



ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 MEDIA COVERAGE



BRIEF

Number: Five



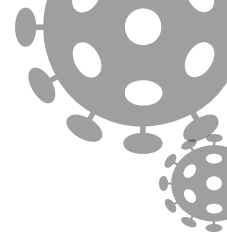
Compiled by
Azola Dayile & Msizi Mzolo

Edited by
**William Bird & Lister
Namumba**

Designed by
Nomshado Lubisi

MEDIAMONITORING
• • • • • **AFRICA**

Introduction



Since the first reported positive case of Covid-19, the media have been called on and expected to undertake, with caution and fervour, their role of communicating not just key information about the Covid-19 pandemic, but also helping the public understand it, how to respond and be safe and as well as fulfil their normal functions of holding the powerful accountable. At the same time, media have been dealing with their own challenges in an incredibly volatile environment. Most credible media seem to have experienced significant increases in audience, but also huge decreases in advertising. Small commercial media, already struggling with sustainability have been pressed even further with some no longer able to operate.

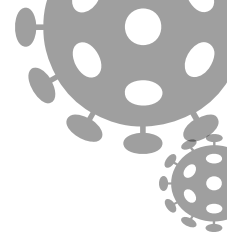
During this time when the world is grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is thus expected of the media to not just report on the daily rates of infections, recoveries and deaths, but to further unpack and help the public understand the ongoing shifts and changes relating to the virus, including the psychosocial and socio-economic impact it has had on the people.

In efforts to uncover the trends in this coverage, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has already produced four bi-monthly brief analyses, looking at aspects such as who gets to speak on what issues or whose voice is amplified in the coverage, undercurrents on gender and race representations and the collective number of Covid-19 related articles published over different days in a monitoring period. 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.[1]

In the analyses undertaken by MMA looking at the trends in coverage, some of the findings were that according to race and gender demographics, it was black male personalities that spoke or were accessed the most in media coverage. The results further reveal that these 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 due to the ongoing communication and public engagement by the government in relation to the virus, whether it be on new infections or recoveries and general lockdown regulations. A further recurring trend is that very little voice is given to experts and/or ordinary citizens on the ground, many of whom are most affected by the pandemic and lockdown in this period.

[1] MMA has a tool to determine who sets the agenda in media coverage. Click this to access it

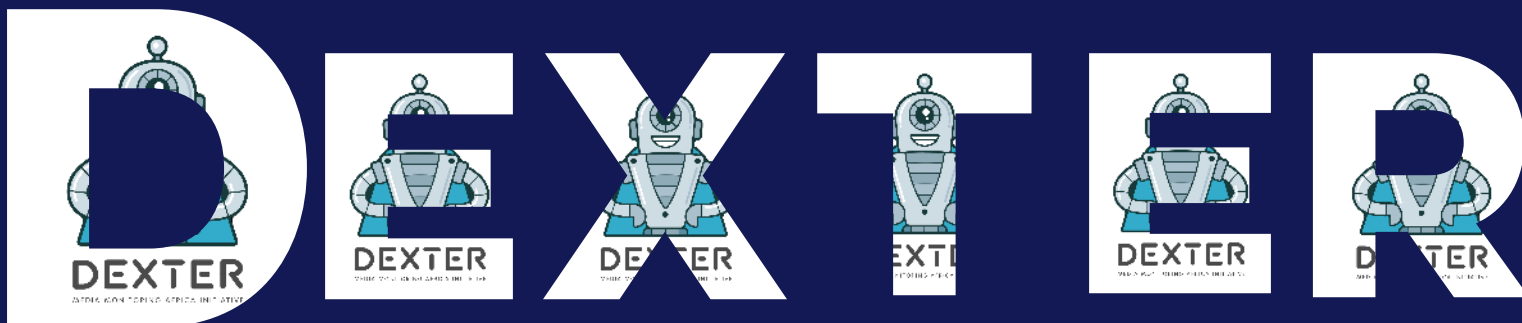
Methodology



Unlike the previous brief analyses that covered a monitoring period of 14 days, for this brief the monitoring period covered is 28 days, from the 31st of May until the 27th of June, 2020. This is to allow for a slightly broader time frame to see trends over time.

Dexter,[2] an in-house online monitoring tool was used to gather and analyse data using keywords, “Coronavirus”, “Quarantine”, “Lockdown”, “Covid-19” and “Pandemic”. The tool scraped media content from the websites of over 50 news media sites.[3] 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. These were, but not limited to, items that specifically spoke to Covid-19 and the lockdown.

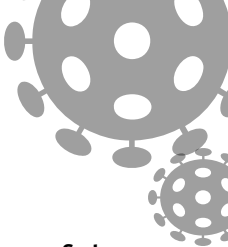
Importantly, we excluded any items that discussed similar topics but were not related to the coronavirus, and more particularly Covid-19. The results in this brief are an analysis of the dataset in the four-week period where a total number of 7, 567 articles were collected and analysed. The previous monitoring period of two weeks recorded 4, 130 articles. Also included in this brief is a new graph that has both values for the total number of news articles published versus the number of articles published on Covid-19 during the monitoring period. The idea is to gauge the amount of coverage for Covid-19 out of the total coverage.



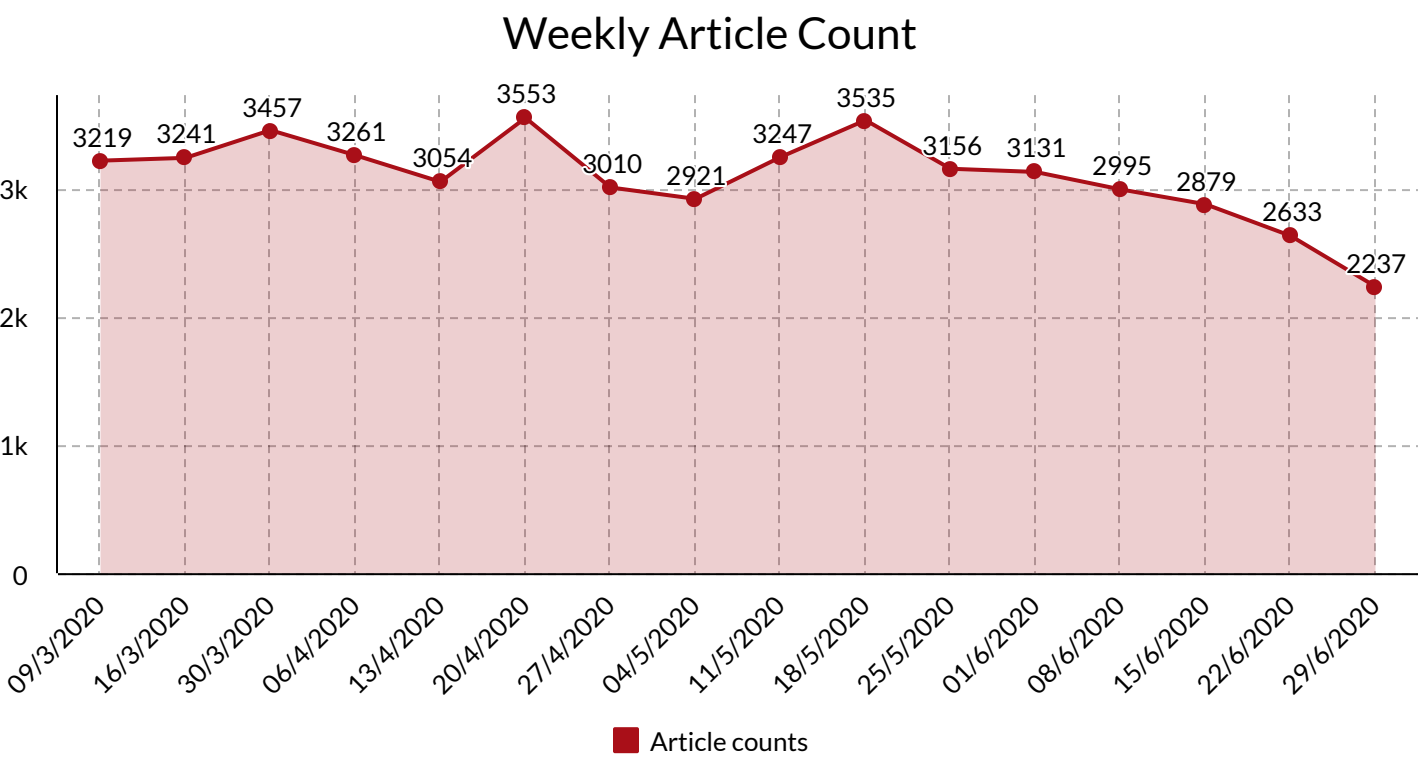
[2] Access to Dexter can be granted upon request.

[3] 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

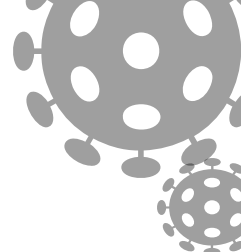


In order to help locate the current 28 day period in broader trends of coverage, it's useful to look at coverage from early March. The longer review period helps visualise the peaks and troughs. March was around the time when the Covid-19 pandemic began to be a feature in South African mainstream news outlets after a positive case of Covid-19 was confirmed in the country. The graph below shows a significant dip in coverage afforded to the Covid-19 crisis by South African news media publications for over five weeks between the 25th of May and 29th of June, 2020.

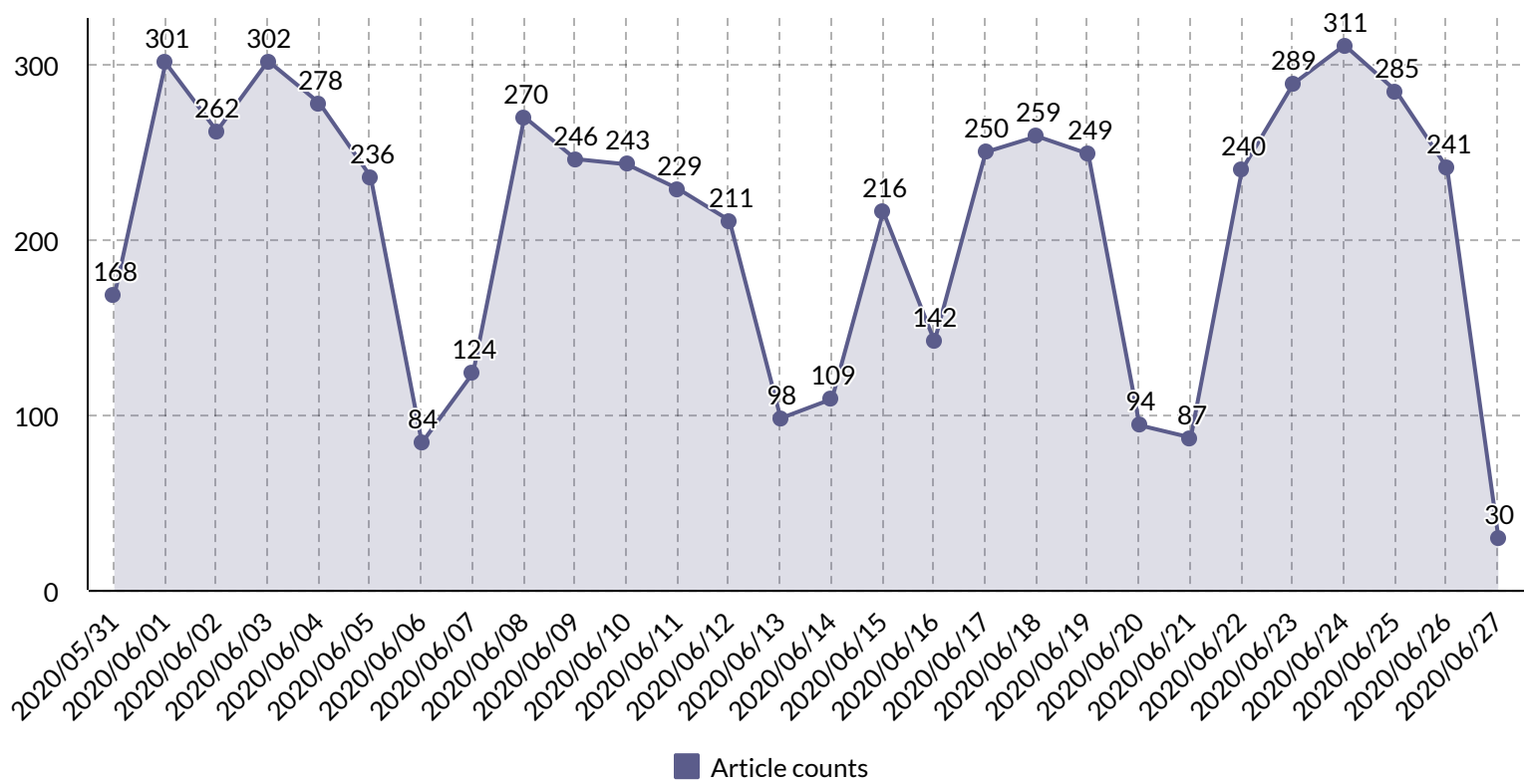


While the trend suggests an almost consistent/uniform amount of Covid-19 coverage from the 09th of March to the 18th of May, 2020 with an average of 3000 articles per week, there was a steep decline of coverage from the week ending on the 25th of May, 2020 (3, 156 articles) until the week ending on the 29th of June, 2020 (2, 237 articles). As reported in previous briefs, the pandemic has caused major strain on many industries including that of journalism and news production.

The decline in coverage is possibly a consequence of this, where newsrooms are operating with increasingly restricted resources largely as a result of financial constraints. There is also a sense of Covid-19 fatigue, and together with easing restrictions, fewer stories have been produced due to budget cuts and other related challenges. This has an impact on what is and is not reported on. Hence we are not seeing a greater diversity of public interest topics such as climate change, human rights violations and community development and activism etc being covered, other than stories on or related to the pandemic.

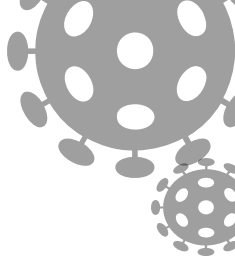


Daily Article Count



The next chart covers the 28 day period and 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 6th of June, for instance, South Africa recorded a minimal 84 articles published on or related to the Covid-19 pandemic and attendant lockdown. This is most likely because the 6th of June fell on a Saturday. However, it picked up the following day and steadily rose throughout the week, falling again on the 13th of June, a Saturday, to 98 articles published on the day.

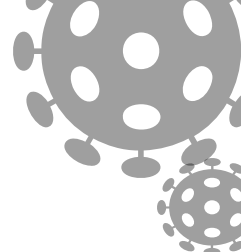
As stated in the previous analyses, only a handful of South African publications produce news on a weekend, which explains the dip in articles on the 6th and 13th of June. The increase in articles that happened within the week of the 7th to the 12th of June is due to the fact that all publications monitored for this brief publish stories within the week.



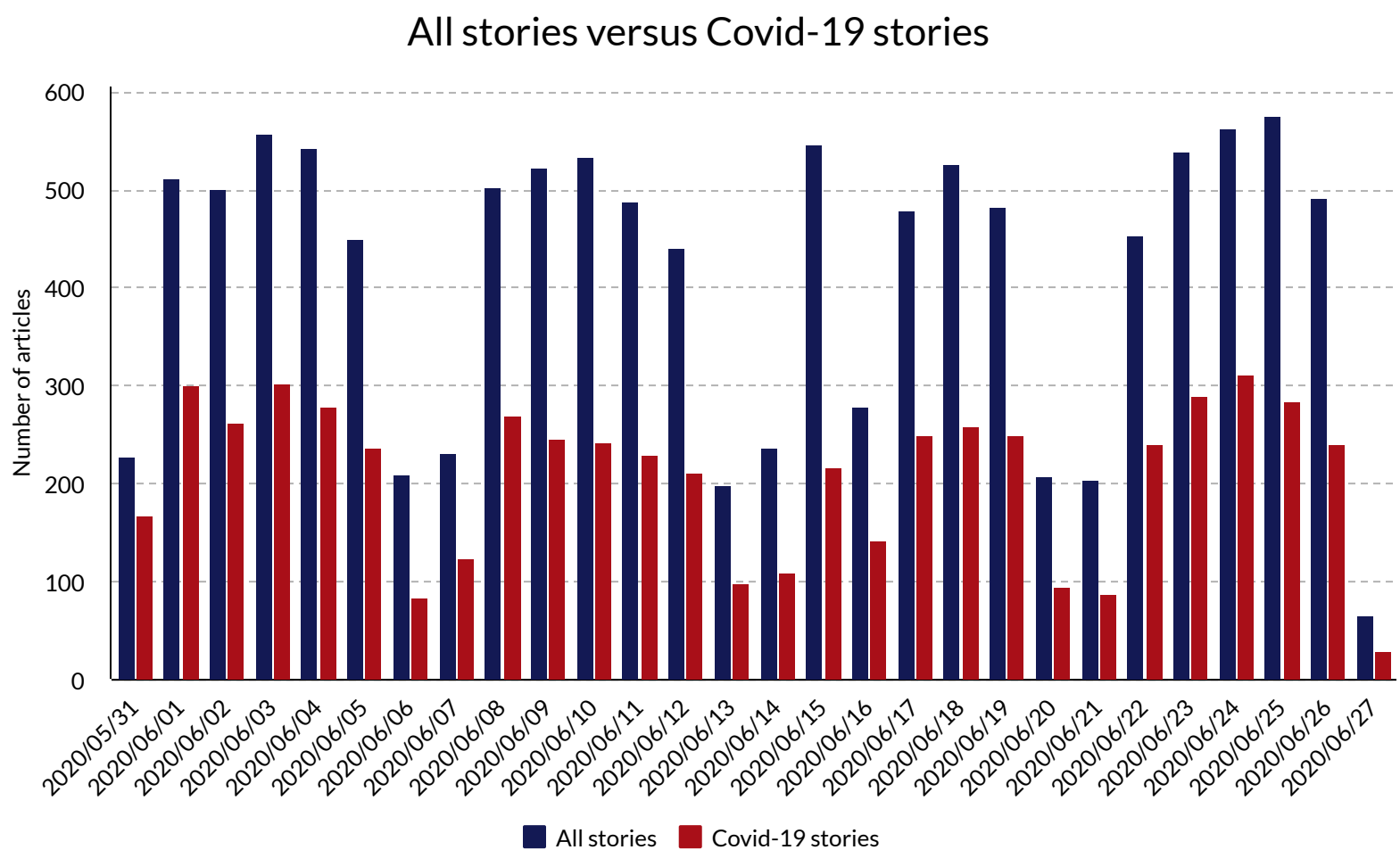
As noted in brief three and four, South African media has further been reporting on international issues relating to Covid-19 and the United States of America (USA) has been the one international context privileged by news publications here. Reasons for this are many, but what we found and attribute this to is Donald Trump's general controversy either on social media or in public appearances, where he goes on to make utterances about Covid-19 that continually grab international headlines. Furthermore, America is one of the countries with the highest reported number of positive Covid-19 cases. This has also contributed to the rise of articles on and about the pandemic by South African publications during this and the previous periods analysed.

On the 27th of June, the last day in the monitoring period, we recorded the lowest number of articles with only 30 articles published. Like the previous analysis, this is to be attributed to the fact that the day fell on a weekend, a period where many of the local online publications, save a few, publish far fewer news stories.





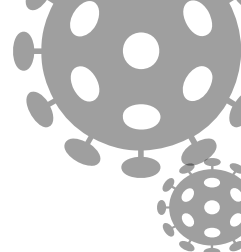
All stories versus Covid-19 stories



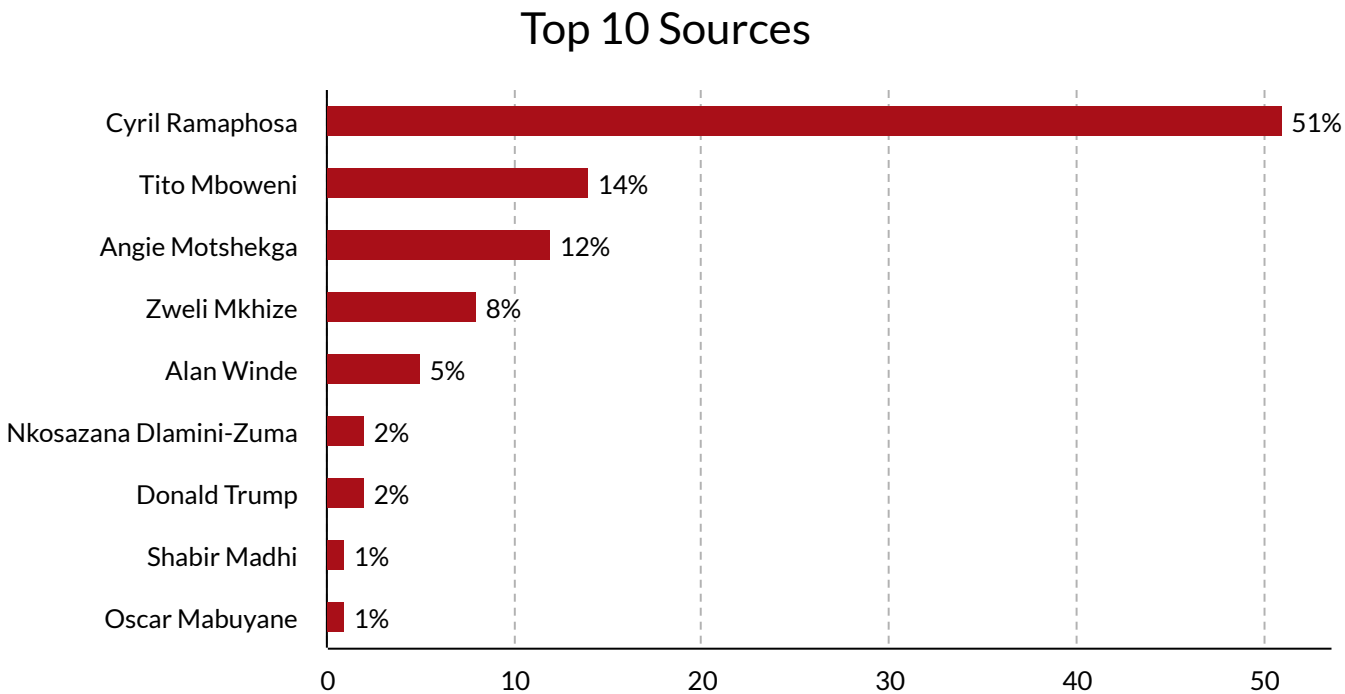
In the previous brief, we introduced a new graph, all stories versus Covid-19 stories, with the idea of gauging the amount of coverage afforded to these respectively. This would allow us to determine trends that are the subject of this brief analysis. As such, for this brief, we have included a similar graph that has both the values for the total number of all articles published versus the number of articles published on Covid-19 each day of the monitoring period.

The graph above reveals that from the entire period studied (31 May, 2020 – 27 June, 2020) there has been a consistent and relatively high number of Covid-19 related articles in comparison to the overall number of stories, Covid-19 related and otherwise. On most of the days studied for this brief, Covid-19 stories made up over 50% of the news stories for that day, which suggests a continued focus of the news cycle for the 28-day period. Given the challenges currently engulfing the journalism fraternity, this consistent reportage on the pandemic is something worth commending.

Whose voice do we hear in the media?



In this section, we will unpack the type of sources the media is focusing on during the pandemic. The reason behind our research on sources is to see whose voices were amplified during the pandemic period.

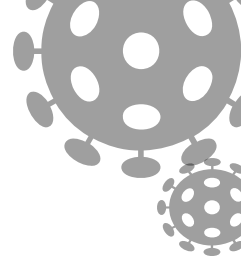


As per the graph above, President Cyril Ramaphosa was the most sourced at 51%, a 9% increase on the 42% recorded in the previous analysis. The President has been at the forefront announcing lockdown regulations. Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga recorded a 12% voice share, an 8% increase compared to the previous analysis. This is hardly surprising because during this period of analysis, the Minister made news regarding the reopening of schools. Health Minister, Zweli Mkhize’s 8% share is a significant decrease from the 23%. This could be attributed to focus by the media on education during this monitoring period.

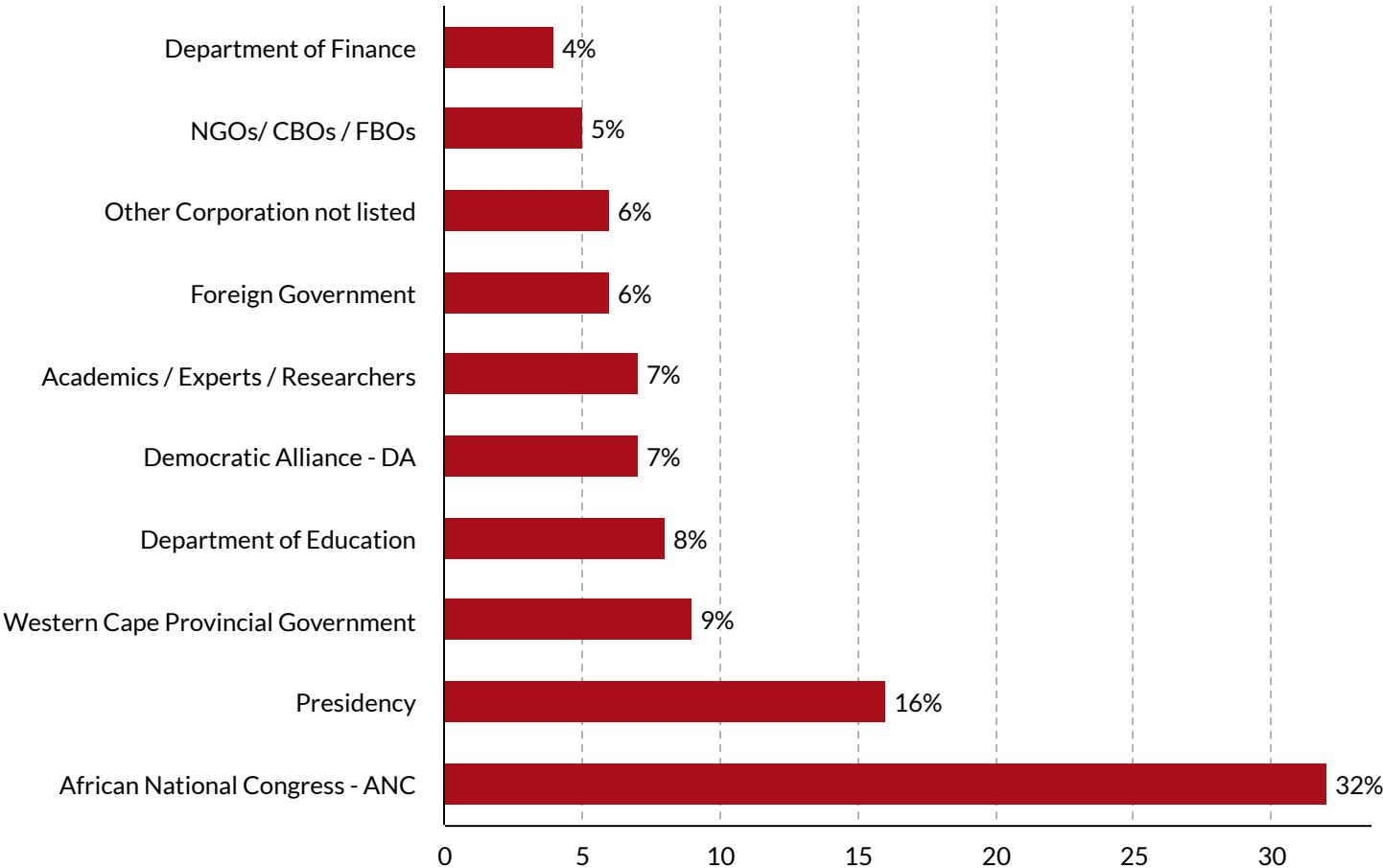
Eastern Cape Premier, Oscar Mabuyane at 1% made a first time appearance on the top 10 list of sources due to reports about the Eastern Cape having an increasing number of healthcare professionals falling ill, a rising demand for high-care[4] as well as the Premier’s call for a ban in alcohol in the Eastern Cape[5].

The inadequate share of voice of medical experts, academics and scientists in coverage of Covid-19 has been a major concern as these play a huge role in helping combat Covid-19. From the graph above, only one source from this group makes it to the top 10. Shabir Madhi is a researcher and professor at Witswatersrand University and he got a mere 1% share of voice. This could be attributed to a focus on education by the media during this monitoring period.

[4] <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-22-nelson-mandela-bay-on-the-brink-of-full-blown-hospital-bed-crisis/>
[5] <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-06-08-ban-alcohol-in-the-eastern-cape-says-premier-oscar-mabuyane>



Top 10 Affiliations



From the sources quoted or mentioned in coverage during the monitoring period, we looked at their affiliation in order to ascertain which groups speak the most in media coverage of Covid-19. The graph below shows the African National Congress (ANC) in the lead at 32%, a decrease from the previous 37%. The lead is not surprising as the ANC is the ruling party and majority of the sources, including those in the previous section, are ANC members.

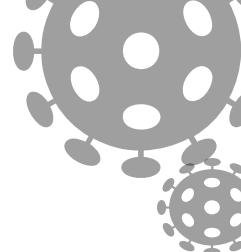
The Department of Basic Education also appeared in the top 10 at 8%. As mentioned in the previous section, this was due to the announcements about the reopening of schools by Minister Angie Motshekga.[6] The Western Cape provincial government was in the news at 9% mainly because it was concerned about the reopening of schools[7] in the province.

Despite the affiliation, ‘Academic/Expert/Researchers’ receiving an insignificant 1% increase from the previous 6% recorded, the fact that this affiliation’s voice share is so low (7%) is concerning because experts and researchers should be commanding a significant share of voice due to the nature of the pandemic the world is facing.

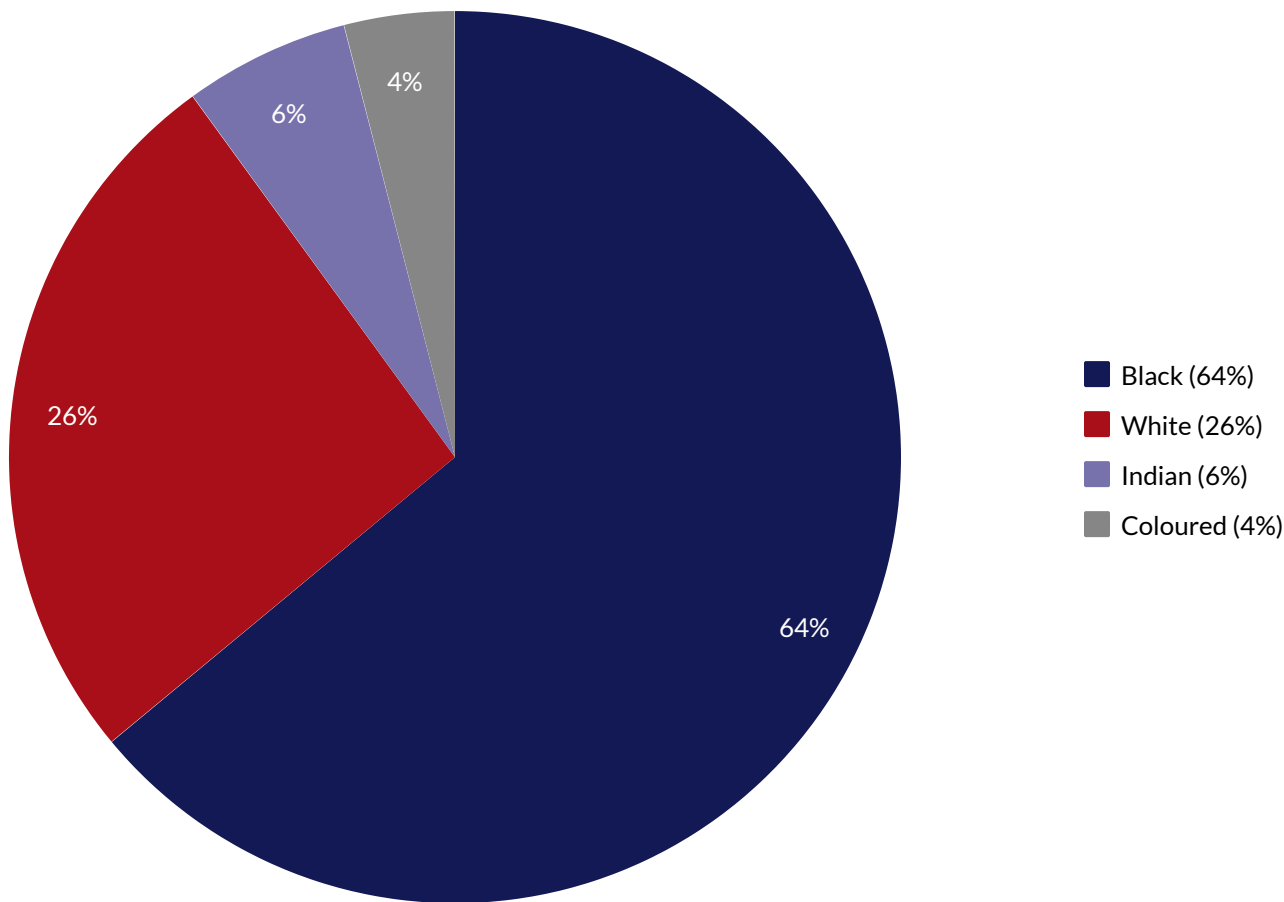
[6] <http://www.rnews.co.za/article/26765/orientation-underway-ahead-of-schools-reopening-on-8-june>

[7] <http://www.enca.com/news/western-cape-adamant-pupils-will-return>

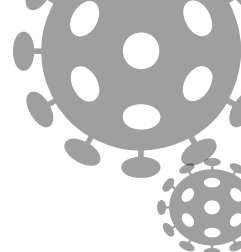
8



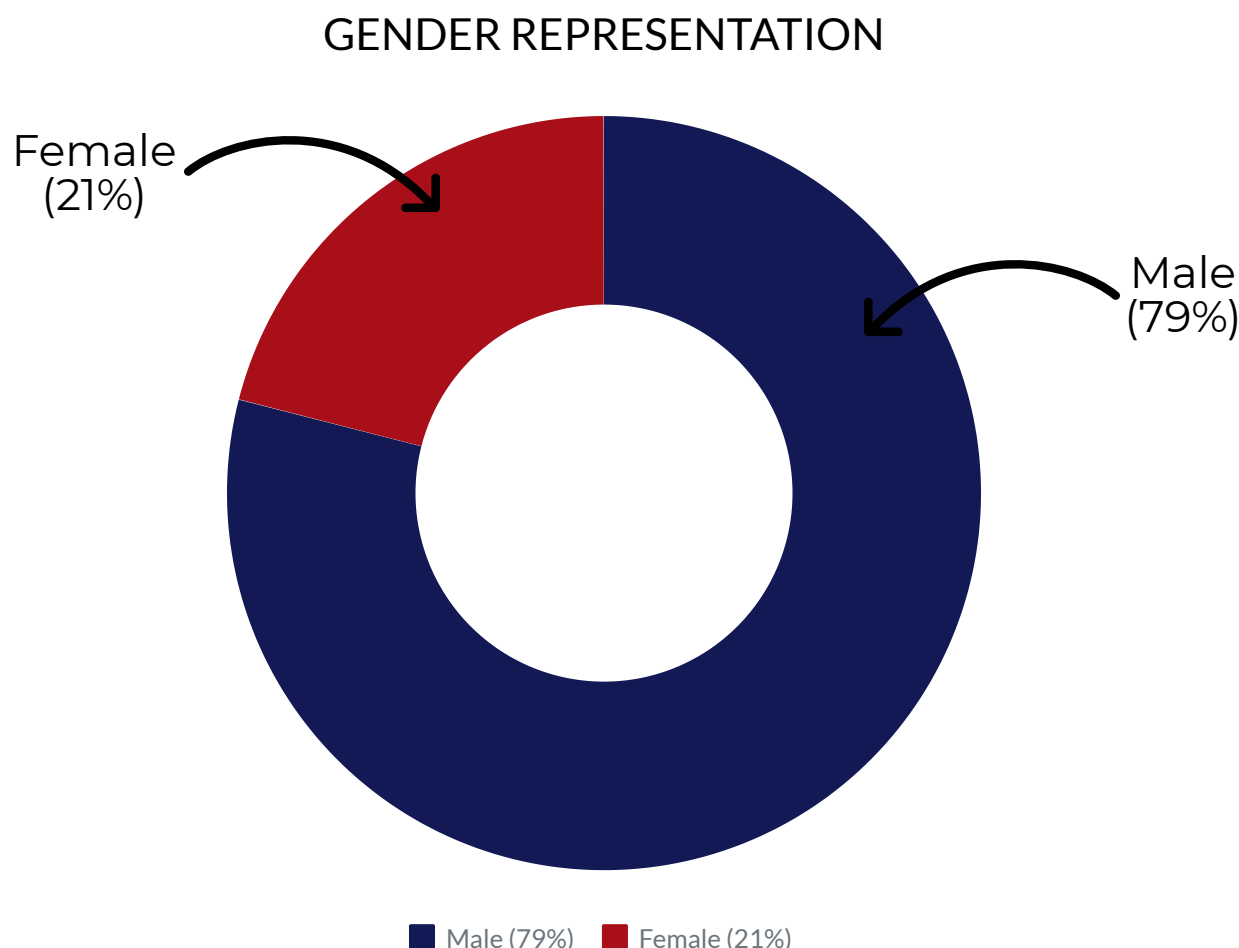
Race Representation



According to the graph above, black people’s voices were the most accessed at 64%. While recording a 3% decrease from the previous analysis, it can deduced that black people dominate in media coverage of Covid-19 in South Africa. White people at 26% recorded an increase from the previous 23%. The large black people’s voice share can be attributed to the fact that most people speaking in coverage of Covid-19 are government officials who are black. No major difference with Indians’ voices at 6% and Coloured people’s voices at 4%. These two respectively had a slight decrease of 1% and a 1% increase from the previous monitoring period.



Source breakdown by gender

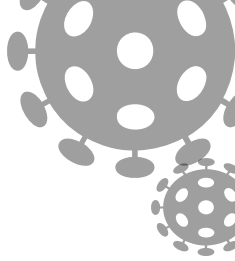


Females at 21% recorded a minimal increase from the previous 19%. Females are still under represented in the media even though they account for 50.5% of the population in South Africa according to Statistics South Africa.[8] Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs were the most accessed females during the period. This was because Minister Angie Motshekga was in coverage related to the reopening of schools which dominated media coverage and Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was making news for government’s decision on the sale of cigarettes. [9]

[8] 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]

[9] <http://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2020-06-03-ban-on-cigarettes-will-not-make-people-quit-smoking-fita-tells-high-court>

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, with the number of articles peaking at over 3000 for a sustained period as shown on the graph representing total coverage of Covid-19. Moreover, 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.

