

Digital Spaces and the Right to Information for Deaf People during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown and restrictions significantly disrupted life as we knew it. New ways of interacting had to be found to replace face-to-face interactions. Technologies had to be adapted, and new ones developed, to cope with the demands of what has been termed the “new normal.” Unfortunately the rapidity of this transformation resulted in some sections of society being left behind. In this chapter we explore the impact of the migration of interactions to online spaces on the deaf community in Zimbabwe. We examine the challenges that the deaf community face in Zimbabwe in relation to access to information, as well as the ways some digital spaces have been inclusive of the needs of deaf people. We also discuss how the deaf community has leveraged digital spaces to drive forward the deaf agenda.

Background

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), believed to have emerged in Wuhan, China, around October 2019, soon became a global pandemic resulting in lockdowns on an unprecedented scale in virtually all countries of the world by April 2020. Global travel ground to a halt and industries shut down as governments scrambled to contain the rapid spread of the virus. As a result, many people stayed indoors and human interactions as we knew them changed. New ways of doing business and interacting emerged in the new normal. Human interactions shifted online, resulting in explosive growth of virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Teams, and Bluejeans. While most of these platforms were already popular, the pandemic allowed them to take off as demand for interactions that did not require face-to-face communication increased. However, there are segments of society that found it difficult to adapt to the new normal, either because of poverty and lack of access to the requisite infrastructure to participate effectively, or because the new platforms were not designed with them in mind. This particularly applies to deaf people all over the world who communicate through signed languages.

The “old normal” was characterized by face-to-face interactions, as there were no fears of spreading the coronavirus. Such interactions are particularly attractive for deaf people due to the visual nature of signed languages. Before the pandemic, deaf people could obtain information from television programs, such as those on Deaf TV Zimbabwe, that were produced for the deaf and in most cases by the deaf. Where there was a need for an interpreter, one could easily be found, as there were no movement restrictions in place. For example, if a deaf person wanted to access counseling services, an interpreter could be found to assist with the communication. Services were offered physically with fewer hindrances in the old normal. Unfortunately, in the new normal, most services migrated online.

In Zimbabwe deaf people found it hard to participate in the new digital meeting places due to a number of factors, including inaccessible platforms. Most of these platforms could not accommodate sign language interpretation, they were not optimized for interpretation, or service providers either intentionally or unintentionally chose not to include interpretation. This resulted in deaf people being unable to use these platforms to access critical services like counseling and other consultations with health-care professionals. In addition, deaf people could not access information on the fast-evolving pandemic situation, thus putting them at greater risk. Inaccessible online spaces also negatively affected remote education for learners and remote work for academics.

This situation in many respects violates the human rights of deaf people, which center on sign language, sign language interpretation, bilingual education, and accessibility in all spheres of life (Haualand and Allen 2009, 9)—factors that are missing in the new normal, although strides are being made to address these gaps, largely as a result of deaf people’s advocacy. The situation of inaccessible services and digital spaces for the deaf in Zimbabwe obtains notwithstanding the fact that the government has an obligation to ensure that deaf people have access to information, even—and more so—in situations of humanitarian crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Normative Framework for Access to Information in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a signatory to a number of international human rights instruments that guarantee freedom of opinion and access to information. These instruments include, among others, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which, in article 19(2), confers rights to access to information and freedom of thought. Of particular importance in the present context is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that Zimbabwe signed and ratified in September 2013. Article 21(b) of the convention specifically calls on state parties to accept and facilitate the use of signed languages, and state parties are implored to encourage mass media houses, including those that provide information through the

internet, to make their services accessible to people with disabilities, including deaf people. It is important to highlight that most provisions of the convention have not been domesticated, as Zimbabwe has a dualist system that requires provisions of international instruments to be specifically enacted through an act of Parliament before they can be applicable.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe has a number of provisions dealing with access to information. Section 6 accords sign language official language status, together with fifteen other languages. Official languages are languages used in government business; however, declaring a language to be official does not necessarily mean that the language must be used, although it creates an expectation that this will be so. Section 6(3)(b) of the constitution specifically requires the government and its agencies to take into account the language requirements of people affected by governmental measures or communications. This creates an obligation for the government to ensure that information on the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, is provided in formats that include sign language, which is what deaf people understand. Further provisions in the Constitution of Zimbabwe that deal with access to information include section 61, which establishes the rights of people to freedom of expression, including the right to receive and communicate ideas and other information.

Challenges Faced by Deaf People in Zimbabwe during the Pandemic

We carried out a short survey of deaf people from across Zimbabwe to establish the challenges they faced in digital spaces during the time of the pandemic. We received nineteen responses to the survey via WhatsApp. The biggest life change that the lockdowns necessitated was staying at home. Unfortunately the deaf—most of whom live with nonsigning family members—became isolated, with limited to no interaction with other deaf people or family members with whom they lived. Digital spaces therefore became a requirement for deaf people in order for them to remain in touch with their communities.

For the deaf the biggest challenge is the cost of data and access to appropriate gadgets to participate fully in online spaces. Data charges in Zimbabwe are relatively high when compared with other regional countries, and this situation is exacerbated by frequent increases in data charges. For example, the mobile network operators increased data charges by almost 100 percent in June 2020, right in the middle of the pandemic, when WhatsApp and other online spaces were the major sources of information on the rapidly developing situation. Information about the pandemic itself has not always been provided in accessible formats, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. The sole national broadcaster, Zimbabwe Television, failed to provide sign language interpretation during COVID-19 announcements and briefings, such that it had to be taken to court to be compelled to provide interpreters at briefings.

The pandemic and lockdown resulted in the closure of most social services, including schools. Schoolchildren lost a lot of valuable study time and, in order to ameliorate the situation, schools and the government introduced radio and TV lessons. Unfortunately radio is not accessible to deaf children, and TV was not a workable alternative because of the lack of sign language interpretation. As a result, deaf learners were closed off from such platforms. Viable alternatives were WhatsApp and Zoom. However, as most deaf children are from poor families, they could not afford the data charges needed to access lectures with video. Sign language delivery of lectures requires significant investment in not just internet bandwidth but associated gadgets as well. On top of that, qualified, paid interpreters would also be required.

While deaf people had previously campaigned for accessible public spaces and services, the advent of the pandemic and the disruptions it brought in communications about the lockdown and prevention protocols reversed many of these gains. For example, service providers had been providing sign language interpreters at meetings, but virtual spaces could not easily accommodate them; thus deaf learners could not easily participate in group discussions. Some online platforms do not enable deaf people and sign language interpreters to see each other optimally or to see the teacher for lipreading or watch signing. In Zimbabwe most online learning was restricted to the WhatsApp platform in the form of text messages without any interaction in signing with the teachers. Hence deaf learners were cut off and largely left behind even though these online platforms were hailed in many sectors as a boon during the pandemic.

The pandemic seems to have accentuated inequalities of access to information and services (Redfern and Baker 2020). The migration of services from physical spaces to virtual spaces has hit the deaf community particularly hard. Those with limited experience and access to smartphones have been especially disadvantaged. The deaf have also not been considered in the many services now being offered via telephone, or via websites and other forms of online access. An example is that of gender-based violence services like counseling and helplines, which were taken online. Unfortunately these helplines do not have facilities for sign language interpreters. Because of this inaccessibility, while many deaf women may have suffered domestic violence during the lockdown period, it was not always easy for them to report it or access the postviolence services they required.

Digital Spaces and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Online platforms, particularly social media, have been described as the new agora where people meet and where most human interactions now happen (Matende and Chidemo 2018). The pandemic and the associated lockdowns only helped to accelerate the migration of human interactions online. With the new media, interactions do not need to be physical, as they can be held virtually over long

distances. In response to the lockdown and pandemic restrictions, there has been a boom in demand for services like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and others that witnessed explosive growth, even while other industries declined. Before the pandemic, deaf people were already actively participating on social media, particularly on WhatsApp through groups, video calling (for those who could afford the data fees), and one-on-one interactions. The popularity of the WhatsApp platform is driven mainly by the discounted rates, through bundled pricing, offered by all the mobile network operators in Zimbabwe. The simplicity of the WhatsApp platform and its ubiquity make it particularly accessible to deaf people in Zimbabwe. Additionally, the platform can be easily accessed from readily available mobile phones. Social media has been particularly beneficial for deaf people all over the world, including in Zimbabwe, as it helps to democratize information flow, and deaf communities thrive on social media. Deaf people can access information in sign language posted by other deaf individuals or organizations specifically targeting deaf communities. The siloed nature of information flow within deaf communities, however, increases the risk of spreading misinformation among the community, especially as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is apparent in myths surrounding the origins of the virus and the current vaccination drive. For example, it is believed that one can become a zombie after taking the vaccine. Such information is widely circulated within the deaf network, thus severely affecting the uptake of vaccines within the deaf community.

Responses by Deaf Organizations

Deaf advocacy in Zimbabwe during the pandemic has been centered on making information about the pandemic accessible. As information is being shared through online spaces, the focus has been on making these accessible and inclusive of sign language. As a result, organizations like Deaf TV Zimbabwe and Deaf Women Included have been making videos and distributing them via services like Facebook and WhatsApp. The videos are usually repurposed for different platforms, with particular emphasis on video size, to take into account those with limited access to data. The lockdown saw an explosion in online content consumption as people were confined in their homes. The growth was curtailed, to an extent, by increases in the cost of data. However, a lot of deaf-friendly content made its way onto social media. The Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust, the producers of Deaf TV Zimbabwe, produced a number of video clips in sign language that were mainly aimed at ensuring not only that deaf people have access to information on the pandemic but also that deaf people find their place in the new normal. The Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust is a deaf-managed nonprofit organization whose main mandate is the promotion of Zimbabwean Sign Language and ensuring that deaf people in Zimbabwe have access to information in sign language.

Many deaf organizations and individuals have found a way to leverage the new agora to advance and promote Zimbabwean Sign Language by offering online training in sign language and posting content about Zimbabwean Sign Language on social media. With many people having free time to learn a new language, the lockdown period and new media provided an opportunity for the promotion of sign language. In response to the challenges with online learning for deaf learners, and in particular a lack of learning materials in sign language, organizations like the Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust began to trial the translation of popular stories and content into sign language, a development that should hopefully encourage the production of more content for deaf learners in sign language for use in schools, particularly for the junior classes. These stories were distributed via social media, thus reaching a wide audience, not just the deaf.

Recommendations

There is a need to set up information clearinghouses for deaf people, particularly in the face of crises like the pandemic. In addition, minimum standards need to be set that guarantee access to information and services for deaf people; this applies to public and private organizations that provide information services. The provision of interpretation services should be prioritized by the government and public broadcasters. In addition, online platforms need to be made accessible through the provision of sign language interpreters so as to ensure that such spaces are not closed off to deaf people.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life as we know it, and the world has adapted to meet the demands of the new normal. With COVID-19 likely to be around for some time, it appears interactions will henceforth continue to happen mostly on digital platforms. Deaf people will continue to advocate to ensure that such spaces remain accessible to them. New technologies should continue to be adopted so as to ensure that new spaces are accessible to all, including the deaf. Deaf communities should also continue to advocate for accessible digital spaces, while governments should play a leading role in ensuring that both public enterprises and private entities offering digital services for public consumption make their products and services accessible to the deaf by including sign language on all platforms.

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