

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Cambodian Journalists



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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Methodology	6
1. Method, Data Collection, and Analysis	6
2. Scope and Limitations of this Research	6
Key Findings	7
1. Demographic Background of the Surveyed Journalists	7
2. The Challenges in Reporting	9
3. The impact of COVID-19 on Journalists' Livelihood	18
Conclusions and Recommendations	23
Annex	25

Executive Summary

Since 2017, the Cambodian government has severely cracked down on media freedom. The authorities shuttered a major independent newspaper, forced the sale of another independent newspaper to businessmen with ties to the government, and silenced 32 radio FM frequencies that broadcasted independent news programs. The government harasses independent journalists and has significantly restricted online expression.¹ Journalists face major challenges, including discrimination, intimidation, harassment, imprisonment and physical attacks. And their ability to effectively report news and serve the public interest has been compounded by the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study examines the impact of COVID-19 on journalist's professional practice and to what extent the pandemic COVID has influenced their livelihood. The study employs quantitative research. The study covers 28 media outlets in Phnom Penh with an online survey of 63 journalists (49 men) in August 2020.

The survey shows that around 50 percent of surveyed journalists earn from \$300–\$600 per month; 27 percent of them \$700–\$1,000 per month; and 14 percent more than \$1,000 per month.

According to the survey, 58 percent of surveyed journalists say they are very concerned about their security and safety while reporting on COVID-19. Some of them also fear the authority's legal crackdown and legal action from other parties in response to their reporting, while nearly half (41.27 percent) of journalists reported that they do not fear legal repercussions for reporting on COVID-19. They are also concerned about the case of the TV Facebook (TV FB) boss arrested when quoting a speech of Prime Minister Hun Sen during the spread of COVID-19.

The findings also suggest that some journalists always censor when they report the information related to COVID-19 (42 percent), and others said they frequently self-censored (26.9 percent).

Concern among journalists about contracting COVID-19 are relatively high, at 41.5 percent. Despite that, 80.95 percent of surveyed journalists did not want to postpone their work during the pandemic. If they did take a break from work, they cited fear of contracting the virus (77.8 percent)

¹ HRW. (April, 2020). Cambodia: Reporter Jailed for Quoting Hun Sen on COVID-19. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/10/cambodia-reporter-jailed-quoting-hun-sen-COVID-19>

or family requests to temporarily suspend the work due to the fears of accusation of COVID-19 reporting. About three-quarters (74.6 percent) of surveyed journalists have decreased in-person contacts during information gathering during the pandemic.

The study also illustrates alternative approaches that journalists adopt when they conduct reporting. Another challenge is the difficulty in getting information related to COVID-19 from the Ministry of Health (say 60.32 percent). Lastly, more than 50 percent of surveyed journalists reported their salary can support their family, while nearly half (47.6 percent) said their salary was insufficient to cover the family's expenses.

Methodology

1. Method, Data Collection, and Analysis

The study employed the quantitative research method with a sample of 63 journalists in Phnom Penh from various news media organizations. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, data collection was conducted online through Google Forms, with a questionnaire² sent to journalists so as to comply with the Ministry of Health's safety guidelines. All respondents explained the purpose and methodology of the research and consented to having their answers used by the study. The journalists individually provided demographic information and responded to questions regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on them, their profession and livelihood. All data was put into SPSS and Excel for analysis.

2. Scope and Limitations of this Research

The study had some limitations. First, access to participants was limited as researchers could not meet them in person. Even though the study covers various media outlets, only 63 responded, and the online response rate was very low. The study was constrained by time, research design (mixed method) and the extent of the topic. The current study is cross-sectional; longitudinal study is highly recommended for future projects.

² The questionnaire can be found in the Annex section.

Key Findings

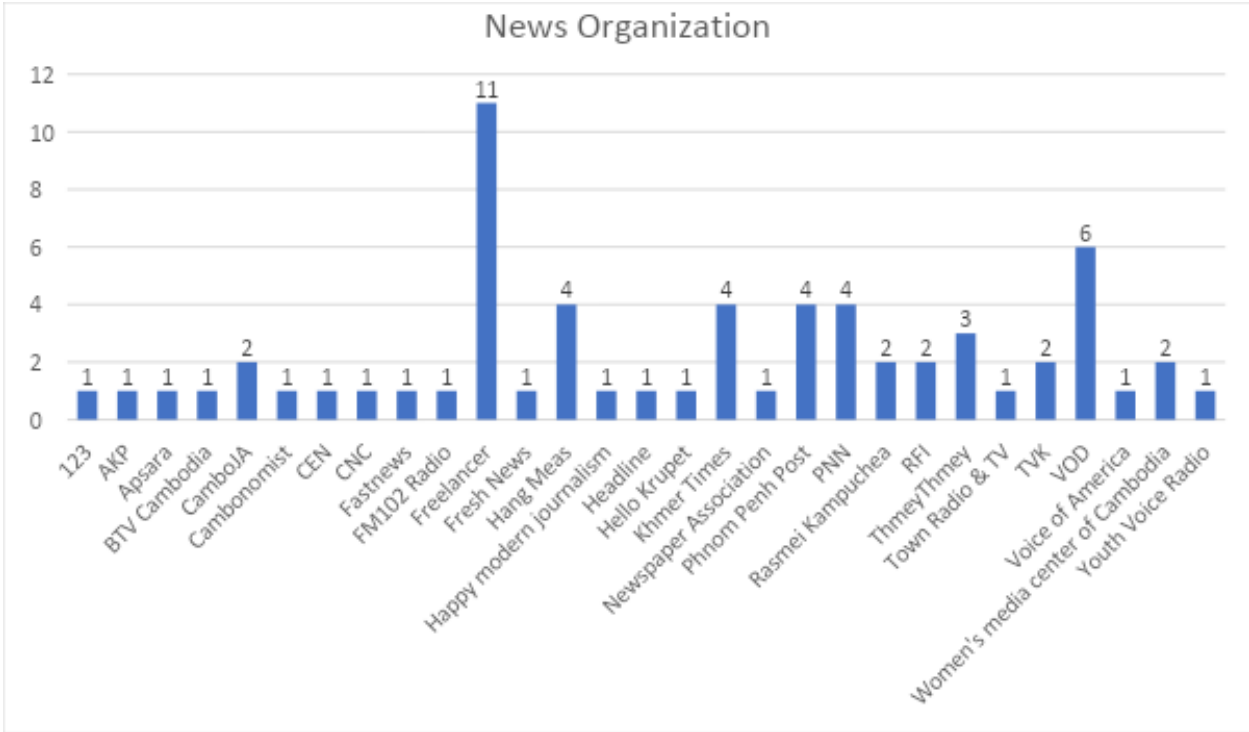
1. Demographic Background of the Surveyed Journalists

Of 64 surveyed journalists, 79.03 percent were male and 20.93 percent were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 60 years old. The majority of them were in their 20s and 30s.

Figure 1: Age of the participants

Age	Frequency	Percent
22	2	3.2
24	1	1.6
26	1	1.6
27	4	6.3
28	10	15.9
29	3	4.8
30	3	4.8
32	7	11.1
33	5	7.9
34	4	6.3
35	7	11.1
36	2	3.2
37	1	1.6
38	5	7.9
40	3	4.8
42	2	3.2
43	1	1.6
46	1	1.6
60	1	1.6
Total	63	100.0

Figure 2: Representation from News Organizations Studied (# of respondents)



As shown in Figure 3, the majority (46 percent) of journalists surveyed earned around \$300–\$600 per month. Nearly a third, 27 percent, received a monthly salary of \$700–\$1,000 a month. Only 14 percent of respondents earned more than \$1,000.

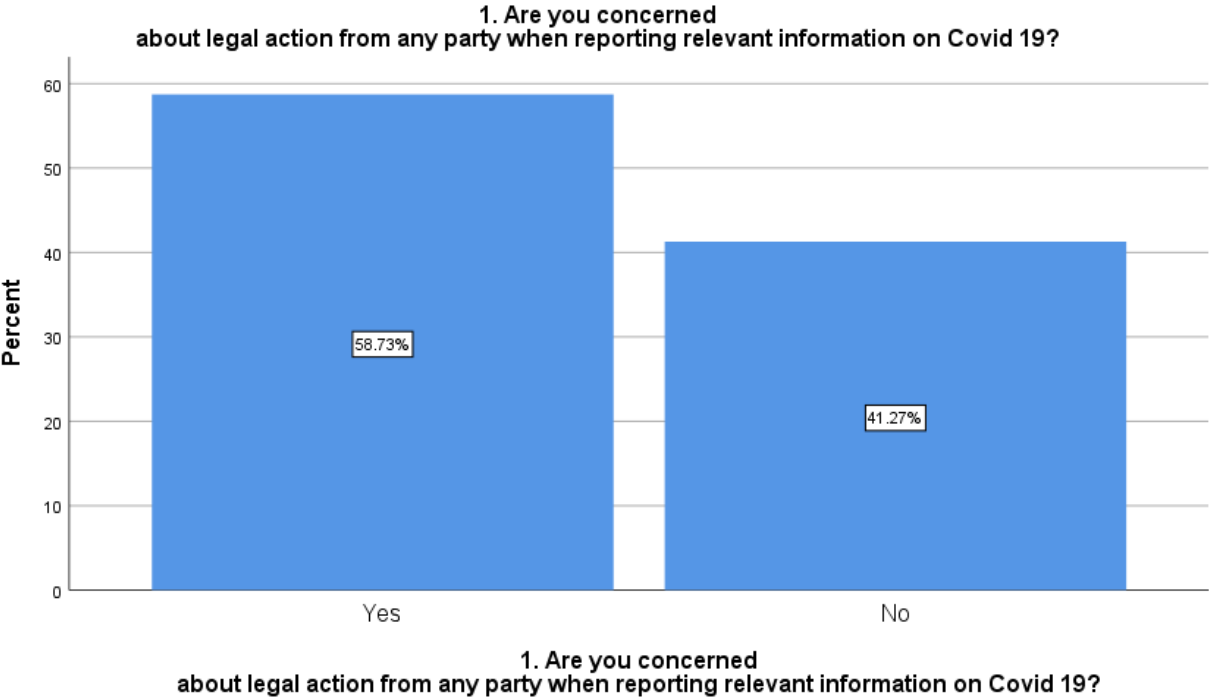
Figure 3: Journalist Salary Ranges

Salary Range	Number	Percent
Less than \$300	8	12.7
\$300–\$600	29	46.0
\$700–1,000	17	27.0
More than \$1,000	9	14.3
Total	63	100.0

2. The Challenges in Reporting

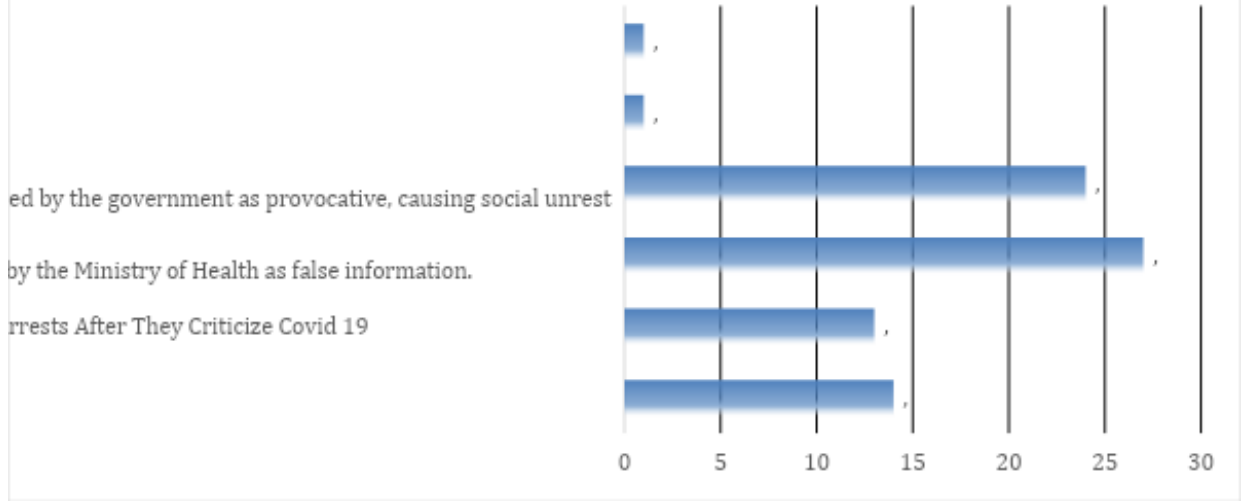
More than 58 percent of the surveyed journalists say they are very concerned about the potential for parties to file legal cases against them for reporting information on COVID-19.

Figure 5: The concern of the journalists when they report the relevant information on COVID-19?



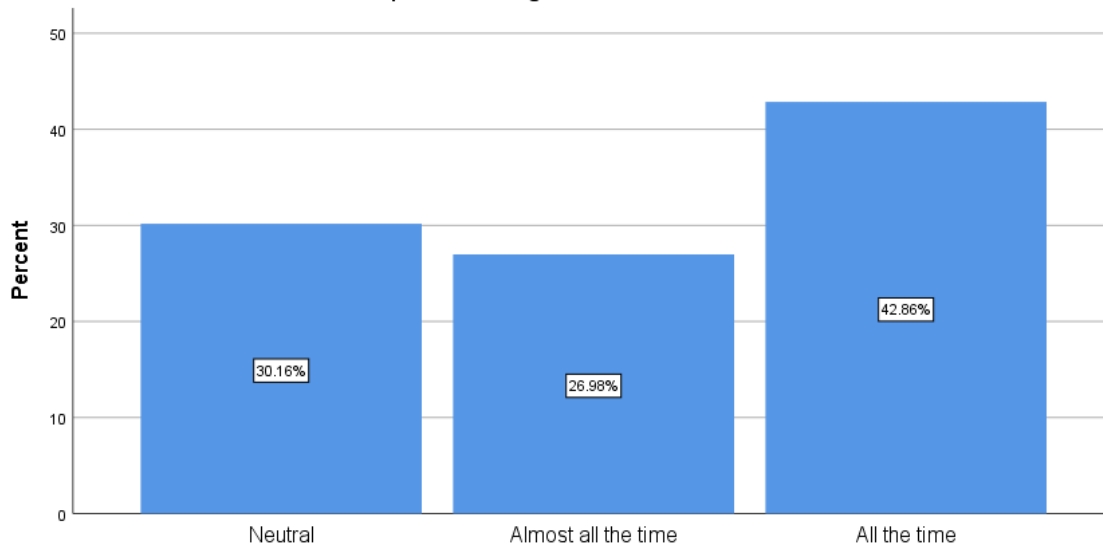
As presented in Figure 6, most (63.2 percent) of the surveyed journalists fear that their reporting could be considered by the government as provocative and causing social unrest. It is also reported that some publications in the past have been rejected by the Ministry of Health accounted for 71.1 percent. Their concerns are also linked to the case of a TVFB publisher who was arrested and charged with incitement a few months prior to the survey. Moreover, their fears are due to the fact that some citizens were called in for questioning or arrested after they criticized the COVID-19 response.

Figure 6: Journalist's Concerns about legal case from any party when reporting relevant information on Covid 19

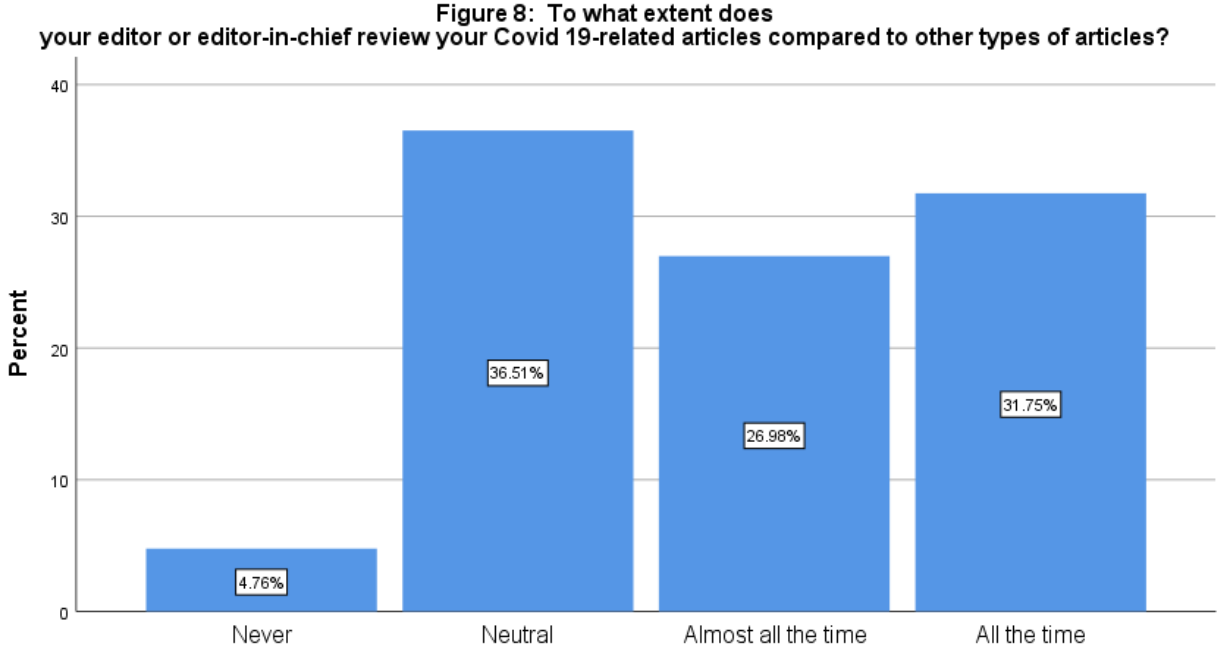


Another challenge faced by the surveyed journalists is self-censorship. Respondents (42 percent) claimed that they always censor themselves when they write about COVID-19. And 26.9 percent of the journalists said they practice self-censorship almost all the time when writing about the pandemic while another 30 percent of respondents said their level of censorship is average (neutral).

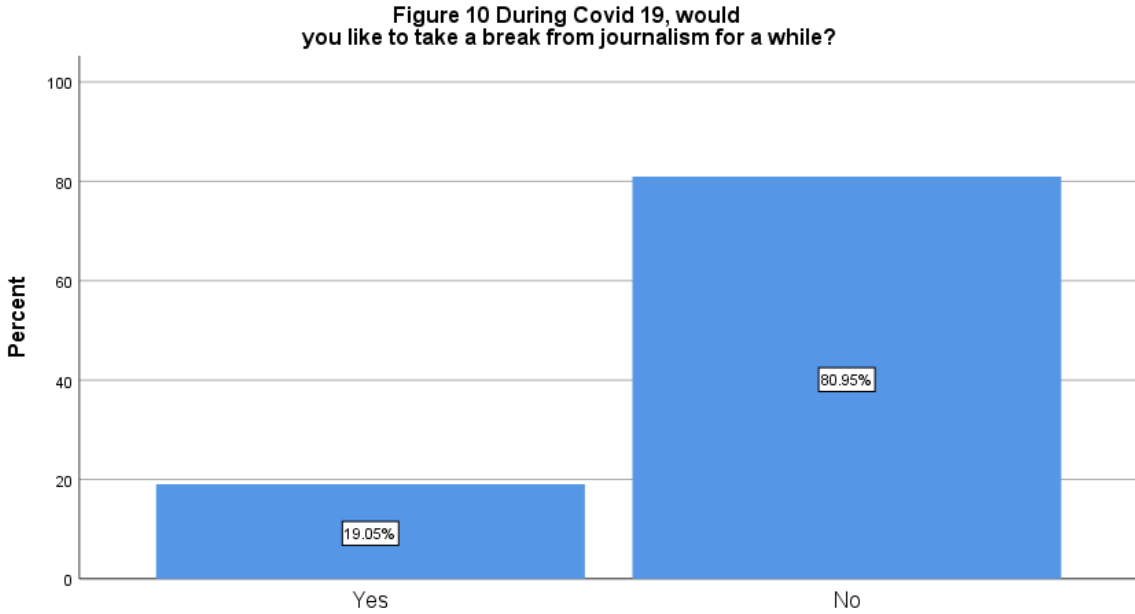
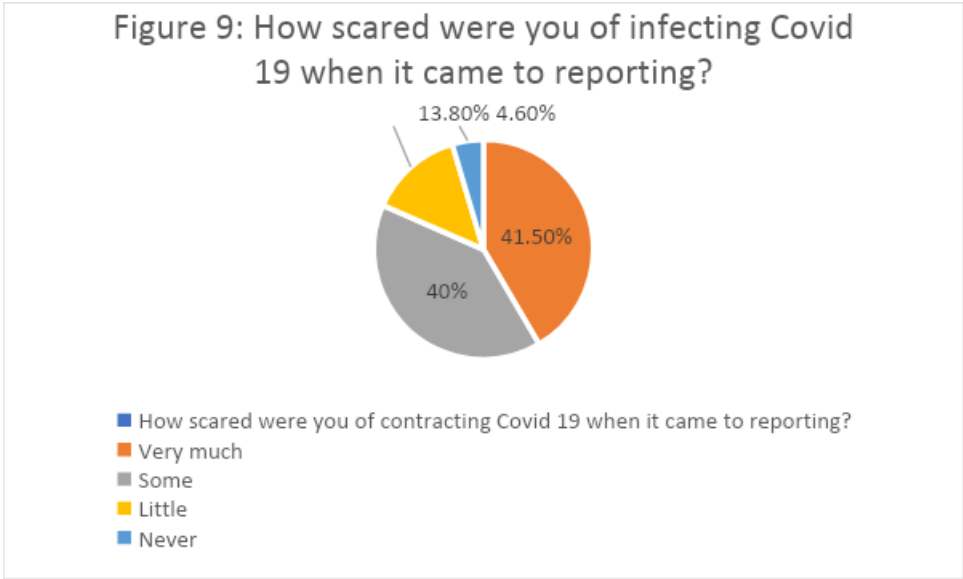
Figure 7: What is the level of self-censorship when writing information related to Covid 19?



In regard to the working environment, 36.51 percent of respondents reported that their editors or editor-in-chief normally scrutinize their COVID-19 articles more than other types of articles. About 31 percent of them reported that the editors check and review their COVID-19 articles all the time. Yet, around 4.76 percent claimed that their editors/editor-in-chief never review their articles about COVID-19, only going through the normal review process.

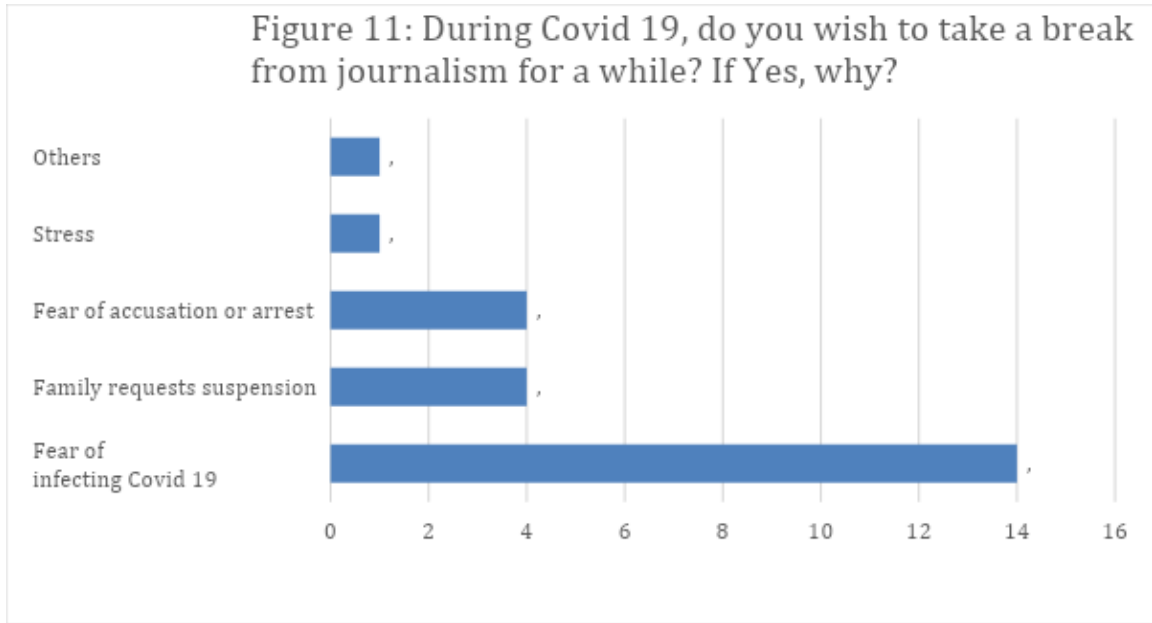


The survey also showed that 41.5 percent and 40 percent of respondents, respectively, reported “very much” and “some” fear of contracting COVID-19 when they are working. And 13.8 percent and 4.6 percent of the journalists responded “little” and “never,” respectively.

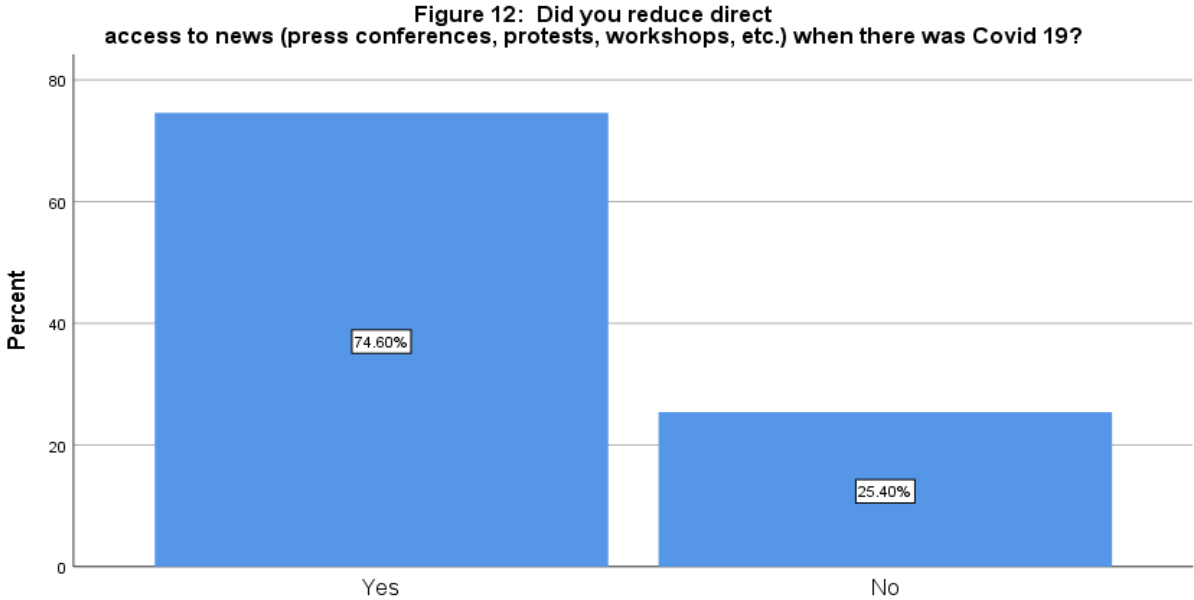


The majority (80.95 percent) of journalists said they do not temporarily want to take a break from journalism during the pandemic. Only 19.5 percent of them said they would like to take a break from work.

Figure 11 shows the reasons why the journalists would like to postpone their daily work. The fear of contracting COVID-19 is the major reason, which accounted for 77.8 percent. Other factors such as family requests and the fear of accusation or arrest potentially affecting their profession and livelihood.

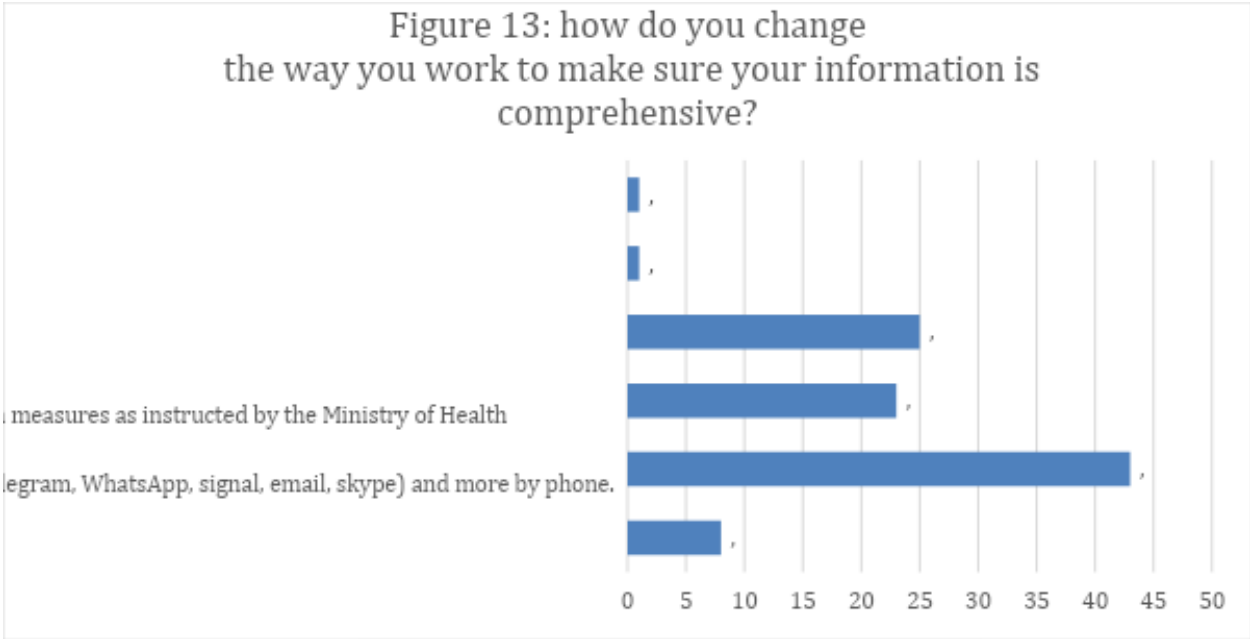


The survey revealed that three-fourths of respondents (74.6 percent) have reduced in-person reporting, that is, gathering news at press conferences, protests, strikes, workshops, etc.) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A quarter of them (25.4 percent) still directly access those sources.



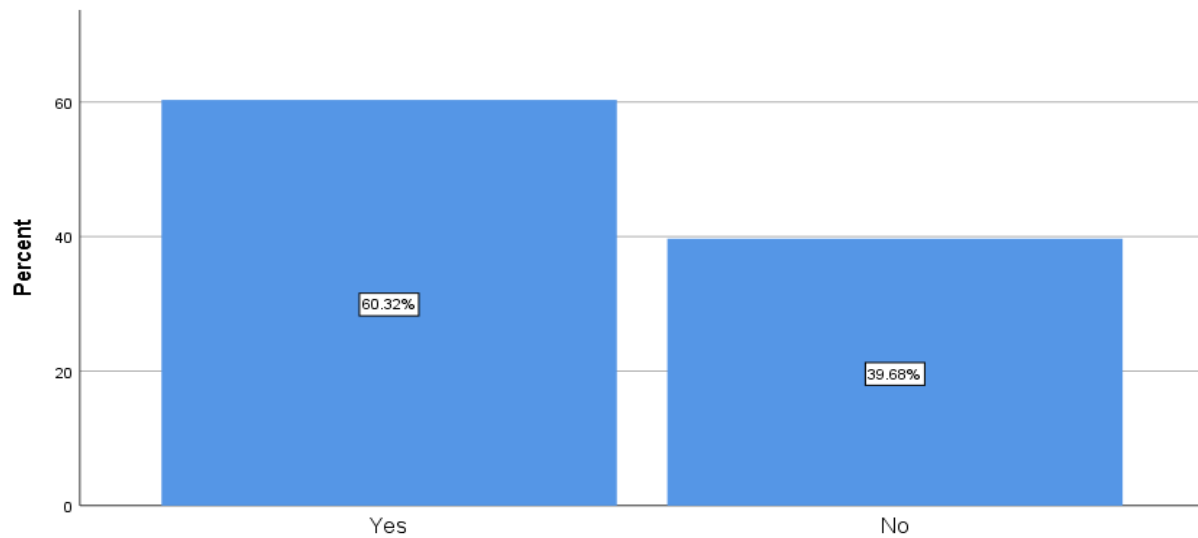
In addition, the study shows that most journalists (89.6 percent) have changed the way they communicate with sources by using social media such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram, etc.

Approximately half of respondents (52.1 percent) have requested to join a Telegram group or other relevant social network, while 47.9 percent of them have directly visited a source, if necessary, by keeping social distance and applying protection hygiene.

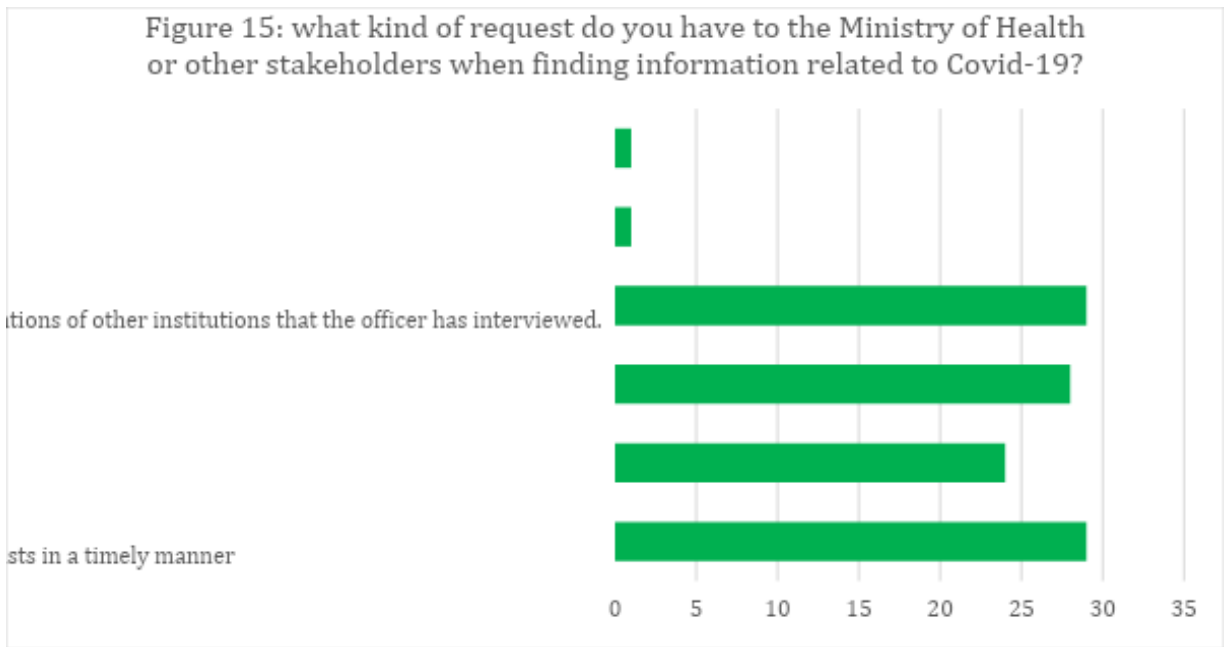


According to Figure 14, the survey shows that the majority of respondents (60.32 percent) face difficulty in getting information related to COVID-19 from the Ministry of Health, while 39.68 percent of them said they did not find it difficult to get information from the Ministry of Health.

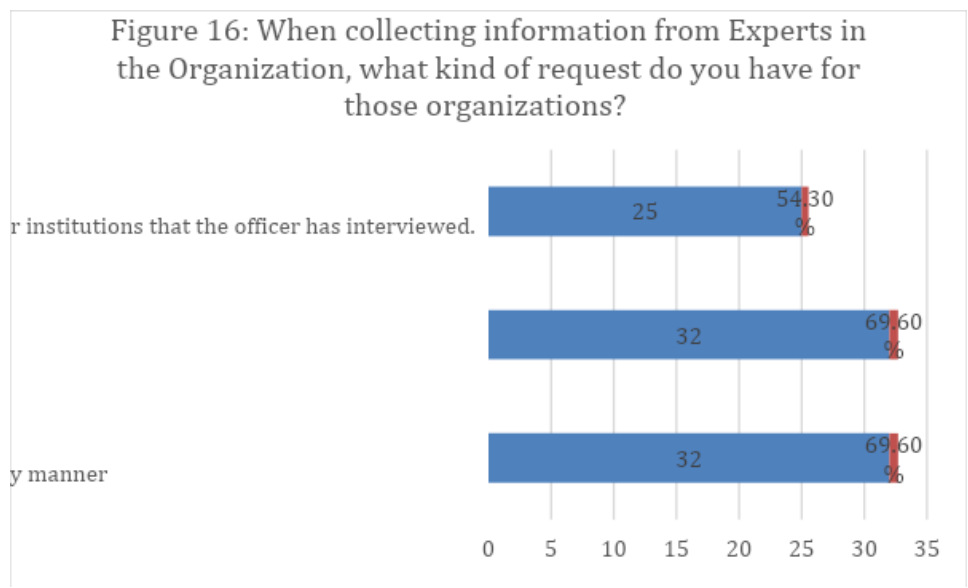
Figure 14: Do you find it difficult to get information related to COVID-19 from the Ministry of Health?



Most of the surveyed journalists (64.4 percent) have requested that the Ministry of Health respond directly to journalist questions and to increase the number of officials or spokespeople who can respond to journalists in a timely manner. The journalist also asked the government to accelerate its responses to journalists (62.2 percent) and give daily or weekly press conferences (53.3 percent).

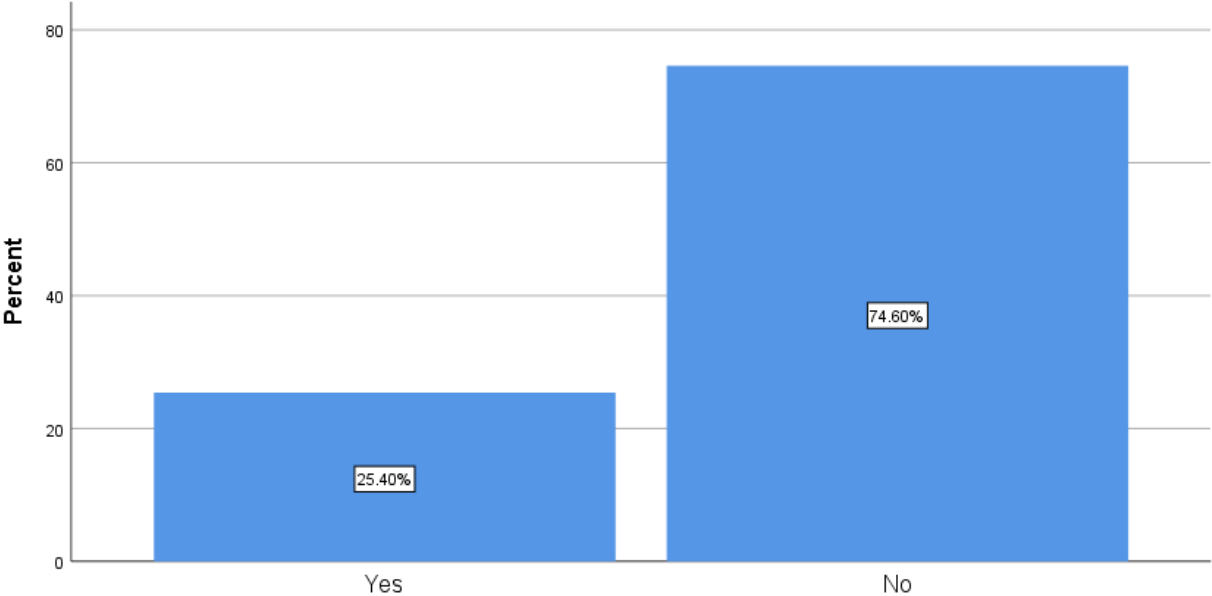


Similarly, most surveyed journalists (69.6 percent) had requested that other professional/government institutions increase the number of officials or experts who can respond to journalists in a timely manner. A little more than half (54.3 percent) of surveyed journalists also requested that organization experts respond to journalists' questions rather than telling them to listen or to read other news outlets.



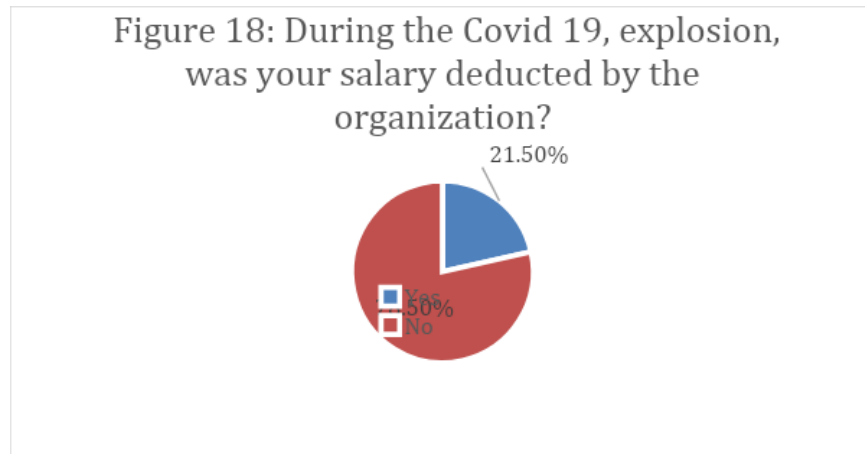
About three-fourths of surveyed journalists (74 percent) claimed they were never rejected by the sources during the pandemic. A quarter of respondents (25.4 percent) said they were turned down by a source because that person was afraid of contracting COVID-19.

Figure 17: During the pandemic, were you rejected by the sources because the sources were afraid of infecting COVID-19?

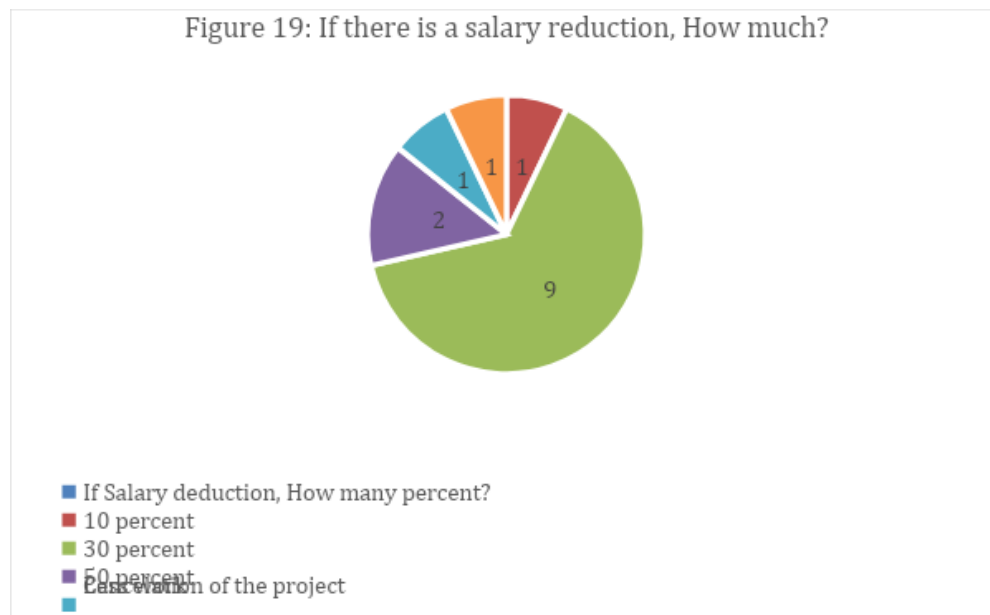


3. The impact of COVID-19 on Journalists' Livelihood

A fifth (21.5 percent) of surveyed journalists said that their salaries have been reduced, while the majority (78.5 percent) had seen no salary reduction.



Nine of the surveyed journalists said they took a 30-percent salary cut. Another two journalists said their salaries had been reduced by half. Some faced the cancellation of their project and less work during the pandemic.



Survey respondents also reported that 17.46 percent the news outlets represented had laid off staff. Two respondents said all staff at their organization had been laid off. Another two journalists reported that two or three staff in their section were forced to stop working. One journalist said five staff had been let go by their organization.

Figure 20, Did your organization lay off staff during the COVID-19 outbreak?

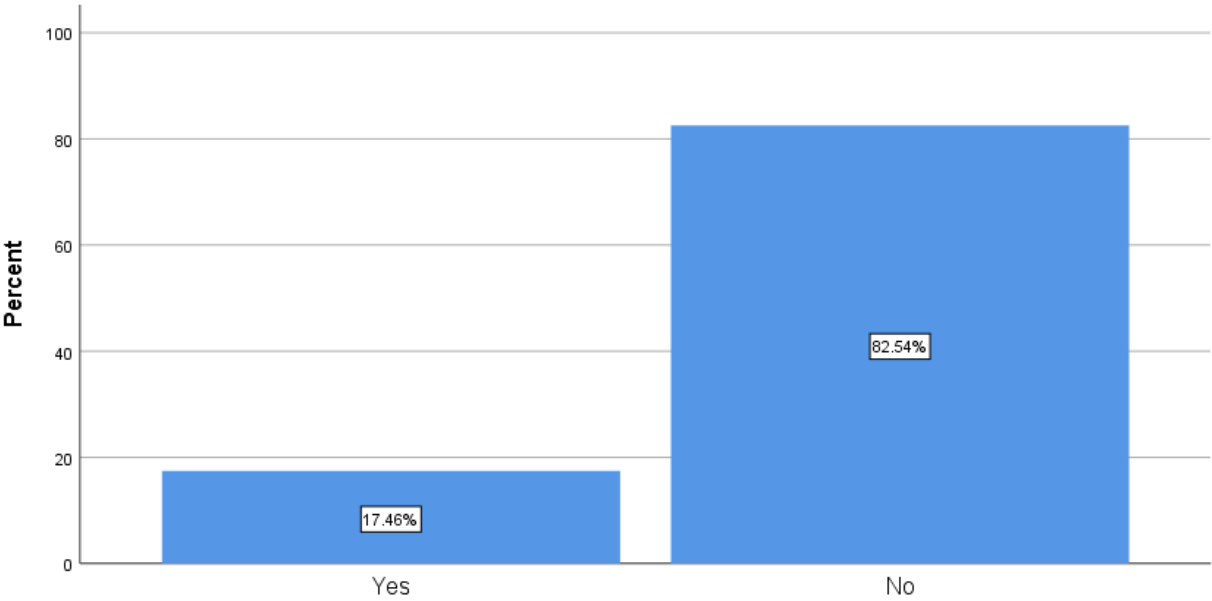
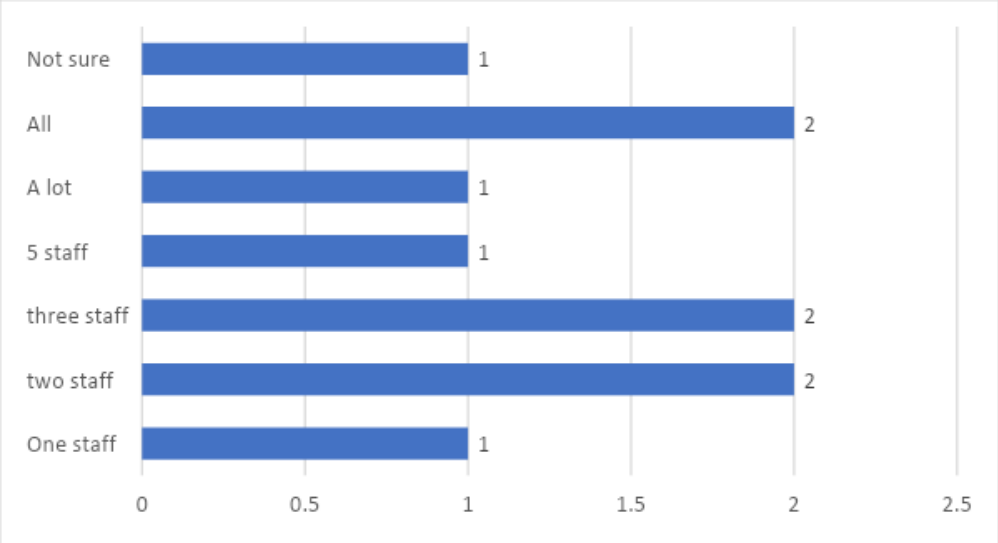
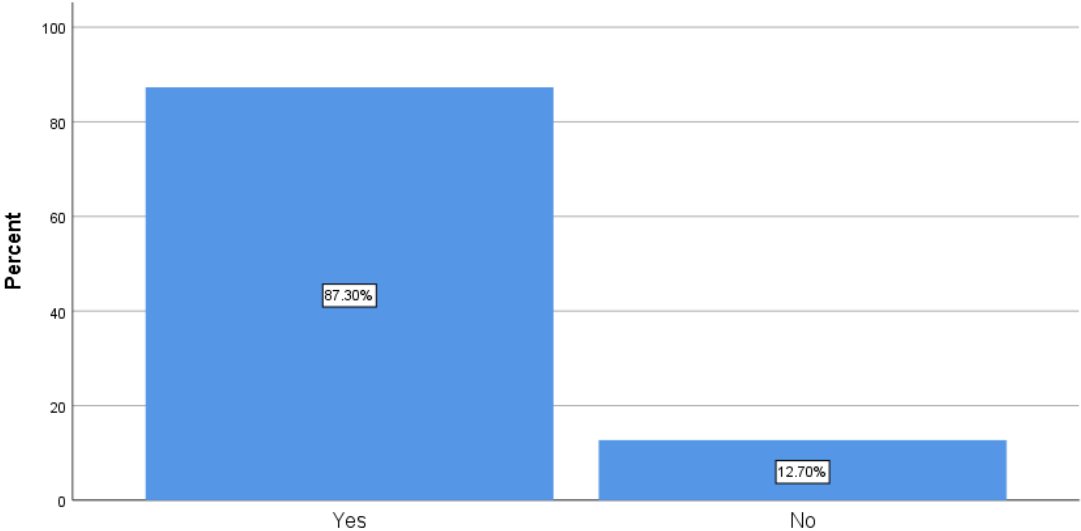


Figure 21: If they lay off the staff, how many people in your section?



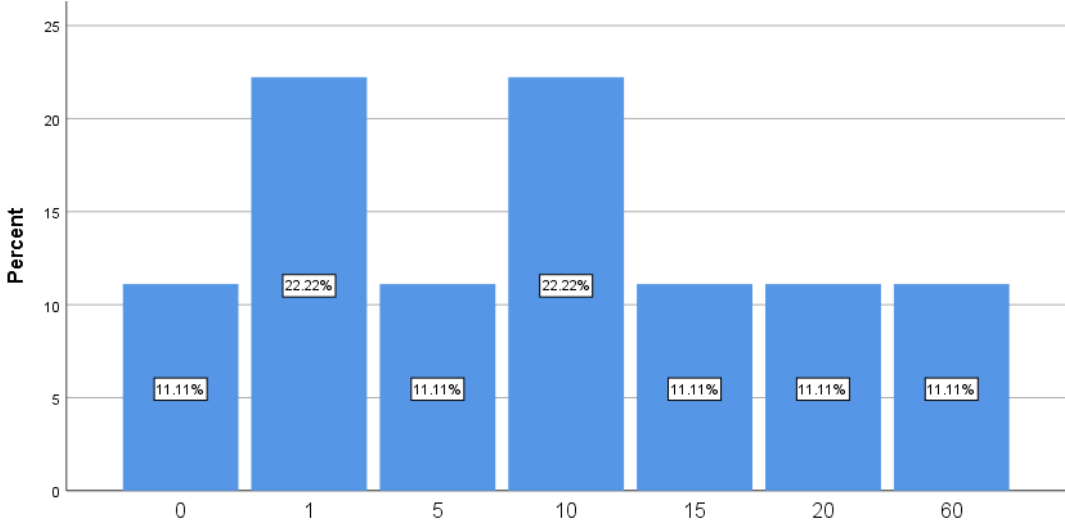
As for personal protective equipment (PPE), 87.3 percent of journalists said they had received disinfectant/alcohol, masks and hand gel for COVID-19 protection.

Figure 22: Does your organization provide alcohol, mask or hand gel to protect COVID-19?



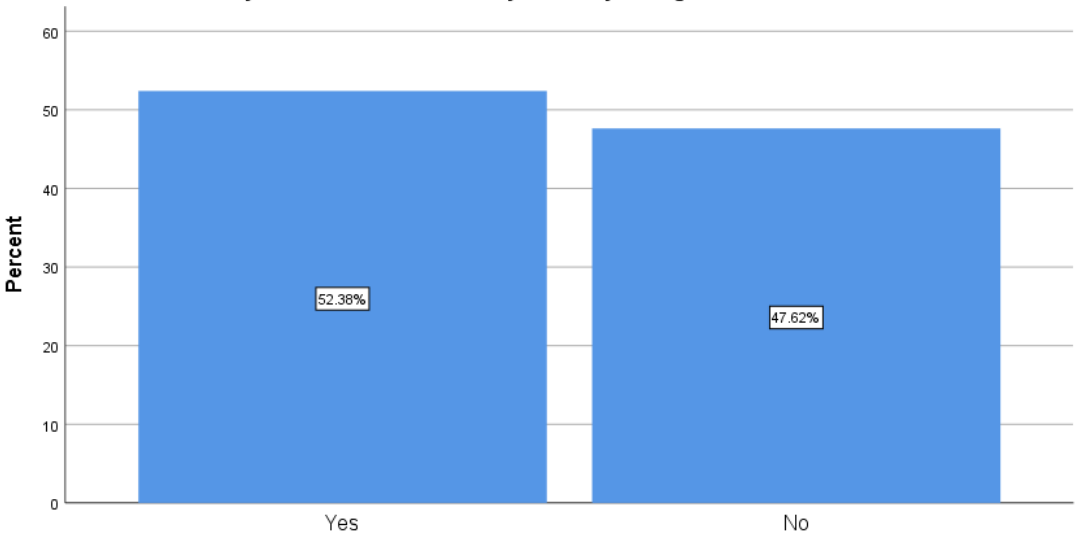
Meanwhile, 22.2 percent of journalists spend \$10 per month for masks, alcohol or hand gel. Another 22.2 percent of them spend \$1 per month. An equal percentage of respondents said they spend \$5, \$15, \$20 or \$60 per month.

Figure 23: If your organization does not provide, how much do you spend on alcohol, mask, or hand gel per month?



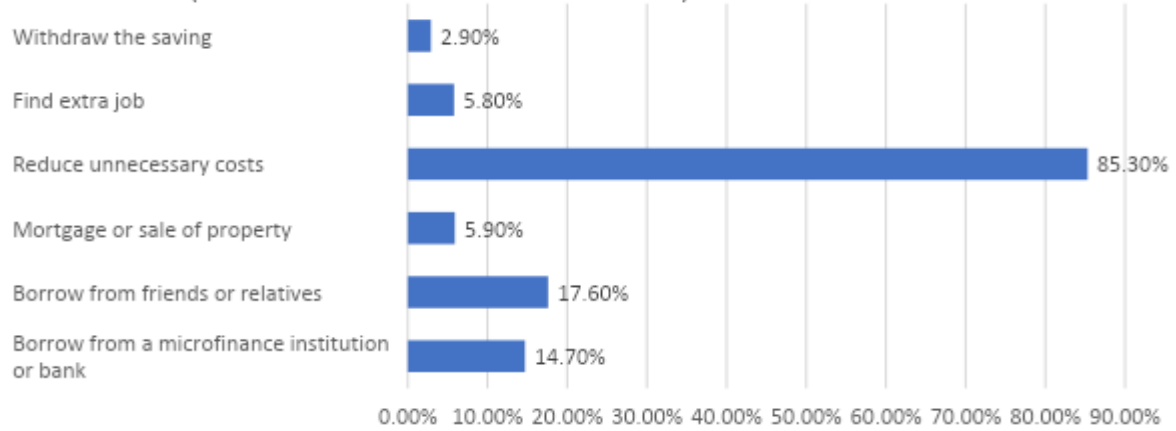
The survey also measured the extent to which the journalists' salary sustained their livelihood and provided enough support to the family during the pandemic. According to the data, over 50 percent of surveyed journalists agreed that their salaries could significantly support their family, while another 47.6 percent claimed that their wages were insufficient to meet the needs of the whole family during the pandemic.

Figure 24: Can your salary support your livelihood and that of your family during the COVID-19?



To cope up with financial difficulty during the pandemic, 85.3 percent of surveyed journalists had reduced unnecessary costs. Others (17.6 percent) borrowed money from friends or relatives, while about 14.7 percent of them had taken a microfinance or bank loan. A small number (5 percent) of respondents had mortgaged their properties to deal with the daily needs of the family. Another 5.8 percent had found jobs to support the family. Few withdrew savings for survival during the pandemic (2.9 percent).

Figure 25: If not, what is the action you can take to move you forward?
(You can select more than one answer)



Conclusions and Recommendations

The major purpose of this study was to gauge the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the journalism profession and journalists' livelihoods. With a focus on 28 local and international news outlets, and 63 respondents, the study details major challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of respondents were male (79.03 percent) and in their 20s and 30s. The survey delved into issues related to professional practices, security, legal threats and accusations and livelihoods.

Among concerns, more than half (58 percent) of journalists fear legal accusations or arrests related to reporting COVID-19 news. Most journalists (63.2 percent) were concerned about facing legal cases brought by the government on the grounds of incitement (63.2 percent), or their publications being rejected by the Ministry of Health (71.1 percent), and about the TVFB boss being arrested over incitement after quoting Prime Minister Hun Sen's speech (36.8 percent). This resulted in more self-scrutiny and self-censorship over reporting and publication. In regard to self-censorship, the surveyed journalists said they always censor when they report (42 percent) or practice self-censorship almost all the time (26.9 percent); another 30 percent reported neutral self-censorship. In addition, journalists report significant impacts on their livelihood. Some are unemployed due to pandemic-related layoffs and some experienced a salary reduction. A fifth of surveyed journalists (21.5 percent) had their salary cut.

As recommendations, journalists suggest the following:

For the government and other authorities:

- Cease the spreading of fear and accusations of journalists
- Encourage independent media outlets and bolster freedom of press and speech
- Offer a conducive working environment for and cooperation with media outlets and journalists

For Ministry of Health and Organization Experts:

- Increase the number of officials or spokesman so as to provide timely responses to queries
- Accelerate the speed of responses to journalists' inquiries

- Provide immediate and concise information on official web pages
- Provide daily or weekly press conferences related to COVID-19 cases
- Respond directly to journalists' questions rather than telling journalists to read or listen other news media

For News Organization:

- Provide technical and mental support to the journalists during the pandemic
- Offer health interventions and safety guidelines for journalists during work
- Maintain salary and other benefits so journalists can survive during the pandemic
- Build a collaborative and effective working team to maximize work during the pandemic

Annex

Survey Questionnaire

I. Demographic

1. Age

2. Gender

Male

Female

3. Organization

4. Experiences

less than 1 year

1 – 3 years

4 – 6 years

7 – 10 years

More than 10 years

5. Salary Range

Less than 300 USD

300 – 600 USD

700 – 1000 USD

More than 1000 USD

II. The impacts of COVID-19 on professional practices

1. Are you concerned about legal action from any party when reporting relevant information on COVID-19?"

Yes

- No

"If 1, why worry? (You can choose more than one answer)

- TVFB boss arrested and charged in the past
- Some Citizens Called for Contracts or Arrests After They Criticize COVID-19
- In the past, some publications have been rejected by the Ministry of Health as false information, despite clear sources, sometimes the source being their own or local officials.
- Fearing that the information could be considered by the government as provocative, causing social unrest

2. What is the level of self-censorship when writing information related to COVID-19?

- Never
- almost never
- Neutral
- almost all the time
- All the time

3. To what extent does your editor or editor-in-chief review your COVID-19 related articles compared to other types of articles?

- Never
- almost never
- Neutral
- almost all the time
- All the time

4. How scared were you of contracting COVID-19 when reporting?

- Very much
- Some
- a little
- not at all

5. During COVID-19, would you like to take a break from journalism for a while?"

- Yes
- No

If Yes, why?

- Fear of infecting COVID-19
- Family requests suspension
- Fear of accusation or arrest

6. Did you reduce direct access to news (press conferences, protests, workshops, etc.) when there was COVID-19?"

- Yes
- No

"If yes, how do you change the way you work to make sure your information is comprehensive?
(You can choose more than one answer)

- send questions with other journalists to ask the sources
- Change the way you communicate with sources using social media (Facebook messenger, telegram, WhatsApp, signal, email, skype) and more by phone.

If it is necessary to visit the source directly, keep the social distance and apply the protection measures as instructed by the Ministry of Health

Request to join a telegram group or other relevant social network

7. Do you find it difficult to get information related to COVID-19 from the Ministry of Health?"

Yes

No

If yes, what kind of request do you have to the Ministry of Health or other stakeholders? (You can choose more than one answer)

Increase the number of officials or spokespersons who can respond to journalists in a timely manner

Repeat daily or weekly press conferences

Accelerate the response to the journalists

Respond directly to journalists' questions rather than telling journalists to listen to or view the publications of other institutions to which the officer has been interviewed.

Other

8. Do you find it difficult to seek information related to COVID-19 from organizational experts?"

Yes

No

If yes, what kind of request do you have for those organizations? (You can choose more than one answer)"

Increase the number of officials or spokespersons who can respond to journalists in a timely manner

Accelerate the response to the journalists

Respond directly to journalists' questions rather than telling journalists to listen to or view the publications of other institutions to which the officer has been interviewed.

Others _____

"9. During COVID-19, were you rejected by the sources because the sources were afraid of infecting COVID-19?

Yes

No

10. During the COVID-19 outbreak, was your salary deducted by the institution?

Yes

No

If Yes, what percentage is deducted?

11. Did your organization lay off staff during the COVID-19 outbreak?"

Yes

No

If yes, how many people in your section?

12. Does your organization provide an alcohol mask or hand gel to protect COVID-19?

Yes

No

If your organization does not provide, how much do you spend on alcohol masks or hand gel per month?

13. Can your salary support your livelihood and that of your family during the COVID-19?

Yes

No

If You answer “no”, what can you do about it? (You can select more than one answer)

Borrow from a microfinance institution or bank

Borrow from friends or relatives

Mortgage or sale of property

Reduce the unnecessary costs

Others _____