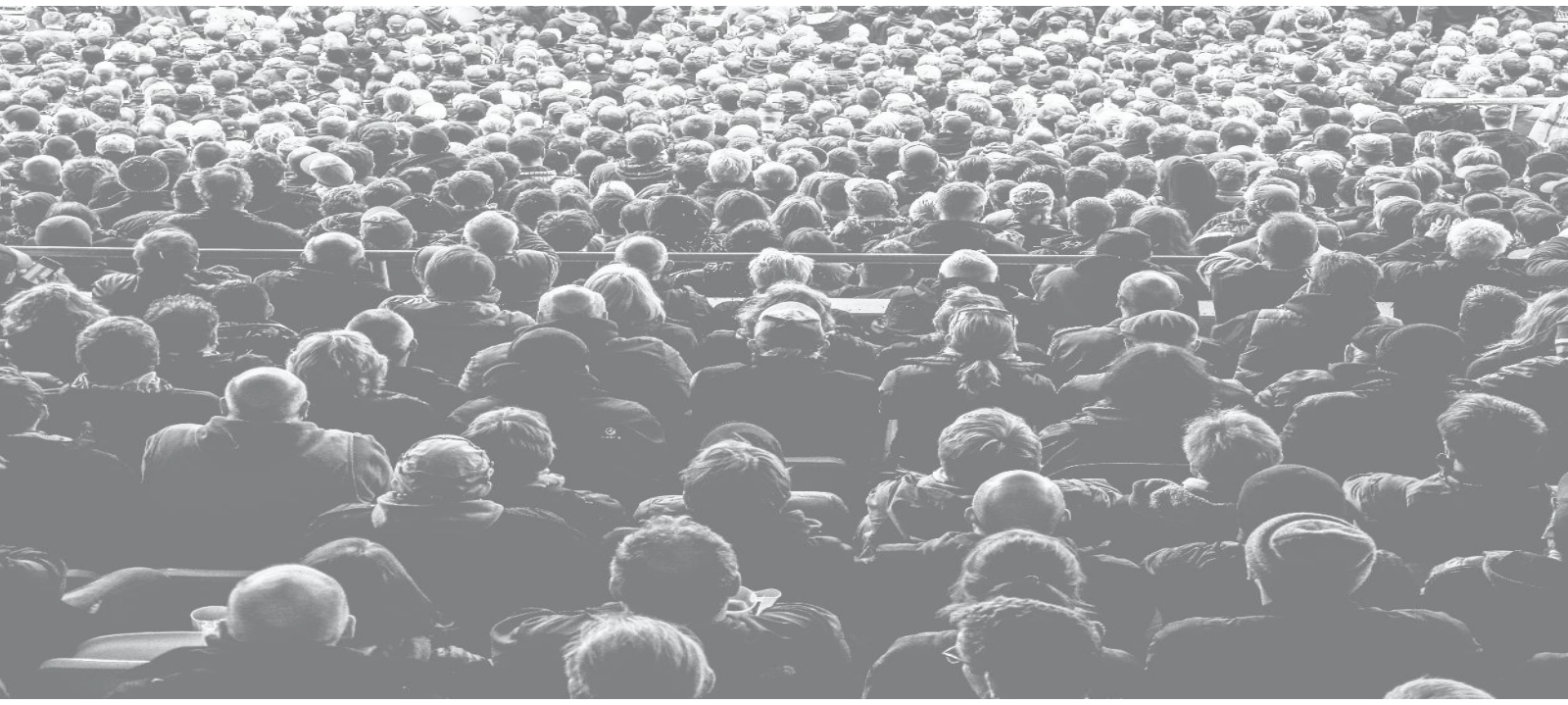


From the affiliations represented on the graph, the top identified affiliation is the African National Congress (ANC), the governing party in South Africa, with a percentage share-breakdown of 37, the same percentage it enjoyed in the previous brief. This is followed by the office of the South African Presidency at 21%, also remaining the same as in the previous analysis. The reasons for these are determined by how the people are referred to in each story. For example, it might be that if President Ramaphosa is speaking to the Nation as President of the Republic,he would then be identified as President, but if he then spoke at an ANC National Executive Committee meeting, it would then be in his role as President of the ANC.

The ANC is the party in governance, and those occupying the office of the Presidency are representatives of the party. As such, it is the ANC and its officials in government who are in the forefront of responding to the Coronavirus pandemic and ensuring citizens' safety and wellbeing. The Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition and governing party of the Western Cape experienced a 3% dip from the 8% it previously enjoyed, a result of more focus being on other provinces like the Eastern Cape and Gauteng rather than the Western Cape where the party is in power and would be expected to give official word on Covid-19-related matters.

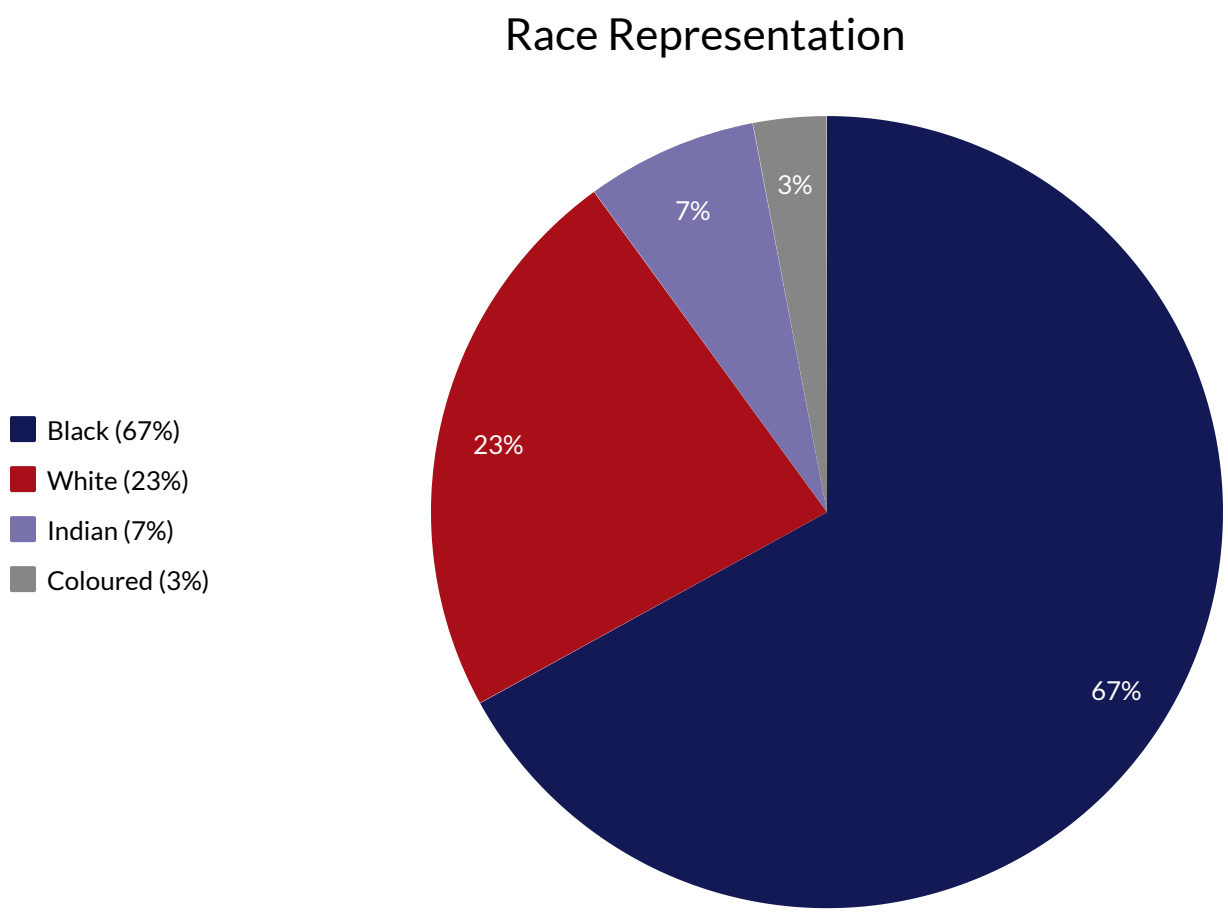
The voice share for Academics/Experts/Researchers was at 6% as can be seen above, a percent decrease from the previous monitoring period. This decrease in the voice share for experts, while not significant, is interesting because during this period of analysis, as mentioned above, a lot of coverage was centred on Dr. Glenda Gray who falls under this affiliation bracket. The reason for this decrease might be because those voicing their opinions and/or responses to her controversy were government officials such as the Health Minister, Dr. Zweli Mkhize[12] and media[13] who ran a few commentaries and editorials.

The rest of the affiliations that appear in the top 10 are the very same institutions/organisations that featured in the previous analysis, occupying the same position on the graph with between 1% and 2% difference in share of voice for this analysis.
Outside of government institutions, the media, which is made up of journalists, media organisations and practitioners were the only group to make it to the top 10 list, recording as with the previous analysis only 4% of total representation. This is a result of the comments and opinions on the Dr. Glenda Gray controversy as well as the public debates around how the media has been covering the pandemic, with media analysts commenting on the issue in some of the publications gathered and analysed.[14]



[12] Mkhize, Z. (2020) READ IN FULL | Zweli Mkhize's statement on Prof Glenda Gray's criticism of lockdown regulations. *News24* [Internet], 21 May 2020 <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/read-in-full-zweli-mkhizes-statement-on-prof-glenda-grays-criticism-of-lockdown-regulations-20200521> [Accessed 12 July 2020]
[13] Basson, A. (2020) Adriaan Basson: The truth behind THAT interview with Prof Glenda Gray. *News24* [Internet], 24 May 2020 <https://www.news24.com/news24/columnists/adriaanbasson/adriaan-basson-the-truth-behind-that-interview-with-prof-glenda-gray-20200523> [Accessed 12 July 2020]
[14] Roper, C. (2020) Something is rotten in the state of enca. *News24* [Internet], 17 May. Available from: <https://www.news24.com/news24/analysis/analysis-something-is-rotten-in-the-state-of-enca-20200517> [Accessed 30 May 2020]

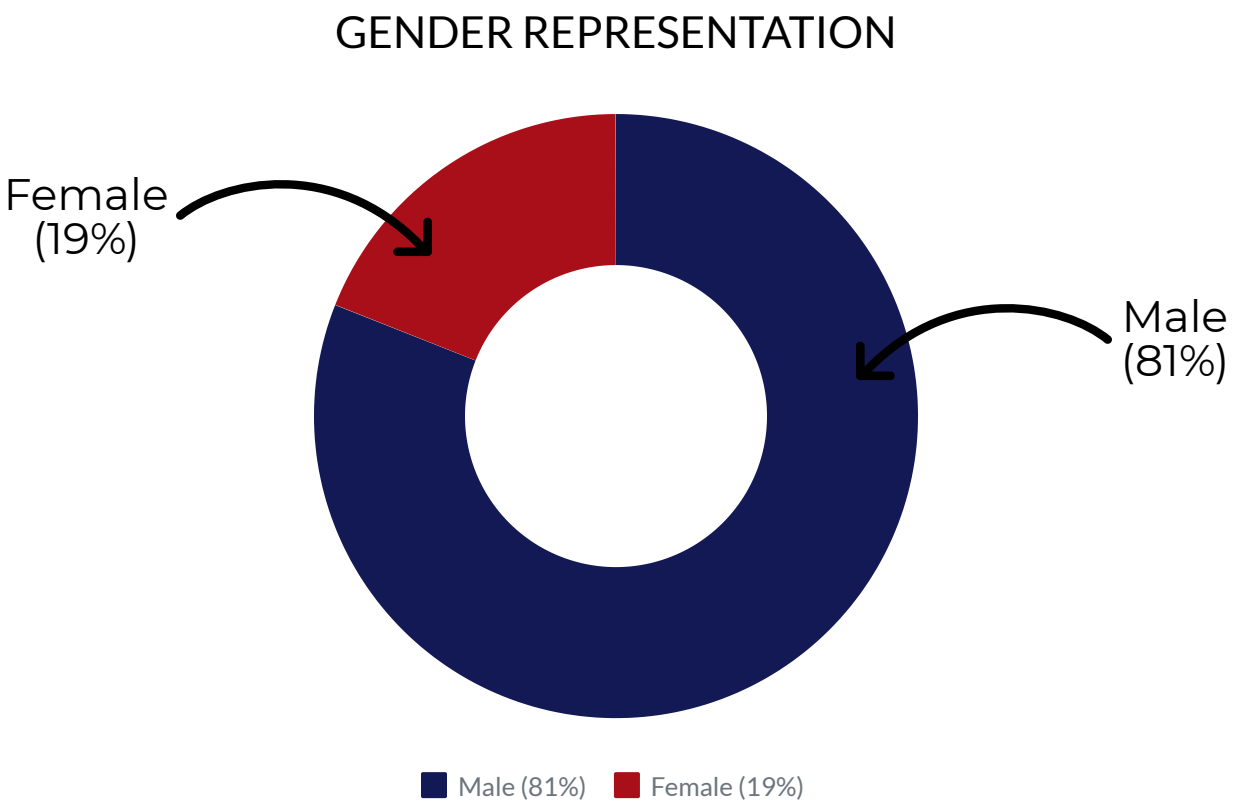
Source breakdown by race



According to the graph above where race representation is shown and broken down, black people's voices were the most accessed at 67% on matters pertaining to Covid-19 and the lockdown in the period studied, a 2% hike from the previous 65% obtained in the previous analysis. This is the same for the other represented population, either dipping by 1% or remaining the same as is the case with Indian voices, when compared to results of the previous analysis. This indicates there was not much change in terms of the main protagonists/speakers from the population groups represented on the graph.

Taking into consideration the Sources and Affiliations graphs together with that of Race Representation, we can conclude that the share of voice of the black population were mainly government officials who were speaking on Covid-19 related issues, with prominent leaders such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Zweli Mkhize, Angie Motshekga and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma making the top 10 sources list. This indicates an imbalance of voice in media coverage, as the black and white population make up 80% and 8% of the population respectively, according to Statistics South Africa's Community Survey of 2016.

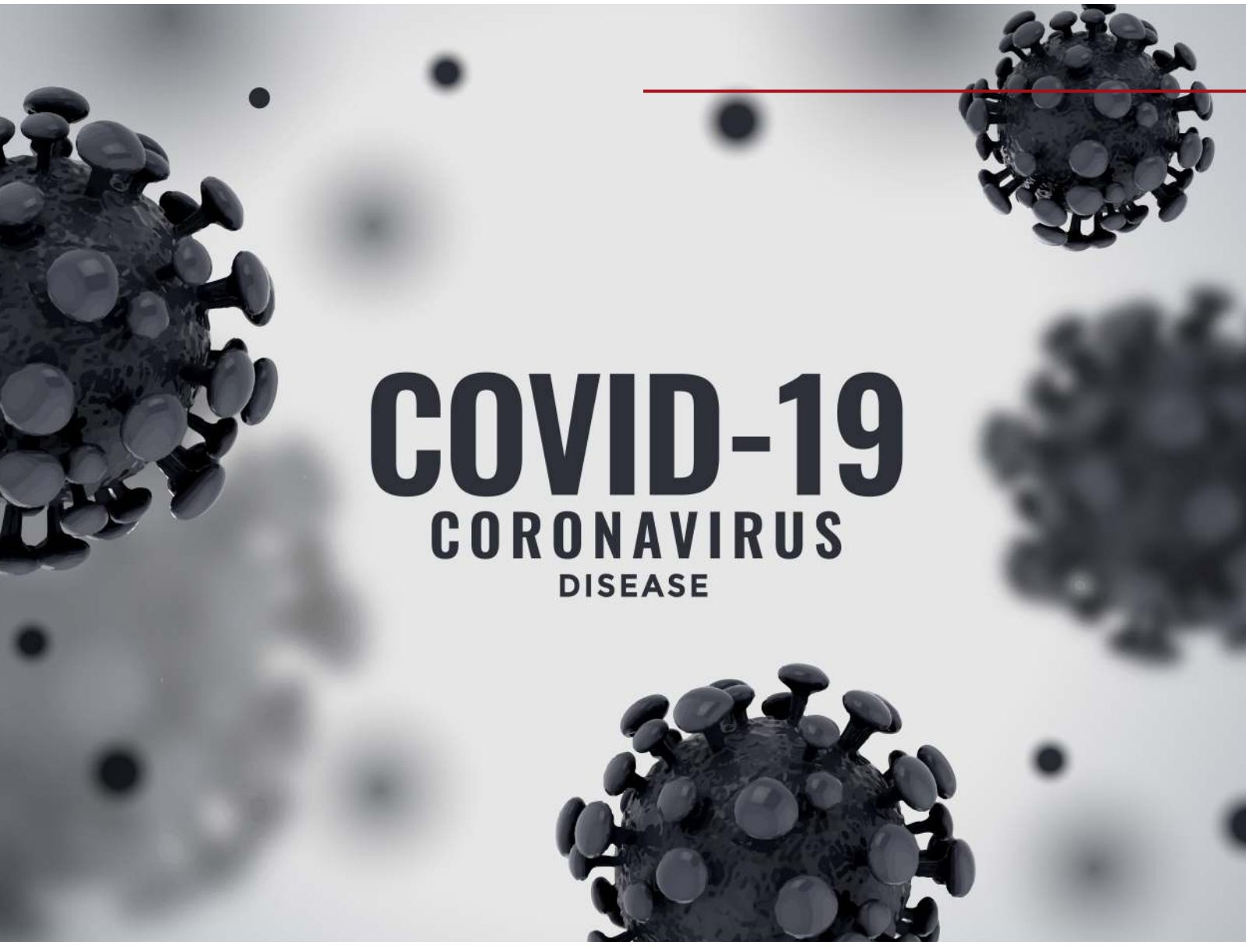
Source breakdown by gender



During the period of this series of analyses, the trend when it comes to representation by gender is that the male voice continues to enjoy a huge amount of the share of the coverage. For this brief too it remained largely unequal, with males on average being accessed four times more than females at 81%, while the latter recorded a lowly 19%. Much of this 19% coverage was on Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga who made the news regarding the contentious issue of schools reopening amid the pandemic and some of the teachers' unions opposing the motion. This corroborates the sources graph above, where in the list of the top 10 most accessed voices regardless of gender and race, there only appears two females, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at position seven, up two places from Brief Three, with 4% share of voice and Angie Motshekga at position eight, down by four places with 4% – recording a 3% dip in her share of voice compared to the previous analysis.

These results are totally disproportionate to the gender spread in South Africa where the female population (50.5%) eclipses the male population by 1% according to official statistics. [15]. The gross under- representation of females in the media is symptomatic of a general trend in South African public life where males enjoy much greater privilege in society such as having the greatest number of male members in the National Assembly at 54% while females are at 46% yet there are more women in South African than there are men as indicated above. For the media, it indicates an ongoing struggle to give voice to those who carry a disproportionate burden in society, and to a degree complicity in recreating existing power dynamics of male dominance.

[15] Community Statistics (2016), *Statistical Release P0301* [Internet]. Statistics South Africa. Pretoria, Available from: <http://cs2016.statssa.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NT-30-06-2016-RELEASE-for-CS-2016-_Statistical-releas_1-July-2016.pdf> [Accessed: 15 May 2020]

Conclusion

While newsrooms continue facing mounting challenges as a result of Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown, news related to the pandemic continues to dominate coverage, taking up more than half of the total daily coverage since March as shown on the graph representing total coverage to coverage of Covid-19. As seen in the data presented and analysis conducted, the greatest number of people interviewed for opinions on the matter were mainly government officials, possibly as a result of government's efforts to constantly and consistently communicate with the public and possibly curb and avoid dis/misinformation during this time of uncertainty and anxiety. Further possibilities of the lack of diversified voices and stories relating to Covid-19 in the media have also been explored in the analysis. Given everything, it would do well for the media to be more pro-active and creative going forward when reporting on the pandemic and related issues, not forgetting the important mandate of including more voices from ordinary members of the public, especially women and children, as well as medical experts and scientists.