

Press freedom in Zimbabwe: Effects of government entrenched policies on the media during COVID 19 lockdown

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Abstract: Freedom of the press is the corner stone of information dissemination, with the media seen as the hallmark of gathering and dishing out that information. The right to freedom of information and responsible journalism are fundamental to health, economic, social and human development across the globe, Zimbabwe included. However, those rights are handled and applied differently in each country. With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic ravaging the whole world, countries changed their media policies to implement restrictive measures that either curtailed access to information or enabled the media to project only what is positive to the authorities' interests. Assumptions can be made that in such an environment, press freedom is under siege through either subtle or more emphatic means of pressure mostly by authorities. Those that operate under state funding are seen with gatekeepers who suppress negative information against government. On the other hand, the private media experience stringent conditions that result to them failing to get the information that is even positive to government. Most governments that continue to control the press, approach to journalism as a tool of "propaganda" with the sole objective of fostering their objectives and suppressing dissent. Based on the known historic traditional roles and functions of the media and journalists, this article explores press freedom in Zimbabwe with great focus being made on the effects of

government entrenched policies on the media during COVID 19 lockdown. The study relies on interviews with journalists and is premised in a qualitative methodology in which the data collected from interviews based on a purposive non probability sampling is analysed through critical discourse analysis of their responses. Since the study deals with the experiences of journalists which is not quantifiable, qualitative methodology is the most appropriate. Findings based on the journalists interviewed show that majority of them, seven out of 12 were of the view that private media was totally under siege and their freedom to operate and move around was curtailed by the security agents, while access to information from the government sources on COVID 19 was a nightmare for them. It is also revealed that only the state media journalists were free to move around and access information easily from the government sources, while several private media journalists were either arrested, assaulted or harassed by the state security agents.

Key words: Press freedom, journalism, Zimbabwe, Coronavirus, government policies.

I. INTRODUCTION

The freedom of the media and journalists are seen and identified through the content they produce and the

manner they interface with sources that include government authorities, the private sector, and the general public. Thus, de Nelson (2007) argues that the right to freedom of information is generally accepted as necessary to participatory democracy around the world. de Nelson further posits that media theorists claim their rationale for this right based on the concept of open and transparent government whose values are applied in democratic political systems mainly in Western countries. "In countries such as the United States and Great Britain, the philosophy is that a well-informed citizen is able to make wiser decisions, therefore; a free press helps to construct a better society. Even though the media in democratic societies enjoy freedom, they are in fact in all countries subject to a number of laws and regulations. Most press laws tend to be restrictive rather than granting rights to journalists. Press freedom and Press regulation (nowadays media regulation) are two fundamental contradictory principles in modern democracies" (de Nelson 2007: 173). However, the outbreak of the world-wide Coronavirus pandemic resulted in many countries, Zimbabwe included, adopting new measures purportedly meant to contain the spread of the disease and at the same time violating people's freedoms to access information and curtailing the media and journalists' access to critical information about the pandemic. This paper attempts to explore the forces which can be viewed as subtle and detrimental to press freedom based on how the government of Zimbabwe enforced and applied the laws during COVID 19 lockdown.

In the first instance it is paramount to explore the legal instruments put in place in Zimbabwe during COVID 19 lockdown to assess if they have negative or positive implications to media and journalists' access to information and dissemination of news. Secondly, it is important that this article explores various concepts that entail the process of news production and framing. Thus, McQuill (1987: 109)'s view that the "normative theory based on the ideas of how media ought to or are expected to operate," is fundamental. As the freedom of both the media and journalists is the vital element of this article, the concepts of press freedom and freedom of expression are unpacked looking at the situation that prevailed in Zimbabwe during COVID 19 lockdown with the intention of engaging in a discussion on whether the media, journalists and their market who are their audiences were free to access information. It also seeks to unravel if the

information they were getting was reliable and relevant. An empirical study is carried out with data drawn from journalists from both the state and private media being presented and analyzed on their experiences, choice of news framing, agenda setting and freedom to access the information they needed for public interest. This study contributes to the world and wealth of knowledge about press freedom in case of certain world pandemics in which governments are seen adopting new policies and measures they purport to be useful to contain the diseases, at the same time seem to be violating press freedom and other basic human rights in the name of saving lives from the pandemics.

COVID 19 Containment legal instrument in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 17 March 2020 announced the start of the 21 days National COVID 19 lockdown with effect from March 30, which allowed only essential services sectors to remain operational while the rest of the commercial and social activities were banned. Following the proclamation of the lockdown, the Ministry of Health and Child Care introduced the Statutory Instrument 83 Chapter 15:17 (2020), pronouncing the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020.

The order specified the sectors which were allowed to remain operational during lockdown and these were categorized under “essential services.” These included (a) any hospital service; (b) any transport service referred to in sections 4(2) and 7(2), whether terrestrial, aerial or waterborne; (c) any service relating to the generation, supply or distribution of electricity; (d) any service relating to the supply and distribution of water; (e) any sewerage or sanitary service; (f) any service relating to the production, supply, delivery or distribution of food (in particular supermarkets and food retail stores), fuel or coal and security services that included police, soldiers, prisons and security guards. Out of the mentioned essential services, the media was excluded thereby ranking it as non-essential service despite the fact that information distribution is known to be key and more effective through the media. Government over looked the vital fact that the media and journalists are so essential for the information about COVID 19 preventative measures and government mechanisms to contain the pandemic to reach even the remote areas; all this meant to enable a successful fight against the disease,” (SI 83 of 2020).

The exclusion of the media in the essential services strand was contrary to the view of the *ZimRights* (2020: 2) who posits that “when confronted with an invisible enemy like the COVID 19 pandemic, a lot depends on how the information is managed. This helps society appreciate the magnitude of the problem, identify hotspots and inform communities on the approaches at both the nation and the communities. In countries like the United Kingdom, journalists are treated as those on ‘essential service’ to allow them to disseminate accurate information.” The human rights organisation states that the media in Zimbabwe has faced difficulties in reporting

on COVID 19. “The government in enforcing the lockdown has come down hard on journalists trying to cover the lockdown. The result of the government gagging other actors like the city councils, as well as a clampdown on journalists has resulted to information starvation. In this vacuum of information, fake news is thriving, creating a dangerous situation. *ZimRights* members had to depend on social media for updates on COVID 19 and the threat of fake news is caused by lack of information as people end up consuming whatever information they get” (*ZimRights* 2020:4 & 6).

Zimbabwe’s Statutory Instrument 83 Part IV (2020) make a clear curtailment and restriction to the media and journalists operating during the national lockdown, that false reporting was regarded as a criminal offence. Section 14 of the instrument on page 453 states that “for the avoidance of doubt any person who publishes or communicates false news about any public officer, official or enforcement officer involved with enforcing or implementing the national lockdown in his or her capacity as such, or about any private individual that has the effect of prejudicing the State’s enforcement of the national lockdown, shall be liable for prosecution under section 31 of the Criminal Law Code (“Publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the State”) and liable to the penalty there provided, that is to say a fine up to or exceeding level fourteen or imprisonment for a period not exceeding twenty years or both.”

The instruments clearly infringed on the media and journalists’ right to access information and disseminate it thereby curtailing press freedom. At the start of the lockdown most journalists from the private media faced difficulties in passing through security check points during their course of duty as the security details clearly spelt out that they only knew the State media. Only the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) was allowed to operate during lockdown. Journalists through their representative organisations such as the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), the Media Institute of Southern Africa- (MISA) Zimbabwe and individual journalists had to complain over their discrimination by the security sector to the Minister of Information Media and Broadcasting Services Monica Mutsvangwa. They raised the issues of harassment of private media reporters prompting the minister issue a directive allowing all journalists to be included as essential services.

News production, agenda setting and framing

The media are seen as biased or reproducing stereotypes, or being organised around formats that construct a particular view of the world. Their role is the ‘manufactured production of ideology’ (McRobbie, quoted in Watson, 1998: 132).

de Nelson (2007: 179) notes that” the agenda-setting, news framing, and formation of public opinion, objectivity and accountability are some of the embedded features in news production. These mechanisms do influence the content of the information, particularly when goals are to be reached such as to foster national unity, racial harmony, and business interests. The content is shaped to meet specific

goals, even though most journalists would argue that they do not select forms of narratives in news reporting.”

It is however important to establish how the media and journalists produced their stories, how they framed them and what agendas they were setting. Thus, McCombs (1992) claims that through agenda-setting, the media inform what to think about whereas through framing, the media tell how to think about it. de Nelson (2007: 181) is of the view that “frames are active, information-generating as well as steering devices. Therefore, since framing is founded on how information is processed and explained, how people talk about an issue, and how they form political evaluations, it can be argued that framing can be used to shape public opinion.” Thus, during COVID 19 lockdown in Zimbabwe media and journalists created certain news frames and set certain agendas which either aided the fight against the pandemic or weakened the processes.

Thus, Williams (2003:10) argues that most media theorists see the content of the media as not being neutral or natural but as manufactured or constructed – as opposed to practitioners who often argue that media content simply reflects what is happening in the world. His view is that there is, however, a debate among theorists about how the media reproduce ideology and in whose interest. He argues that for some, the media are the 'tools' of powerful interests simply reproducing the messages of their masters and maintaining an ideology that serves to protect their power, thereby entailing the news production as only based on the media and journalists' framing.

Studies show that the concept of frame approach was initially proposed by the sociologist Erving Goffman along with the anthropologist-psychologist Gregory Bateson, in 1974 and later Entman (1993) developed Goffman's idea to conceptualize framing. de Nelson (2007) says Entman's view is that framing involves “selection” and “salience” and the process is to deliberately select a piece of information to report and obviate others. Wolfsfeld (2001) is of the view that news media are agents for amplifying political waves in two ways: when a wave begins and sometimes when it ends. His argument is that the amplification usually comes with a considerable amount of space devoted but also with emotional tones. Thus, de Nelson (2007:180) asserts that the decision of editors that a story is either “hot” or “dead” has significant consequences for leaders, activists, and the public. As Wolfsfeld (2001) points out, news media also provide narrative structure to political waves by supplying citizens with a fairly common view of the major events, actors and topics. Thus, de Nelson argues that the adoption of a particular media frame influences the construction of news stories, and the news media construct stories that correspond with predictable public reactions to the event such as sorrow over the loss of human lives, and anger at any who can be held responsible.

It has been argued that “the consent of the population has to be won and the media play a role in ensuring this is so by

presenting the ideas and views of the powerful as natural and legitimate. Others argue the dominant values and beliefs represented in the media reflect the values and beliefs shared by most people in society. At the heart of the discussion of 'ideology' is a basic problem: the relationship between what is represented in the media and the reality of what is happening out there in the world” (Williams 2003:10). Schlesinger (1990) draws attention to the relationship between the media and their sources of information, arguing that sociology of journalism should be more sensitive to how this relationship can shape what is news. In the dance between sources and the media there is a debate about who exercises the power to define the nature of what is reported (Gans, 1979).

Press freedom and freedom of expression

Cole (2006:3) argues that “press freedom does not necessarily ensure improved reporting.” Rather than seeing the media as the mouthpiece for the ruling classes, free press theory highlights the independent role of the media in society. As a concept, 'freedom of the press' has had a long and distinguished history”, argues William (2003: 38). Arguments have been made by Keane (1991: 12) that “freedom of the press was necessary because 'the virtue of the individual must be developed and tested continually by engaging contrary opinions and experiences.” William (2003: 39) argues that “it is the natural right of the individual to publish freely his or her views in the face of the restrictions imposed by the state.” This is buttressed by Thompson (1995: 238) who says the “free expression of opinion through the organs of an independent press is seen as a principal means by which diversity of viewpoints could be expressed and an enlightened public opinion could be formed while the abuses of state power by corrupt tyrannical governments could be checked”. He argues that a “free and independent press would play the role of a critical watchdog, not only would it articulate a diversity of opinions and thereby enrich the sphere of knowledge and debate, but it would also expose and criticise the activities of those who rule and the principles on which their decisions are based.”

William (2003:39) states that press freedom - as with universal suffrage, secret ballots and regular elections - serves as one of the main mechanisms through which public opinion is expressed. He argues that for James Mill, people could not choose and criticise their governors without 'the most perfect knowledge relative to the characters of those who present themselves to their choice ...by information conveyed freely, and without reserve, from one to another' (quoted in Boyce, 1978: 22). Mill argues that liberty of the press ensured that the 'government is always fully apprised, which, by no other means it can ever be, of the sentiments of the people, and feels a decided interest in conforming to them' (quoted in Bromley and O'Malley, 1997: 20). Thus, Keane (1991) posits that a free press's defence rests on the view that the truth can be attained through unfettered public discussion amongst citizens.

On another note, de Nelson (2007: 175) explains that “freedom of expression, as it is known today, has its roots in

the period of Enlightenment through the ideas of philosophers and political thinkers that inspired the liberal revolutions of the 18th Century.” The argument is that the “basic concept of this liberal thought may be summarized in the premise that human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (de Nelson (2007: 175). As much as people are free to express themselves, the media and journalists are able to access the newsworthy information which they amplify to inform more of their publics and audiences, and this article seeks to find out whether press freedom and freedom of expression existed during COVID 19 lockdown.

Information restrictions and constraints

It is argued that commercial and political activities contribute to the limitation of a free press. The first constraint is the need to comply with market factors, so as to provide information in the form of entertainment that the audience wants. The second constraint is political. The media are usually attached to a line of political philosophy. In addition, the very first underlying cause is rooted in the process of news production in which we find the concepts that determine beforehand how the news is “manufactured” (de Nelson 2007:178). All this points to the concepts discussed earlier which are agenda-setting, news framing, news production and construction of public opinion. Based on these arguments, it is not possible to ignore that fact that the impact of the health, socio-economic, and political environments in which the media operate influence the manner in which the content is produced and published, thereby constraining and limiting a lot of information from being included as part of the news published. Thus, this confirms the fact that the media are aided by news selection processes that are not and cannot be objective. This article explores the constraints associated with media and journalists’ operations during the COVID 19 lockdown, with great reference being made to the Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, pronouncing the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020, to expose press freedom or lack of it.

Empirical study: Media and journalists’ freedom during COVID 19 lockdown (interviews)

This article bases its findings on the responses given by journalists to questions posed to them to establish their level of freedom in conducting their work during the COVID 19 lockdown. The targeted journalists were drawn from the state media, private media and freelancers. From the sections of the media sector mentioned above, a total of 12 journalists were targeted with four drawn from the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group which is the only state owned print media house with titles such as the Chronicle and Sunday News based in Bulawayo where the study was conducted. Zimpapers also has other titles such as the Herald, Sunday Mail based in Harare and the Manica Post in Manicaland. Four others were targeted from the Alpha Media Holdings that has titles such as the *NewsDay*, the *Standard* whose journalists were targeted. The company also has other titles such as the Zimbabwe Independent and Southern Eye. The last four journalists

targeted were freelancers who contribute to both the state and private media houses. All the journalists interviewed were initially booked and agreed to be interviewed. The selection of the journalists was informed by the view that they both private and state employed journalists represented the two categories of the media without having to interview all the journalists from the private sector and state sector. Their views were considered to be representation of the experiences, feelings and observations of what prevailed during the lockdown. The interviews were meant to have an understanding of how the journalists operated and what were their experiences in terms of their freedom to access information and disseminate it. The interest of the study was not to quantify the reactions but to qualitatively drawn representative meanings and feelings that of journalists in terms of their freedoms during lockdown. The aim was that while it was reported that only the state media journalists were free to operate, what could be the experiences and feelings of journalists from both the state and private media. Journalists had mixed views on the aspect of press freedom during the COVID 19 lockdown. Their dominating view was that at the start of the lockdown, freedom of the media and journalists was curtailed, mostly for those working for private media and freelance journalists who had movement restrictions in addition to having difficulties in accessing information mostly from government sources.

A privately owned *NewsDay* (daily newspaper) reporter said there was massive crackdown on journalists mostly from the private media at the start of the lockdown. This however affected the primary stage of the news production in which a journalist has to move around and access information before writing a comprehensive story. This is a clear indication that press freedom was under siege at the time.

“At the start of the lockdown, there was a massive crackdown on journalists from the private media as they were labeled as opposition. There was however no press freedom during the lockdown. We have the pending Hopewell Chin’ono (Freelance journalist) case, we have the Mduduzi Mathuthu (ZimLive Editor) case. In April there were five journalists who were arrested for covering the lockdown, namely Beatific Ngumbwanda, a reporter for the weekly TellZim, Freelancer Panashe Makufa, *NewsDay* and Voice of America reporter, Nunurai Jena, Tatenda Julius and freelancer Kudzanai Musengi,” the *NewsDay* reporter said.

To further expose lack of press freedom during lockdown, the journalist said getting information from the government was very difficult.

“For example, President Emmerson Mnangagwa came to Bulawayo State House and no private media or freelance journalist was allowed to cover him. We had the recent National University of Science and Technology (NUST) graduation where the private media again were denied entry. However, getting information from general public sources is not that difficult except that some fear to be victimised hence resorting to anonymity,” he said.

The journalist further argues that there is always a tense relationship between private media reporters and the government as journalists from the private media are labeled as opposition, adding that this resulted to them relying on public sources more than the government. Some of the stories that this reporter wrote during the lockdown are: <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2020/05/lockdown-assistance-pwds-sold-dummy/> and <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2020/05/informal-traders-lobby-for-roller-meal-monitoring/>. In his view, the reporter for some reasons he thinks that the media restriction, to some extent, was necessary because some online were causing panic to citizens with misleading information and unresearched stories. He, however, said that government later relaxed the restriction on journalists particularly from around August –September such that the reporters had free movement to conduct their journalism duties.

“Later, there was freedom of movement and people well educated about the virus and measures are always put in place to fight COVID 19. For example, every function people attended, there were sanitizers, temperature testing and social distancing of one metre apart. The government should just give the media- be it private or public-equal opportunities to access information,” the *NewsDay* reporter said.

The reporter from the *Standard* (private weekly newspaper) said journalists faced difficulties in operating during the lockdown considering the fact that some colleagues were beaten during the course of their duties shows that there was no press freedom.

“It has been difficult to work during lockdown because most journalists were beaten, some arrested during this period. Especially, journalists from the private media- you fail to get news as you are regarded as not a journalist or it’s said your media house is not recognised. It has been difficult for some of us who were working from home. We did not get firsthand information, we would see things on social media and then call to confirm,” she said.

The journalists further said she worked from home and it was difficult to get comments and at times public sources would need something (money) to help motivate them or give out information. This means that the framing of the stories was influenced by the sources who first put condition to reporters before they could give them information they want. She also said police at some point said they did not know her media house and only recognised the *Chronicle* and the ZBC (State media) and she had to bribe her way out. She said despite the relaxation of restrictions for journalists, she still felt she was unsafe health-wise because there was no adequate protective clothing and she felt she could not risk dying for a story and the health bill becomes hers and her family when she falls sick. The journalist also urged the government to stop being bias in favour of the State media and stop controlling how the media should conduct its work.

A freelance journalist said the level of press freedom during lockdown was bad.

“The level of press freedom during the lockdown was heavily affected and reduced in the sense that most journalists were forced to work from home in order to curb the spread of the pandemic and sources of information were no longer operating from the offices. The conditions of accessing information from both government and general public sources changed and social media became the source. We had to call the government officials to confirm whether the information was true or false. The general public sources also played the role of citizen journalists to notify people about what was happening in their surroundings,” he said.

The freelancer said his relation or interface with government officials was very limited and next to none and only general public sources and private sector sources became easy to access for him as he always got tips from them. He however said he personally did not encounter any harassment, intimidation or assault by government officials or security forces. The freelancer said the SI 83 2020 restricted the journalists and the media as the government deployed state law enforcement agents who only preferred working with the state media.

The restriction of the media did not help matters in containing the spread of COVID-19 because the pandemic continued to spread around the country with or without the media. The media was supposed to be allowed to act as watchdogs to the citizens, to inform and educate the people about the dangers of COVID-19 and also provide correct statistics of the infected people, he said.

He felt that in terms of covering COVID-19 issues the media was not free and government did not want the correct information to flow to the public. This shows that the government was influencing agenda setting in the media by only expecting the media to publish what it wanted published. For that matter the state media was forced to follow suit. The reporter urged that the government should allow the media to operate freely without being suppressed by its laws and regulations.

A *Chronicle* (daily state newspaper) journalist though admitting that their operation was not that much affected in terms of freedom of movement and interaction with government sources said the environment in general was toxic mostly for freelance and private media journalists during the COVID 19 lockdown. This exposes that the government was only favouring the state media and therefore this favouritism cannot be rated as press freedom.

In terms of press freedom, journalists still work in an environment where there are very stringent laws that restrict them from reporting on anything freely. Government officials always withheld information to

protect themselves hence access to it was and is very tricky,” she said.

She said the media restriction by authorities did not help matters as that did not stop the spread of the virus especially in cities. She challenged the government to give journalists the freedom to express themselves in whichever way they want just like it is stated in the constitution.

Information on Covid-19 can freely flow from both sides if only theoretically based laws in the constitution are put into action and if only journalists report on firsthand information,” she said.

A *Sunday News* (state owned weekly newspaper) journalist said the COVID 19 lockdown period was a difficult moment for the journalists mostly those employed by the private media.

The period was the most difficult times for the media and journalists. We saw some journalists being arrested at roadblocks for operating during the lockdown. Journalists from the private sector were the most affected. Only the state media was allowed to operate without any hindrance. One journalist was detained in prison for almost three months during this period. Reports say some were even beaten by security forces, so press freedom was suppressed,” the journalist said.

The journalist further indicated that access to information was difficult for journalists as most sources were confined in their homes. He said journalist relied on the use of text messages, Whatsapp and phone calls to communicate with sources with no means of face-to-face contact with sources. He further noted that the relationship between journalists and government officials was average as most of the sources delayed responding to inquiries from journalists and at times never responded. The journalist also said there has been an improvement in press freedom of late after repeated calls for the government to be inclusive in its dealing with the media in general and this resulted to the private media being allowed to operate without much obstacles. He further appealed to government to allow the media to operate freely in as far as dissemination of information is concerned and to also allow free movement of journalists to gather as much information as they could so as to properly inform the public about the coronavirus.

Interviews findings and analysis

Out of the 12 journalists targeted to find out the state of media and freedom of the journalists during the COVID 19 lockdown, majority of them, including some from the state media, were of the view that media and journalists were not absolutely free to interact and access information at the time. They however revealed that those working for the state media were better placed and at advantage, especially in getting information from government sources and interacting with the security personnel. In order to get a balanced version of the experiences of journalists during lockdown, it was imperative to target equal numbers of journalists from each section of the

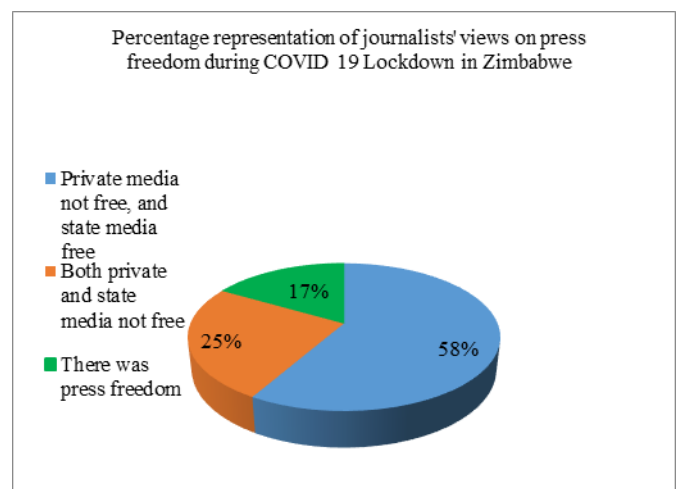
sector, namely State, private and freelancers to ensure a balance of probability in their sector representative views and experiences.

Findings based on the journalists show that majority of them which are seven out of 12 were of the view that private media was totally under siege and their freedom to operate and move around was curtailed by the security agents, while access to information from the government sources on COVID 19 was a nightmare for them. They also added that only the state media journalists were free to move around and access information easily from the government sources.

The second category of three (3) journalists was of those who said media as a whole and all the journalists were totally not free to operate as they had to navigate their ways to evade police and soldiers’ arrest during their course of duty at the same time they struggled to get information from government sources.

The last category was of two (2) journalists those who said there was some freedom of the media and journalists and never wanted to blame government for curtailing any freedoms, instead accusing some of the journalists for irresponsible reporting which they said raised alarm and despondence leading the government to apply some measures to contain the misdeeds. They were of the view that the government was right to gag the media so that the public do not get misinformed about the deadly pandemic and end up taking wrong actions. In all the responses from the journalists this study found out that the general view and feeling from both the state and private media was that journalists and the media were not free hence press freedom was under siege during the COVID 19 lock down especially at the start of it.

Fig:1 shows the percentage representation of journalists’ views on press freedom during COVID 19 Lockdown in Zimbabwe.



II. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that parliamentarians should move a motion and debate on a policy formulation that will enable the promulgation of laws, to ensure the full time inclusion of journalists and the media as some of the essential services

which should be allowed to operate even at the times of state of emergency and proclamation of emergent lockdown measures. This is because in all the aspects of government and people's livelihood as it was during the COVID 19 lockdown, information dissemination is vital and the media and the journalists are the major platforms and personnel to disseminate the information about such important issues. It is recommended that the importance attached to the health workers, security sector, food supplies entities among others even in times of lockdown and state of emergencies must also apply to the media and journalists. Government must be guided by the laws to ensure the safety of journalists at all times and the polarized media environment must be quashed through the enactment of the new laws that synchronizes the state and private media operational and ethical principles with the government not expected to capture and control the state media as has been the case in the findings of the study.

III. CONCLUSION

The general view of this study based on the journalists' remarks is that media and journalists were under siege during COVID 19 lockdown. Findings show that government officials and state security agents were responsible for the suppression of press freedom during the period as they sought to enforce lockdown measures based after the promulgation of the Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, (Chapter 15:17) pronouncing the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020. This article reveals that the state and government suppressed the media in three ways. The first one is the intimidation, harassment, assault and arrest of private media journalists, second is the withholding of information from journalists and the third is the blocking of private media journalists from free movement.

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