# STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN ZIMBABWE

ZCMIL

Zimbabwe Centre for Media
& Information Literacy
**Innovate . Explore . Engage**

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# Journalism in Flux: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities of a Digital Landscape

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# PREFACE

The inaugural *State of the News Media* report is a timely and comprehensive examination of the media landscape in Zimbabwe, covering the period from May 2022 to May 2023. Produced by the Zimbabwe Centre for Media and Information Literacy (ZCMIL) in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), this report is an essential resource for stakeholders involved in media development in Zimbabwe.

The report provides valuable insights into the key challenges and opportunities facing the news media in Zimbabwe. It highlights the critical issue of depleted and understaffed newsrooms, which is causing journalists to be overworked and underpaid, leading to burnout and a decline in news quality. Additionally, the report identifies the lack of resources and digital tools in newsrooms as a significant concern affecting news production, distribution, and consumption.

Despite these challenges, the report reveals the emergence of innovative forms of journalism, such as the integration of satire and the growth of investigative journalism, which are contributing to the diversification of the media landscape in Zimbabwe. The report also underscores the significant role of digital platforms in transforming journalism practice in Zimbabwe, including the use of metrics and analytics in newsrooms to shape editorial operations and determine story prominence.

However, the report also highlights concerns about the negative impact of cyberbullying, online harassment, and content moderation on freedom of expression and democracy. The lack of practical skills relevant to the constantly

evolving professional practice among journalism schools is also a significant issue that requires attention.

We are indebted to the author, Dr. Mphathisi Ndlovu, who was able to produce an incisive paper within the shortest possible time. We are also grateful to KAS without whose funding support we would not have been able to produce this maiden report.

Divine Dube
Managing Director, ZCMIL

# INTRODUCTION

Journalism is constantly evolving due to digital disruptions and other socio-political and economic factors. The news media across the globe are facing serious challenges. Legacy news organisations are grappling with digital disruptions and changing revenue models. News outlets in Zimbabwe have not been spared from these challenges. This study investigates the state of the newsroom in Zimbabwe. It examines the opportunities and threats brought by transformations and disruptions in the media sector. Located within the prevailing socio-political, economic, legal, and technological environments, this research shows the implications of the changing media landscape to journalism practice and democracy. It tackles issues such as data analytics, social media-driven journalism, content monetization, online harassment, content moderation, the rise of peripheral news actors, and working conditions in newsrooms.

# SUMMARY OF KEY INSIGHTS

- Depleted and understaffed newsrooms: Many Zimbabwean newsrooms are facing cutbacks in staffing, resulting in dire implications for journalism practice. Journalists are often overworked, underpaid, and at risk of burnout.

- Limited monetization of online content: The use of digital platforms for content monetization is still underdeveloped in Zimbabwean newsrooms. Innovative approaches to monetizing online content are needed to sustain journalism in the digital age.

- Digital tools and their impact: Digital tools are increasingly permeating newsrooms and transforming journalism practice. While challenges of access and affordability persist, digital tools are reshaping news production, distribution, and consumption. New positions such as online editor and social media coordinator are emerging to adapt to these changes.

- Resistance to digital transition: The transition from print to online has faced resistance from some journalists in Zimbabwe. Resource constraints for digital journalism hinder the smooth adoption of digital innovations. The lack of a strong social media presence among some journalists undermines engaged journalism.

- Metrics and analytics shaping editorial operations: Metrics and analytics are playing an increasingly significant role in journalism practice, influencing story selection and prominence. Editorial decisions are influenced by data-driven insights.

- WhatsApp as a journalistic tool: WhatsApp has become a critical platform for content distribution in Zimbabwean newsrooms, acting as a source for

citizens and driving traffic to news websites. It also serves as a source of story ideas.

- Cyberbullying and online harassment: Journalists in newsrooms face cyberbullying and online harassment, which impact their engagement with audiences. Mob censorship and self-censorship are emerging concerns, with implications for journalism practice and democracy. Efforts are needed to address this issue.

- Online content moderation and freedom of expression: Journalism practice now includes online content moderation, raising concerns about the implications for freedom of expression and democracy.

- Rise of peripheral news actors: The media landscape in Zimbabwe is being transformed by peripheral news actors, challenging traditional notions of journalism and news. These actors contribute to combating news deserts and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities through innovative news practices.

- Desire for investigative journalism: There is a growing demand for investigative journalism in Zimbabwe, leading to the establishment of investigative news outlets. However, insufficient organizational and institutional support poses challenges to the development of this form of journalism.

- Integration of satire in newsrooms: Satire is being integrated into newsrooms as a creative way to critique the powerful and challenge social hierarchies. Humor and laughter are employed to undermine authority.

- Resource constraints: Limited resources such as computers, cars, chairs, and mobile phones have a detrimental impact on journalistic work, hindering efficiency and quality.

- Need for practical skills in journalism education: Some media practitioners express concerns that journalism schools are not equipping trainees with practical skills relevant to the rapidly evolving professional practice.

# METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative approach as the focus was on participants' lived realities and experiences. It sought to understand and describe phenomena from an *emic* or insider's perspective. As a qualitative researcher, I was interested in understanding the lived experiences of participants (journalists) in the newsroom, from their vantage points. Thus, I sought to make sense of how journalists and other media personnel interpret the state of the newsroom in Zimbabwe. Qualitative studies focus on the meanings that are produced and generated by social actors (journalists in this case) at a particular point in time and a particular context. Researchers can provide a *thick description* or describe the actions of the participants in detail. As a researcher, I became committed to seeing the social world (state of the newsroom) from the vantage point of participants (journalists).

Qualitative studies are conducted in natural settings. In this case, the newsroom constitutes a "natural habitat" (Mabweazara, 2014:2) for journalists, and hence I collected data mostly in physical newsroom settings. To fully understand the practices, routines, and cultures of newsmakers, I spent a month collecting data. I utilised semi-structured interviews, ethnography, and observation as methods of data collection. Interviews were mainly conducted at the offices of news organisations where journalists conduct their work. I am aware of the shifting nature of the newsroom in this digital age. In a few instances, I interacted with participants at city centres and via the phone.

Ethnography is the study of a way of life. It is a holistic and rich description of people's cultures, beliefs, and experiences. Ethnography enables researchers to provide detailed accounts of people's lived realities in particular social settings. As a researcher, I was able to get close to the social group (journalists) that I was studying. It was an effective method of data collection as it enabled me to immerse myself in the social settings of the journalism world. Spending time in physical newsrooms also enabled me to appreciate the culture of journalists and observe and document their daily professional practices.

In addition, I was able to understand the role and work of online editors. I was also able to observe how they uploaded news content on websites and social media platforms. At the same time, I became familiar with how online editors moderated comments on their news websites and also used metrics and analytics in newsrooms. Further, I was able to observe the challenges in news outlets such as depleted newsrooms and poor infrastructure (chairs, computers, etc.). This enabled me to give provide rich and detailed accounts of journalists' lived

experiences. Pseudonyms were used by some participants to protect their identities.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select news outlets and participants for this study. This non-random sampling technique allows researchers to make conscious and deliberate decisions in the selection process. The sampling process was determined by the research objectives – to examine the state of newsrooms in Zimbabwe. In this selection process, I considered legacy news media (public and private media), and digital news start-ups. The focus of the study was mainly on print and online news media (rather than broadcast), although a few community radio stations were selected.  The following 17 news outlets were selected for this research are:

*The Herald, NewsDay, Southern Eye, Chronicle, The Sunday News*, *Community Podium*, *uMthunywa*, *The Standard*, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *263Chat, Ntepe-Manama Community Radio*, *The Citizen Bulletin*, *Magamba Network*, *Zimbabwe Daily*, *The NewsHawks*, *CITE*, and *Radio BuKalanga.*

The following **figure** provides a list of news organisations that were selected:
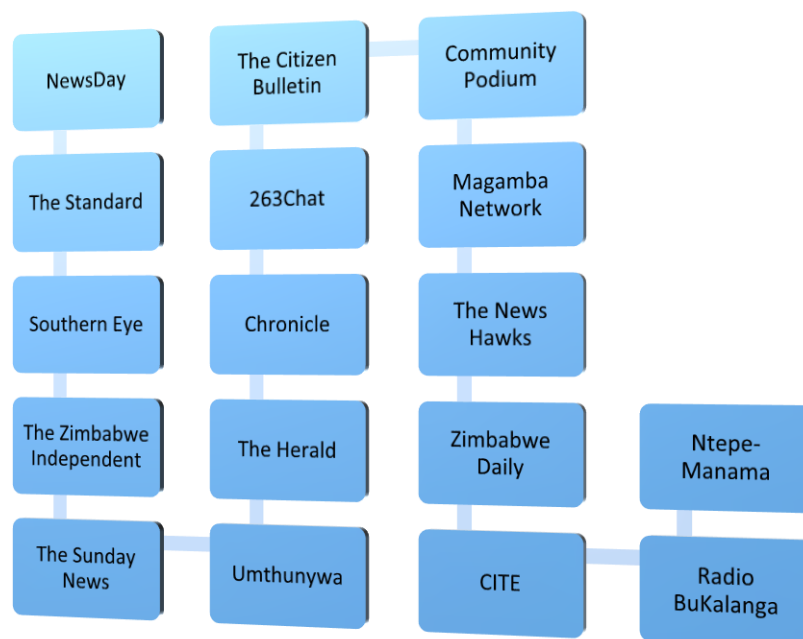


Concerning research participants, I selected editors, founders, reporters, online media coordinators, and interns. A total of 28 journalists and media personnel participated in this study as shown in the following **figure**:

**Research participants**
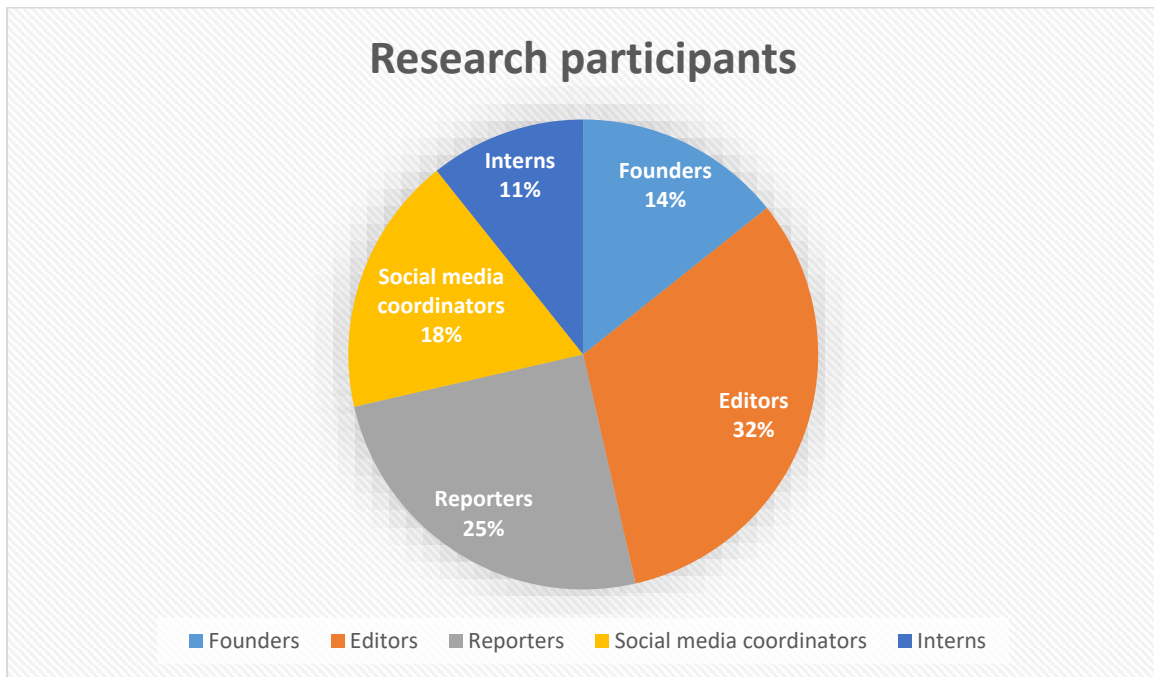


Most of the research participants were news editors, reporters, and online/social media coordinators.

The following figures show the distribution of participants based on gender:

**Gender**
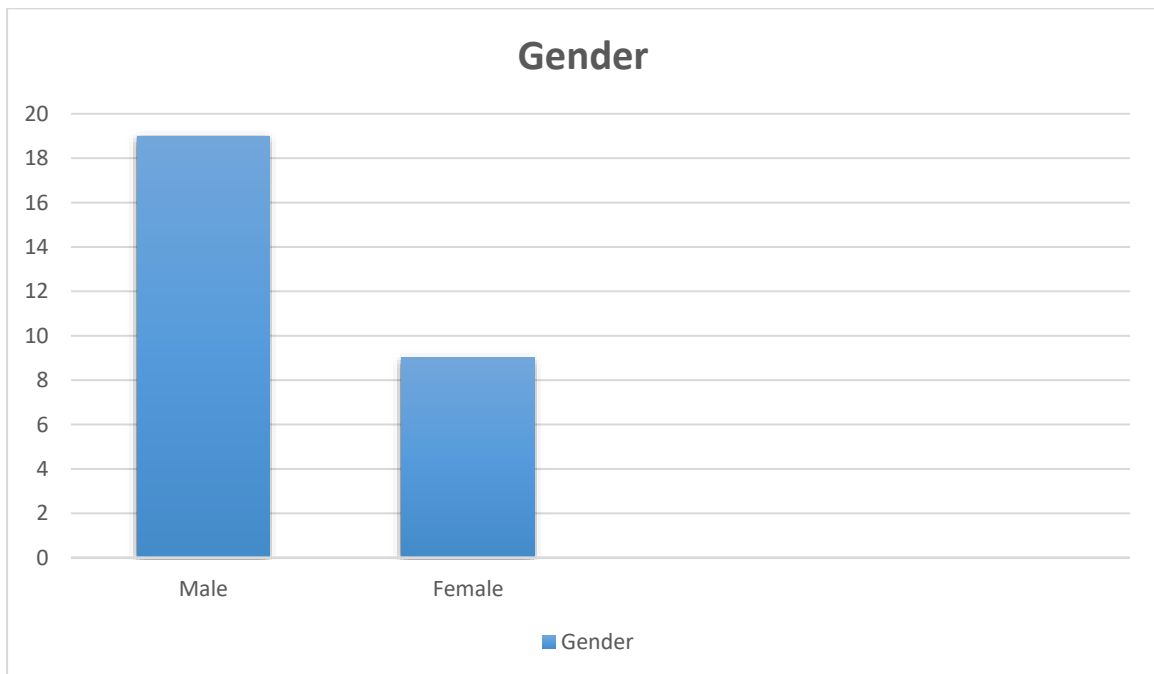


The study was conducted in April 2023 in Harare, Bulawayo, Plumtree, and Gwanda.

# EMERGING ISSUES

*This section provides an in-depth analysis of the state of Zimbabwean newsrooms. It is categorised along various thematic issues that include digital disruptions, moderation, online harassment, working conditions, and the rise of peripheral actors.*

## **"Digital First, Hardcopy Best": Digital Disruptions in Newsrooms**

Digital tools are permeating newsrooms and transforming journalism practice in Zimbabwe. Findings show that these digital spaces are altering, upending, and recasting the processes of producing, distributing, and consuming news content. Most newsrooms are appropriating and using digital tools in ways that enhance journalism practice. Whilst challenges of access and affordability persist, digital disruptions are shaping journalists' cultures, routines, norms, and identities. The process of news gathering and dissemination has become more rapid and decentred.

The motto: "*digital first, hardcopy best*" has become popular in legacy news outlets. It attests to the negotiations, ambivalences, and tensions surrounding the relationship between traditional journalism and emergent digital journalism. Whilst journalists value digital platforms for their role in breaking news, they still consider the print edition as quality journalism.

Newsmaking practices and cultures are being transformed and recast as the day-to-day professional work of journalists is being influenced by digital disruptions. The traditional hierarchical order in journalism has become destabilised as audiences are having a say in the production of news content. More importantly, the dominance of legacy news media is being challenged and disrupted by peripheral actors who are relying on digital platforms to produce and distribute content.

Digital disruptions are evident in the Zimbabwean media landscape. First, start-ups or peripheral news actors such as *The News Hawks*, *Magamba Network*, *263Chat Community Podium,* and *CITE* are operating wholly as digital news outlets. These news organisations do not publish traditional print editions. Instead, they are utilising digital tools to share news content and engage with audiences.

Second, legacy news outlets are also adapting to these digital changes. Zimpapers adopted a "digital first" strategy to harness the benefits of online media. Given the challenges of Covid-19 induced lockdown, Zimpapers migrated some of its publications (*UMthunywa*, *BMetro*, and *Kwayedza*) to the digital platforms as a cost-cutting measure. Traditional print publications were replaced by online editions. News content from these tabloids is distributed via digital platforms and e-paper. In addition, new positions have been created in mainstream news outlets to promote the adoption and integration of digital tools into journalism practice. News organisations such as *The Herald*, *UMthunywa*, *NewsDay*, and *Chronicle*

recruited online editors, online news editors, social media coordinators, and social media editors who are responsible for managing the digital platforms.

The following **figure** shows some of the positions at news organisations created as a result of digital disruptions in newsrooms.

Chronicle
- Online editor
- Online news editor
- Social media coordinator

The Sunday News
- Online news editor

AMH
-Digital and Online editor

CITE
- Social media editor

uMthunywa
- Social media coordinator

The Herald
- Online news editor
- Social media coordinator
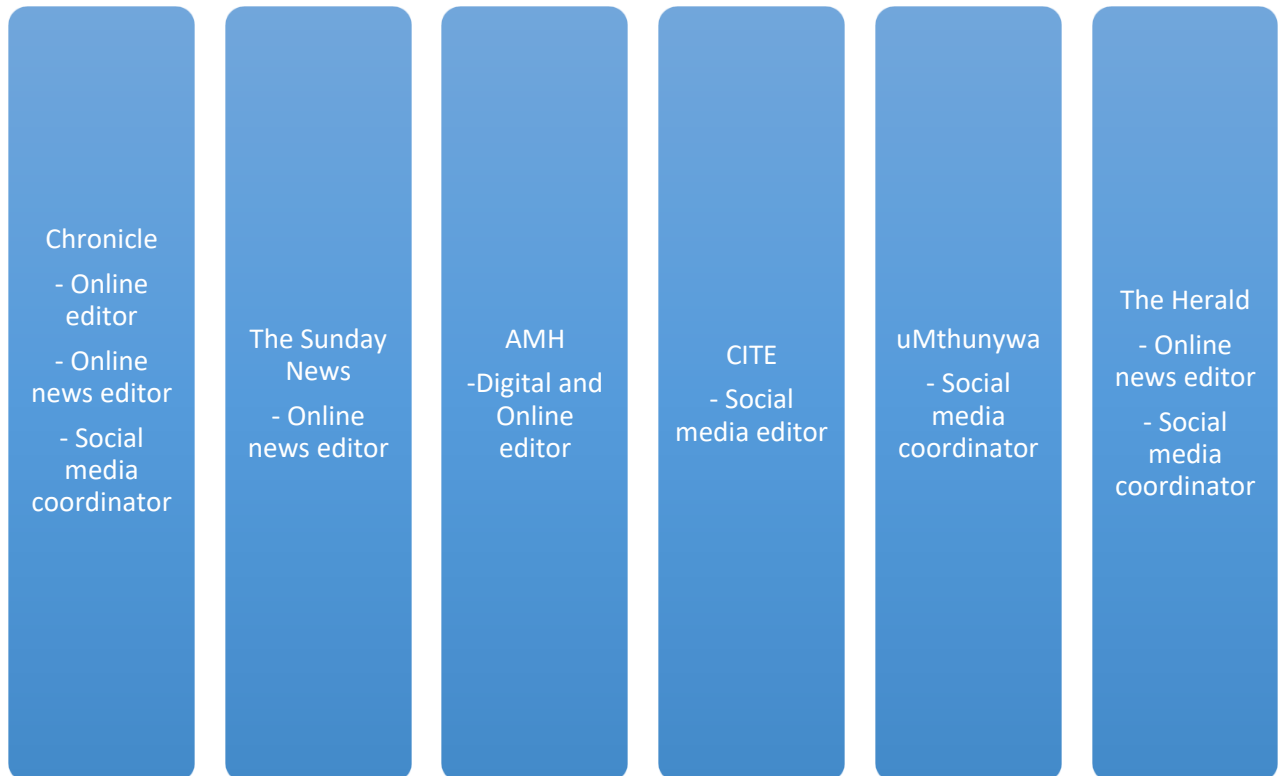
News organisations are emphasizing audience engagement, metrics, and analytics. Peripheral news actors such as *The Citizen Bulletin* had positions such as *Audience Growth and Engagement Officer*, *Content Distribution and Visuals Editor*, and *Publishing and Content Distribution Editor*. Digital tools are at the core of fostering and strengthening meaningful relationships with audiences.

With the adoption of digital platforms, journalistic cultures, routines, and practices have shifted. Journalists in legacy news media are no longer writing solely for the traditional print edition. Instead, they have to provide up-to-date content (text, photos, and videos) for the online desk as well. Reporters have to send 'light' stories to the online/social media desk as they work on a fully-fledged news story for the print edition.

The "on-the-go newsrooms" (Mare, 2014:24) have become the order of the day. This is aptly captured by a news editor at Magamba Network:

> Our newsroom is WhatsApp. Contributors pitch their stories wherever they are. They are contributing from different locations.

> *They pitch on the WhatsApp group, we approve and they start working.*

Online news editors such as Temba Dube are involved in the transformation of newsrooms. Dube manages the online desk at the *Chronicle* together with the online editor, and social media coordinator. He explained how the need to break the need first is shaping the transformations in newsrooms:

> *We have to be the first with the news. Our motto is online first, hard copy best. We post a story on the website. From there, we take it to Twitter and Facebook. The main purpose is to drive traffic to the website. On Twitter, we put a sentence to show what it is about. If someone is interested, they click on it, and they are taken to the website.*

At *The Herald*, the online editor and social media coordinator are responsible for running the social media pages. Similarly, a social media editor at *CITE* is responsible for posting and sharing content.

Whilst working in the field, journalists are expected to submit online content such as small statements, pictures, and video clips to the social media desk. This news content is uploaded on the website and then posted on social platforms. Due to these digital changes, it has become mandatory for reporters in some newsrooms to provide up-to-date news content for the online desk. A reporter at *The Herald* echoed these sentiments:

> *When you go on an assignment, you are expected to take pictures and send them to the social media team*.

Upskilling and re-skilling are integral in journalism work. Journalists at *CITE* are being equipped with skills to navigate the journalism terrain in this digital age:

> *Our journalists have undergone training in mobile reporting. They have also been trained to use Adobe Premium Pro to edit content on their own. I usually post these videos to ensure that the news content is a multimedia story*.

However, the transition from offline to online has not been smooth sailing in most newsrooms. One of the participants noted that some journalists initially resisted these digital innovations:

> *We used to spend a lot of time asking the journalists who were in the field to send news content so that we post it on our digital platforms. Some journalists would prefer to go back to the newsroom to write the story. This undermined the element of breaking news.*

A journalist at an online desk echoed these sentiments:

> *The transition has not been easy. News is about breaking the story first. But some journalists never send updates. Sometimes you need to call them so that they send updates.*

Another participant believes that many journalists are yet to grasp the art of utilising digital platforms for journalistic work.

> *Change is difficult. Some journalists are still stuck on legacy issues. They are always thinking about writing a story for the next day's paper.*

In essence, some journalists who are struggling to adapt to the new realities in the newsroom. Whilst multimedia journalism is lauded in some quarters, a *NewsDay* journalist noted that some reporters feel it is not their duty to take pictures and videos.

Nonetheless, it has become mandatory for journalists to be active on social media. In some newsrooms like Zimpapers, it is a requirement for journalists to retweet at least 10 stories per day. A participant noted that at Zimpapers:

> *For every story that you write, you have to put your Twitter handle at the end*.

A reporter at the *Chronicle* added:

> *I am active on Twitter. I post my stories and retweet anything that relates to work. Facebook is just a docile platform for me*.

In essence, a contemporary journalist has to be techno-savvy and be active on social media. However, there are concerns that newsrooms are poorly resourced for online journalism:

> *We are poorly resourced to do online journalism. The news organisation gave me a good phone, but it does not give me data.*

> *They still expect me to be providing up-to-date content. This defeats the whole purpose of saying we want to have vibrant online journalism.*

Two issues come to the fore. First, some participants are concerned that their news organisations do not provide Internet data for journalistic work. Second, other newsrooms are not equipping journalists with smartphones to conduct their work in this digital age. As a result, it has become challenging for some journalists to be part of the digital transformations in the newsrooms.

Another challenge is that some journalists are not active on Twitter which makes it difficult for them to share their stories. These journalists do not have a strong social media presence, and this may be due to a lack of interest. Coupled with this, some news organisations do not have a policy that requires journalists to share their stories online.

Other newsrooms are understaffed and as a result, it has become difficult for reporters in legacy news outlets to cope with the pressure of writing for both the main paper and the online desk. There is a need for news organisations to invest in resources (human, material, and financial) to fully harness the benefits of digital tools.

Whilst these digital platforms are enabling journalists to interact with audiences, a participant was concerned about the minimal engagement in online spaces:

> *Journalists do not want to account for their stories. There is minimal interaction. In Western countries, journalists share their own stories and generate debates. We need journalists to initiate conversations around issues and stories so that we get more information that we need.*

Some journalists may not be engaging audiences in digital spaces due to cyberbullying. This is echoed by journalists who are concerned with how their work is encroaching into their personal lives on social media. They feel that news organisations are taking away their rights to express themselves freely on social media:

> *Since I am attached to this news outlet, the things that I say or do become an extension of the organisation.*

Another participant added that the personal and work lives of journalists have become blurred on social media as there is a conflation of the individual and organisation:

*There is difficulty for you to say what you think on social media as an individual that is divorced from the news organisation. When I tweet, some people assume that I tweet on behalf of the news organisation that I work.*

Despite these challenges, it is evident that newsrooms are being redefined and recast in Zimbabwe. Central to these changes has been the establishment and consolidation of virtual newsrooms and mobile offices. Virtual newsrooms constitute "journalistic practices in digital spaces" (Mabweazara, 2014:2). Mobile offices entail that mobile phones have become integral in newsmaking processes without the need for "physical proximity" (Mabweazara, 2011:699).

**Are metrics and analytics transforming Zimbabwean newsrooms?**

With the advent of digital tools, journalism has become 'metrics driven'. In their research on 'analytics-driven journalism', Moyo, Mare, and Matsilele (2019) argue that analytic tools are altering, redefining, and reconfiguring journalism practice in African newsrooms. Web editors are using metrics and analytics to make decisions regarding the promotion and distribution of news stories.

This study confirms the arguments in the extant literature as it shows that metrics and analytics are shaping editorial decisions in newsrooms. Journalists and online editors are increasingly embracing metrics and analytics in their work.

These figures are impacting journalists' morale and motivation. This was expressed by one of the journalists at the *Chronicle*:

> *It is important to write a story that is read and highly commented on.*

It is important to write a story that is read and highly commented on.

Using analytic tools, news organisations can analyse audience behaviour and measure the impact of news stories. Some news organisations are using *Disqus Analytics* to track and analyse audience activities on their websites. Analytics tools can measure indices such as bounce rate, articles read, comment reads, and total engagement.

| | |
|---|---|
| Total engagement | Article reads |
| Pageviews | Returning readers |
| Comment reads | Bounce rate |
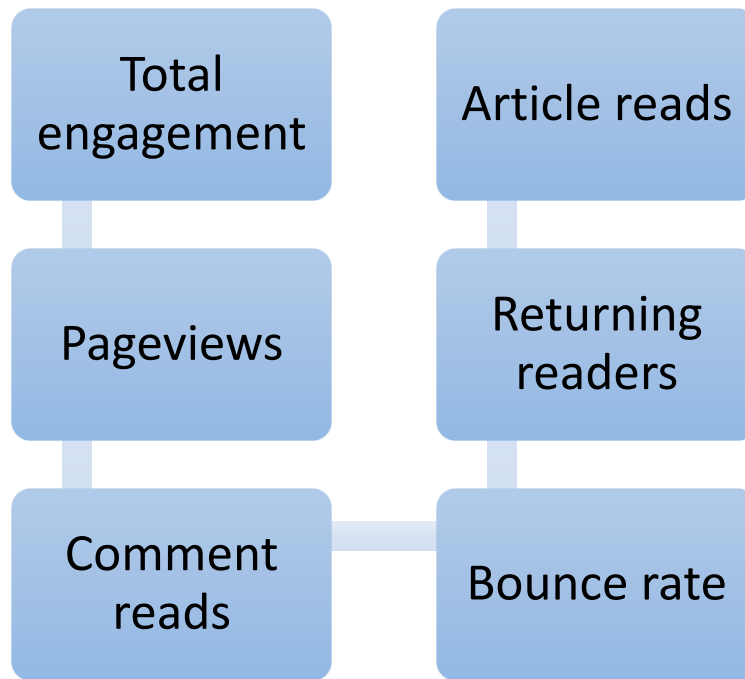
Analytics shed light on audience behaviours such as page views and time spent on content. Within metrics-driven newsrooms, editorial decisions are made based on the number of people who consume news content, the rate at which news stories are shared by audiences, and also the overall impact of the news content. Research findings indicate that most newsrooms in Zimbabwe are integrating metrics and analytics into editorial operations.

The metrics and analytics are used daily at *The Herald*. During the diary meetings, the online team presents a social media diary:

> *In the morning, I present analytics on what is trending on social media to give leads to the news desk. In the afternoon, I present analytics on the stories that we posted. This would indicate the top-performing stories and help us to decide if there is a need for a follow-up.*

Thus, analytics have become integrated into journalistic cultures, practices, and routines. They have become part and parcel of diary meetings as they are being embraced in newsrooms.

*CITE* uses in-built analytics such as *Meta Business Suite* (Facebook and Instagram) and Google Analytics (website) to manage digital platforms. By using Google Analytics, *CITE* can track audience behaviour (stories with the highest reach, the location of the readers, and ascertain how the readers were directed to the news

website). Some audiences make direct visits to the news websites, whilst others open the website via social media platforms.

Metrics enable newsroom decision-makers to track news stories. As a result, metrics and analytics have implications for editorial decisions. Newsmakers can use the metrics and analytics to make decisions on the stories to promote.

Newsroom decisionmakers are increasingly making editorial decisions based on audience activities and behaviours online
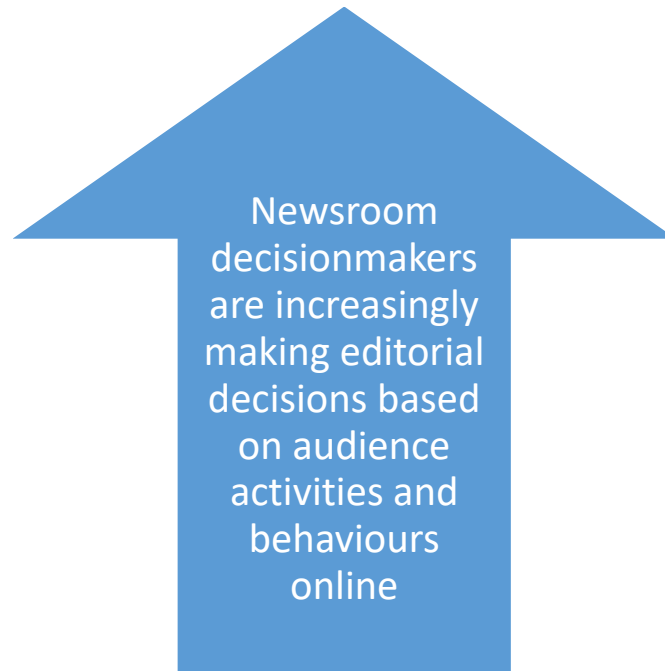
At the same time, news companies utilise analytics to make decisions on social media platforms to use for news content distribution:

> *When we use analytics, we can maximise the social media platform that is drawing our audiences.*

At *CITE*, the staff meets every week to discuss these statistics:

> *As a social media editor, I need to provide statistics for social media platforms. With the assistance of the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, I give departmental updates on the highest engagement for posts and stories. I give reasons why the stories have the highest rates. It gives us a guideline of what we are supposed to be focussing on in the coming week.*

One of the participants echoes the above sentiments:

> *These statistics show us the kind of stories that people want to read. We try to produce stories that have an impact. We do not to spend a lot of time and resources on a story that will not drive traffic.*

In essence, there is a shift in the traditional values that determine the 'newsworthiness' of a story. Metrics and data analytics are shaping the editorial decisions on which stories are covered and given prominence. Participants noted that if a story generates a lot of interest online, news organisations may decide to make a follow-up or provide more explanation. Whilst analytics-driven journalism can be lauded for its audience-centric nature, its downside is the fate of stories that are in the public interest but are not driving traffic on social media.

A reporter at the *Chronicle* asserted that analytics are relevant to their work:

> *I check the most followed stories. They tell us what we need to produce as journalists. We are not writing for ourselves, but creating content that must appeal to readers. What will be the point of writing a story that is not read?*

Whilst analytics are shaping newsroom cultures, they should not be considered omnipotent. Instead, editorial policies have implications for the kind of news stories that news outlets produce and distribute.

**Social media-driven journalism: How social media platforms are changing the face of journalism**

Social media platforms have become integral in transforming the processes of news production, distribution, and consumption. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are some of the social media platforms used by news outlets to distribute news content. Posters and video formats are used for Instagram and TikTok respectively. Digital platforms have become integral to journalistic work. The roles of these social media platforms are varied.

First, online publications such as *263Chat* provide a platform for discussions on topical issues such as service delivery and politics. *263Chat* was created as a Twitter account in 2012 to open up dialogue on these topical issues. In 2014, *263Chat* started publishing news on its social media platforms. According to the founder of *263Chat*, Nigel Mugamu, social media is integral to their work:

> *We leverage the large and growing social media following*.

Second, WhatsApp is shaping journalism practice as a source of news. *263Chat* launched an e-paper which is distributed to 59, 000 subscribers on WhatsApp every Monday to Friday for free. The e-paper on a PDF is meant to be read like a newspaper. *263Chat* has a large WhatsApp community.

Other digital start-ups are also utilising WhatsApp for content distribution. This was also echoed by *Community Podium*'s founder and executive director:

> *Our biggest platform for sharing news content is WhatsApp. We have WhatsApp groups for respective communities.*

Audiences are relying on WhatsApp for their informational needs. Most of the news organisations are using WhatsApp groups to distribute news content. *CITE* uses its WhatsApp platform to engage with audiences. *UMthunywa* also uses WhatsApp groups to share news content such as an e-paper. However, Facebook has emerged as the most popular site for this tabloid:

> *Facebook is the most used digital platform as there is more audience engagement*.

Facebook is also *Zimbabwe Daily*'s main platform for content distribution as it has the largest following. The site is followed by 317, 000 people on Facebook.

However, some news organisations like *Chronicle* restrict interactions on these WhatsApp groups. These groups are strictly for administrators to post news content, rather than open to members posting:

> *It is only the administrators who post content. Some people may start advertising, and posting offensive comments.*

Other news sites such as *CITE* have a WhatsApp group that only allows posting from administrators, and another open to members engaging. Other news outlets like *The Citizen Bulletin* open their WhatsApp groups for audience engagement. WhatsApp is also utilised by news organisations to direct audiences to news websites. This is noted by *CITE*'s social media editor:

> *Our analytics show that when visiting the news website, most of our audiences use WhatsApp. Even for YouTube, our audiences usually use WhatsApp. WhatsApp is accessible to most people and hence it is easier to gain audiences from this platform and direct them to other digital platforms.*

Social media platforms are important tools for promoting engagement on news websites. This is aptly captured by *The Herald*'s social media coordinator:

> *Stories published on the website are shared on social media platforms so that we increase traffic to the website.*

The Digital and Online Editor at Alpha Media Holdings added that social media platforms are used to drive traffic on their website:

> *If a reporter is at an event and there is breaking news, we start with limited characters on social media. We post it on the website as breaking news. We then share it on social media so that we redirect traffic to the website for more details.*

At *The NewsHawks*, news content is first posted on Twitter and then shared on the website.

These digital platforms are not only sources of news for audiences but for journalists as well. Journalists are using social media platforms to generate story ideas. At *The Herald*, audience engagement is considered important for news gathering:

> *We go through the comments section on the stories we post to get leads on the questions that people are asking.*

Participants noted that they can make follow-ups on tweets by government officials. In addition, journalists can make follow up on issues that are trending on social media. Thus, social media platforms give journalists leads on issues that are making news.

Whilst there are all these opportunities offered by digital transformations, some participants were concerned about the ramifications of journalists relying on these social media platforms:

> *Social media promote laziness because some will just go on Twitter, take whatever someone has said, and make a story out of it instead of generating a story by calling the source directly.*

Moreover, social media-driven journalism has a 'darker' side which I probe in the following section.

## On journalism and mob censorship in the age of digital hate

### *"You need to develop a thick skin"*

Online interactivity and audience engagement have become popular in newsrooms. Whilst social media platforms such as Twitter are shaping the nature and form of reciprocity between journalists and audiences, there are concerns about the rise of "mob censorship" in this age of the "digital age" (Waisbord, 2020:1030). These digital spaces have a 'darker side' as journalists are being threatened, harassed, and abused online whilst conducting their work. Journalists occupy a "vulnerable position" (Perreault and Perreault, 2021:976) in these digital spaces where they are expected to engage and build relationships with their audiences. Mob censorship describes how journalists are being silenced, demonised, and disciplined by audiences in digital spaces (Waisbord, 2020).

Most of the participants are concerned about the attacks and flaming directed at journalists on digital platforms. Online harassment may be in the form of users reprimanding or disciplining journalists:

> *Some people are brutal online. Ku Twitter uyabe uyinyama (on Twitter we get harassed). If your news story contains a technical error such as spelling, they lynch you. Users who know us personally may decide to expose our shenanigans.*

Another participant added that they get attacked a lot on Facebook:

> *Sometimes they ridicule us and laugh at the stuff that we post. They dismiss the story as useless and ask why we are posting such content.*

Some of the threats in online spaces are underpinned by the polarised political environment in the country. Within this bifurcated media environment, Zimpapers is viewed as pro-government. On the other hand, *NewsDay*, *CITE*, and other private press are seen as pro-opposition. One of the journalists at Zimpapers noted that they are disparaged online as *"izinja zika Mnangagwa"* (Mnangagwa's running dogs).

Other attacks are related to issues of minorities. One of the participants stated that journalists who produce news content on the LGBTQ community tend to be attacked for allegedly "corrupting our children".

In the age of engaged journalism, audiences have subverted the power of journalists. Far from helping to build trust and deepen loyalty, in some instances, engaged journalism is widening the rifts between journalists and audiences. Cyber-bullying and mob censorship have serious impacts on journalists' mental health:

> *Journalists need to be very mentally strong. We have been attacked so many times. If you follow comments posted by users, you may get traumatised.*

Online threats, bullying, and vigilantism are not only digital safety issues but have deeper implications for journalism practice and democracy. There is an increasing feeling among journalists that they may be watched by the perpetrators, which Munoriyarwa and Chiumbu (2021:32) term "panopticon tendencies". As a result, online abuse may lead to self-censorship. Journalists may not hold the powerful accountable due to fear of online harassment. Waisbord (2019:212) aptly asserts that in instances where there are safety risks involved, journalists may "cautiously approach sensitive issues".

One of the journalists who hosts Twitter Spaces was harassed and bullied online for interviewing Douglas Mwonzora:

> *Some people were coming to my DM labelling me a 'hure raMwonzora' (Mwonzora's prostitute). Such harassment weighs you down mentally. That is why I have slowed down on hosting Twitter Spaces.*

Another journalist describes how digital hate affects their day-to-day work:

> *The new generation of journalists is traumatised when they experience such attacks. Some of these threats are quite scary. You may hear a journalist saying 'I am now scared to write these stories'. You cannot force someone to write a story if you cannot guarantee their security. What is so scary is that some of these perpetrators are faceless characters. It may be someone waiting for you outside your work offices.*

But how are journalists coping and dealing with these online attacks? Some newsmakers regard cyber-bullying as the 'new normal and part of their everyday professional experiences:

*I work for an organisation that is not liked by urbanites who are the readers mostly. If I become angry that people are saying things that I do not like, I won't work.*

Journalists at Magamba Network have sessions on mental health where they interact with psychologists.

Most of the participants believe that journalists have to "develop a thick skin" to deal with online abuse. A journalist at *The Herald* noted that they ignore such online attacks and have developed a thick skin.

Some journalists deal with digital hate by opting to disengage from social media platforms. In some instances, there is limited traffic on social media as journalists prefer to 'just follow' without participating in online discussions. However, this is problematic as in this age of reciprocal journalism, newsmakers are expected to forge meaningful relationships with their audiences. The safety of journalists in the digital age needs urgent attention. There is a need for news organisations to protect and support journalists in dealing with online harassment. Throwaway phrases like "develop a thick skin" and "toughen up" may serve to legitimate a serious problem in the newsroom. Journalists should not feel weak whenever they are failing to "toughen up". Instead, there should be concerted efforts by news organisations, policymakers, and other stakeholders to address the scourge of mob censorship targeted at journalists in online spaces.

One of the mechanisms employed by news organisations in dealing with trolling and flaming content moderation.

## **Moderation of online content in newsrooms**

Newsrooms across the globe are embarking on engaged journalism in an attempt to build and solidify meaningful relationships with their audiences. However, these efforts are being undermined by the manifestation of offensive, harmful, and inappropriate content in online spaces. News organisations have responded with various strategies to protect journalists and other online users from abuse. Online content moderation has become part of journalistic practices and routines in Zimbabwean newsrooms. It denotes a process of regulating or screening user-generated content to ascertain its appropriateness. Content moderation involves monitoring, assessing, and filtering user-generated content that violates the rules and guidelines set by a news organisation. The user-generated content that does not comply with community guidelines is removed from news websites. Whilst news organisations employ automated moderation, in some cases human moderation is utilised as the online team manually screens content.

Findings indicate that journalists at the online desks at various newsrooms are responsible for moderating content on the news websites. Online editors and social media editors filter out offensive or toxic comments on websites. A participant from the online desk explained how online content moderation is carried out:

> *There is some content that we don't publish on our website. We moderate. I see the comments first and then approve or disapprove. On Twitter, users are free to debate anyhow.*

The above sentiments are echoed by another participant from the online desk:

> *We remove vulgar, insults, and other offensive language on the website. On social media, we do not moderate. On Twitter, you can block a user, but that is on rare occasions.*

Participants noted that they manage social media interactions by removing posts deemed offensive and insensitive.

However, there are fundamental questions about the implications of online content moderation on freedom of expression and democracy. Whilst questions abound on how content moderation undermines freedom of expression, participants argued that regulating interactions does not necessarily infringe on free speech. Of course, a key concern was that content moderation may undermine audience engagement:

> *The moment you moderate you are likely to chase away people*

In this digital age, news companies are concerned with driving traffic and engagement in online spaces. More importantly, news outlets are also bent on generating revenue through these digital spaces. As a result, some participants felt that moderation may have adverse impacts on news organisations' prospects of monetizing content.

## Content monetization in digital platforms

Digital tools are transforming revenue generation models in newsrooms. Some news outlets are monetizing their digital content to generate income. Content monetization is about making money or profits from the content that is created and shared on digital platforms.

Findings indicate that most newsrooms regard audience engagement as a tool for content monetization. However, the use of digital platforms for content monetization is not yet developed in Zimbabwean newsrooms.
Newsmakers appreciate that high audience engagement on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook can drive more traffic to a news website. This is aptly captured by a participant:

> *For every click on the website, it's money. If someone opens the link, it's money. When users are clicking on the website, they are making money for us.*

Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp are used by news outlets to direct audiences to the news website. For these news organisations, what is important is for users to click on the website and consume content.
Participants stated that news companies are generating revenue through direct advertising and Google Ads:

> *We try to monetize our content. If there is more traffic on our website, we can generate income from Google.*

Despite the financial benefits, one of the news outlets ceased subscribing to Google Ads due to technical challenges experienced:

> *We once subscribed to Google Ads on our website. However, there were too many Google ads and pop-ups which made it difficult for us to post our news content.*

Another method of revenue generation is direct advertising on news websites. Whilst there are these attempts to monetize digital content, some participants were concerned that newsrooms are yet to reap the benefits of these digital tools:

> *Most newsrooms in Zimbabwe have not mastered the use of digital platforms for revenue generation.*

There is a need for news organisations to attract more readers to enhance site traffic and audience engagement. The peripheral news actors are utilising digital affordances to transform their newsrooms.

## *Community Podium* and the Disruption of traditional newsmaking practices

Gayatri Spivak's ground-breaking and influential essay *"Can the subaltern speak"* remains poignant, especially in communities that have become news deserts. At the core of the condition of these marginalised communities is how they are being denied a voice to speak on their condition. However, the rise of peripheral news actors is subverting the long-standing elitism in the media. These new entrants are transforming the media landscape in two ways. First, the peripheral news actors are transgressing the well-established notions of what constitutes a journalist, and also news. Second, the new entrants are enabling marginalised groups to voice their lived conditions, rather than be spoken for.

*Community Podium* is one of the news outlets which scholars regard as "strangers", "newcomers" and "emergent actors" (Hanusch and Lohmann, 2022). This new entrant is contributing to the changes in the journalism landscape in Zimbabwe. Peripheral news actors are not regarded as traditional journalists but are involved in producing journalistic work. Although they operate outside the margins or boundaries of the journalism field, they contribute to news production and distribution.

*Community Podium* was established in 2019 as a non-profit participatory media organisation dedicated to providing support for content creators and creating inclusive platforms for the voices of marginalized communities to be heard. Its founder and executive director, Nkosikhona Dibiti, regards *Community Podium* as a space for marginalised communities to reclaim their voice:

> *The whole idea was to give communities, particularly ordinary people but mostly from marginalised communities, a voice. It sought to ensure that ordinary people's voices are captured in the media.*

One of the criticisms of the mainstream media is that they marginalise the voices of ordinary people. Subaltern communities tend to be denied a voice in the legacy media. Instead, they are usually spoken for by those in privileged positions. This view is echoed by Dibiti who believes that voices of marginalised communities are excluded and marginalised in legacy news media through sourcing routines. News stories tend to focus on the views of experts, government officials, and other authorities:

> *We felt that we needed conversations that emanate from ordinary people's perspectives on issues that affect them.*

As a result, *Community Podium* is disrupting traditional journalism where elite sources are considered "primary definers of news" (Hall et al., 1978). Instead, the news outlet is giving ordinary and marginalised people a voice to chronicle their everyday experiences:

> *Our journalism seeks to chronicle the lived experiences of ordinary people. We want to profile their lived experiences and amplify their voices.*

Our journalism seeks to chronicle the lived experiences of ordinary people. We want to profile their lived experiences and amplify their voices.

*Community Podium* operates in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces. It has been providing information on voter registration centres and vaccination to communities in Matabeleland regions which are regarded as news deserts. The news organisation serves the following districts in Matabeleland North and South; Victoria Falls, Hwange, Lupane, Binga, Plumtree, Matobo, Tsholotsho, Gwanda, and Nkayi.

As a peripheral player, *Community Podium* seeks to operate differently from legacy news media. It also utilises a participatory civic media approach in its production, packaging, and distribution of content. The news outlet provides a platform for communities to articulate their grievances and lived realities.

Co-creation of content with communities is at the core of the journalism work of *Community Podium*:

> *We are not going to say that in Tsholotsho this is what is happening. We want someone in Tsholotsho, a young person, to*

*report about their community. If they share with us the story, we edit it and verify the information. We will then structure the content, add journalistic aspects to the story and report it.*

Dibiti believes that it is easier and more effective for communities to share their lived experiences with community reporters. *Community Podium* uses a citizen journalism model as news is produced by ordinary people in their communities. Thus, news content is produced by and for communities. This civic media approach serves to enhance community participation and active citizenship.
In addition, solutions journalism is also at the heart of the work at *Community Podium*. The emphasis is on the impact of the news content that is produced.

*Sometimes if we publish a news story, legislators and councillors get serious because communities would have narrated their lived experiences.*

Social media platforms are playing a huge role in this advocacy work. On certain occasions, *Community Podium* tags relevant authorities on Twitter to address the problems faced by communities.

How does *Community Podium* package its content? This is done through social media advocacy, documentaries, radio programme, and hard news stories. First, social media advocacy involves using tweets, images, and videos to share content on what is happening in communities. Second, four documentaries have been produced by *Community Podium* which chronicle the lived experiences of community members. In addition, *Ilihlo lemaphandleni Show* is aired on *Skyz Metro* radio every Thursday afternoon. Its tagline is "*We are all about airing lived experiences of rural communities*".

# Community Podium

- Documentaries
- Social media advocacy
- Ilihlo lemaphandleni radio show
- Hard news stories

Other interventions include livestreaming local authority meetings in the rural areas, modelled along *CITE*'s livestreaming of the Bulawayo City Council (BCC) meetings.

The newsroom structure of *Community Podium* consists of a news editor, two employed reporters, and over 60 community reporters. The community reporters have been equipped with basic journalism skills. Multimediality has become a common feature in journalism:

> *We train them on videos. At times, a story does not need to be in a text format. It can be a picture or video. We are operating in an environment where you are expected to do everything. A reporter should be able to give us a news story with quality photos and videos. However, at times we lack the resources to practice multimedia journalism.*

WhatsApp is the most used platform by *Community Podium* for content distribution. There are WhatsApp groups that were created for communities in areas such as Hwange, Tsholotsho, and Nkayi. Dibiti noted that most of *Community Podium*'s website visits are from the diaspora (South Africa, the UK, and the USA). *Community Podium* is also utilising the voice notes feature on WhatsApp for content distribution.

Podcasting has not worked due to challenges of access and affordability for communities. The Anchor FM platform which was used for podcasting generated very few visits.

> *We are trying to develop young people who have an appetite for news. People would rather download voice notes of a few megabytes and listen on WhatsApp.*

There is a shift in journalism practices, routines, and processes. The approach of co-creating content with community members means that the editorial staff has to relinquish some power to community reporters.

> *The editor does the editorial stuff like fact-checking and publishing the stories. We don't have diary meetings per se. We try to have a more relaxed policy. If the story is newsworthy for the community, we will publish it. We try to get an official comment. If they don't want to comment, we go ahead and publish the story*.

Gatekeeping has become minimal. Unlike in legacy news outlets, news stories are published without the voices of experts, government officials, and other authoritative figures.

Community reporters work voluntarily. There are instances where community reporters receive small stipends per story.  However, the challenge is that when there are no incentives, morale tends to be low:

> *With citizen journalists incentivised, we usually see action and energy.*

There are other challenges that the *Community Podium* is facing. First, the news outlet lacks resources to practice fully-fledged multimedia journalism:
> *We are trying to develop young people who have an appetite for news. In this way, we have been training our community reporters to use images and videos for content creation. However, the major challenge has been the lack of resources.*

*Community Podium* provides mobile phones to employed reporters. As a result, community reporters use their mobile phones for content distribution. Those who are not equipped with smartphones are struggling to practice mobile reporting:
> *Journalism is one of those underpaying professions. We have to produce content every day. Our citizen journalists do not have resources.*

Due to the socio-economic conditions, citizen journalists end up being offered transport and food by politicians when attending newsworthy events. Such

gestures compromise issues of journalistic objectivity, ethics, and quality reporting as politicians end up assuming that they "own this journalist".

Further, Dibiti noted that skills transfer to non-journalists is proving difficult. Journalists without formal training at journalism schools are struggling to grasp the basics of news writing. In some cases, editors end up rewriting news stories.

Lastly, the issue of accreditation for citizen journalists needs to be addressed. Community reporters who have not been accredited by the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) are struggling to conduct their journalism work. Without accreditation, community reporters are not considered journalists. As a result, these peripheral news actors experience intimidation in communities. *Community Podium* is not the only news outlet combating news deserts.

**Combating news deserts: *The Citizen Bulletin***

Access to information is a fundamental right in democratic societies. The media central are to citizenship as they ensure that local communities enjoy their rights and duties in society. However, marginalised communities in rural areas are struggling with access to timely and credible information. Certain geographical areas in Matabeleland have turned into news deserts as communities tend to be excluded by mainstream news outlets. Without access to local news, the local population may not actively participate in national issues such as elections.

*The Citizen Bulletin* was established to address such information gaps in Matabeleland. This is aptly captured by the news outlet's managing director:

> *The Citizen Bulletin is an independent digital news outlet that produces hard-hitting and hyper-local stories and news analysis for the greater region of Matabeleland.*

He added that the mission of *The Citizen Bulletin* is twofold:

> *We serve to convene citizens of the greater region of Matabeleland into informed audiences to make them active agents. Secondly, we want to reach marginalised communities and keep them informed and engaged.*

The journalism at *The Citizen Bulletin* is community-driven as the emphasis is on keeping the citizens informed and engaged. A participant noted that news stories have to "emanate from the people" and must reflect issues that affect them. *The Citizen Bulletin* serves to spotlight those issues. Community reporters who are based in the local areas contribute to the news content. In addition, content ambassadors in rural areas are also involved in sharing news content from *The Citizen Bulletin*.

The news outlet's approach is on issue-based stories, rather than breaking news stories. The thematic areas covered include:
- Local governance

- Social and economic justice

- Public Education

- Climate change

- Data journalism

*The Citizen Bulletin*'s interest is also in stories driving toward solutions journalism:

> *We want to be able to trace the impact of our stories. Community members come up with solutions to address a problem. Other communities can replicate that solution.*

Digital tools are being appropriated for not only content production and distribution but for fostering engagement. The idea of an *Open Newsroom* is one of the initiatives that promote audience engagement. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are being used for engaged journalism. Journalists at *The Citizen Bulletin* spotlight a certain issue on these platforms and ask audiences to participate in discussions.

WhatsApp is the primary distribution channel for *The Citizen Bulletin*. The news outlet utilises WhatsApp broadcast lists, communities, and newsgroups. Besides providing an arena for audience engagement, WhatsApp is used for the distribution of a bi-weekly e-paper.

## *The NewsHawks* and the state of investigative journalism in Zimbabwe

### "Our mandate is to hold power in its various forms and manifestations to account"

In 2020, an investigative news-gathering platform, *The NewsHawks*, was established by a team of editors and reporters who formerly worked at AMH. Editorial independence and investigative became the guiding principles for this digital news outlet. The journalists left AMH to establish *The NewsHawks* due to irreconcilable differences with the publisher concerning the editorial direction:

> *We were not happy about the drift of the editorial direction under the publisher Trevor Ncube when he joined the government as an advisor to the President. He wanted us to change the editorial direction, which we resisted.*

To these journalists, it was an unworkable situation:

> *The mandate of the private media is to hold the executive to account. If you conflate roles by having a publisher joining the*

*executive that he is supposed to critique, you become fatally compromised.*

These journalists realised that there was an investigative journalism gap in the market. Thus, the idea of *The NewsHawks* was born as a desire to "hold power in its various forms and manifestations to account". Given their experiences at AMH, the founders built an editorial team and policy firewalled against undue influence.

*The NewsHawks* seeks to hold authorities in public offices, private offices, civil society, and other spheres of life into account. Watchdog journalism is at the core of the work at *The NewsHawks* as there is an emphasis on promoting accountability in governance. This was echoed by the managing editor at *The NewsHawks*:

> *We also feel that we need to expose failures in leadership, governance, and policy spheres.*

*The NewsHawks* is also guided by the desire to serve the public interest. Thus, public interest journalism is also at the core of what is done at *The NewsHawks*:

> *Whatever we are trying to do must be guided by the public interest model*.

The newsroom at *The NewsHawks* consists of about 15 personnel. When the news outlet was established, the founders were tempted to come up with a print publication.

> *We understand the utility of print even if it is dying.  Readers have migrated to the digital spaces but advertisers have remained in print without readers. But we resisted the pressure.*

The professional journalistic work at *The NewsHawks* consists of short-term investigations and long-term investigations. Whilst the newsroom resembles the structure of legacy news media, there is an emphasis on building a digital team. The editorial team is responsible for posting news content to the digital platforms. Social media platforms are pertinent to the journalistic work at *The NewsHawks*. The newsmakers first break their stories on Twitter and then on the online website. News stories are also distributed on Facebook and in a PDF edition. In addition, a digital hub is being set up to promote the production of creative and visual content.

*The NewsHawks*' model is different from that of *The Citizen Bulletin* and *Community Podium* in terms of the target audiences. In contrast to the other two news outlets which target marginalised communities, *The NewsHawks* targets elite constituencies:

> *We are targeting people who can influence decision-makers because they are closer to them in terms of their interaction. This is not to say that issues concerning the general people don't matter. They matter a lot. But the elite constituencies have leverage over the policymakers to quickly get things done. Even if you are reporting issues about people in Mbare, Makokoba, and everywhere, it must be such that the issues are channelled through structures that influence change in the situation.*

Besides the emphasis on elite constituencies, *The NewsHawks* also practices solutions journalism as news reporting has to be impactful, traceable, and auditable.

The participants weighed in on the state of investigative journalism in Zimbabwe. One of the journalists at *The NewsHawks* bemoaned the lack of institutional and organisational support for investigative journalism in the country. He noted that there is not much investigative journalism as legacy news media are hard-pressed by resources and are in "survival mode":

> *Organisations can't investigate much. You need money which is not there. You also need logistics which are not money, such as cars. Whenever you see flashes of investigative journalism, it is individuals committed to it rather than institutions.*

The journalist adds that investigative journalism is underdeveloped in the country due to organisational and logistical factors, rather than a lack of skills:

> *There is a mistaken belief that the problem is a skill. It is not a question of skill. It is mainly a question of organisation and logistics. Investigative journalism involves quite a lot of money.*

There is no doubt that investigative journalism is at the heart of democracy. However, most newsrooms in Zimbabwe are resource-constrained and are unable to conduct fully-fledged and long-term investigative journalism projects. Some news organisations are struggling to remunerate their staff and provide basic resources such as a car for assignments. In such a situation, investigative journalism that requires resources remains a dream.

## A voice for the underdogs? The work of *Zimbabwe Daily*

*One thing we have realised is that we have very angry people who need an outlet to vent that anger. We want to use a cartoon as an outlet for people to express*

*themselves. If you put a cartoon out there, people begin to vent and talk about issues that matter.*

Across the globe, subjugated groups have always found creative ways of circumventing authoritarianism. Deploying humour and mockery are some of these strategies used by marginalised groups to denounce the powerful and the 'untouchables'. The *Zimbabwe Daily* (*Zimdaily*) is an emerging news outlet that is creatively using humour and digital technologies to undermine social hierarchy and authority. Its work is similar to Bakhtin's understanding of how carnivals and laughter were used to subvert social hierarchies and ridicule the elites during the carnivals of the medieval era. *Zimdaily*'s underground nature indicates the counter-hegemonic role of this online news outlet. This peripheral news actor seeks to speak truth to power.

*Zimdaily* is an online platform that utilises produces cartoons and shares them on social media in ways that disrupt the social order. The cartoons usually shared on Twitter and the website constitutes the *sine qua non* of *Zimdaily*'s content creation:

> *We are an online media. We want to make it a talk tv platform. A lot of people know us for our cartoons. Our major selling point is cartoons. We need to show the social, economic, and political aspects of this country in a way that will provoke thought in people.*

The cartoons reflect and mediate people's lived experiences and socio-political happenings in the county. They are meant to provide a critique of the prevailing socio-political and economic order.

*Zimdaily* has decentred the art of news production and dissemination. An editor at *Zimdaily* noted that local populations should contribute to the production of news content. *Zimdaily* is thus construed as a 'reader-owned platform'.
The main goal of *Zimdaily* is to promote accountability. The cartoons are inspired by the everyday conversations of ordinary people:

> *One thing we have realised is that we have very angry people who need an outlet to vent that anger. We want to use a cartoon as an outlet for people to express themselves. If you put a cartoon out there, people begin to vent and talk about issues that matter.*

*Zimdaily*'s main platform for content distribution is Facebook. The team at *Zimdaily* Newsroom is thin as it is made up of an editor, social media coordinator, and cartoonist.

## Satire, youth activism, and creative spaces: The Case of Magamba Network

Participation is one of the key pillars of democracy. *Magamba Network* is utilising creative spaces to transform youth activism and participation. As a digital media organization, *Magamba Network* enables young people to use creativity for participation and democratic engagements. This digital media organisation emerged in 2007 as a creative space for inspiring youth people to be part of the change in the country.

Magamba has two programs, Digital X and Arts for Change. The former enables citizens to participate through various creative spaces such as Open Parly Zimbabwe, Twitter Spaces, TikTok, Instagram, Open Council, and Moto Republik. Open Parly Zimbabwe, a flagship program, serves to empower the youth to participate in the political process by equipping citizen journalists with skills to report live from the parliament. Twitter Spaces enables citizens to participate and speak about issues that affect them. Moto Republik is a creative hub for young people to meet, interact and collaborate on projects.

Second, the Arts for Change program utilises music, film, and other artistic expressions to promote participation, accountability, and democracy. Magamba TV allows young people to use political comedy and satirical shows to address critical issues. Satire is also through Zambezi News, a parody of Zimbabwe's state broadcaster.

## Are tabloids undermining social hierarchy? The case of *uMthunywa*

On the one hand, tabloids tend to be dismissed as "sensationalist", "melodramatic" and "trash" reading. On the other hand, they are valorised for undermining social hierarchy and siding with the underdogs in society. Its advocates view tabloid journalism as an alternative public sphere.

*UMthunywa* is one of the few tabloids in the country. Its tagline is *iphephandaba likazulu* which loosely translates to a newspaper for the masses. These words demonstrate that *uMthunywa* seeks to self-represent as a voice for the downtrodden. *uMthunywa* was established in 1985 and is published in IsiNdebele. It folded in 1993 and re-emerged in 2004 (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2022). Existing studies show that politically and economically marginalised communities in Matabeleland appropriated *uMthunywa* to articulate their grievances (Mabweazara and Strelitz, 2009). However, recently, there have been concerns that the tabloid was on the brink of collapse due to viability challenges caused by

low advertising revenue and reader migration to online platforms (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2022). Given all these debates, this study on *uMthunywa* is timely.

Findings indicate that *uMthunywa* is embracing digital tools for its newsmaking practices. The newspaper has become a digital-only news site as content is distributed exclusively on social media platforms. An e-paper is shared on *uMthunywa*'s WhatsApp group. Most of the e-paper's subscribers are based in the diaspora. Zimpapers' tabloids, that is, *uMthunywa*, Kwaedza, and *BMetro* ceased producing print editions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to a journalist at *uMthunywa*, the tabloid's most popular stories related to infidelity, witchcraft, potholes, and water rights. The journalist was adamant that *uMthunywa*'s print edition is revived, the tabloid would flourish. There is a sense that *uMthunywa* has regained its popularity, despite concerns that the circulation figures were low when it was forced to stop printing.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are also transforming the process of news distribution. According to a participant, audience engagement is more pronounced on the Facebook platform.

However, the tabloid is facing numerous challenges which undermine its efforts to be a voice of the voiceless. As a state-controlled paper, it is difficult for *uMthunywa* to reflect the views and experiences of certain marginalised groups. There is a sense that *uMthunywa* is diverting readers from tackling their lived realities.

 In addition, *uMthunywa* has limited staff capacity and this has implications for the workload and quality of journalism. The newsroom is composed of an editor, a news editor, and a reporter. The reporter also serves as a social media coordinator.

One of the challenges faced by *uMthunywa* is financial viability. A participant added that indigenous language media such as *uMthunywa* are struggling to generate revenue through advertising.
A participant also called for a rethink in the distribution patterns of *uMthunywa*. The argument was that *uMthunywa* is not distributed in areas where it is popular such as Filabusi, Plumtree, Gwanda, Kezi, and Lupane.

**Working Conditions in Newsrooms**

## *Increased workload, but poor remuneration?*

The challenges in newsrooms are vast. Some of the discussions are centred on the welfare of journalists. First, newsrooms have limited staff capacity but the workload has increased. Most news organisations are under-staffed and journalists are overworked. Some online desks consist of three personnel and this undermines digital transformation in the newsroom. One of the participants stated that "newsrooms are under-staffed" and "journalists are overworked". Another journalist also aptly captured it:

> *There are now a few journalists in newsrooms. On a particular day, you might have someone who is sick, another attending a funeral, and another on work leave. You might be the only senior reporter at the newsroom working with interns. That is a serious problem for any organisation to have most of its people not around. I have to focus on writing for the main paper, and I have to focus on sending online content, at the same time there are a few people. That is a serious challenge.*

One journalist noted that in some newsrooms, graduate trainees are "now running the newspapers". At the *Southern Eye*, there are two full-time journalists. The other personnel are interns, correspondents, and graduate trainees.

The limited staff capacity is digital transformation in the newsrooms. A journalist at Zimpapers noted that his newsroom is not using TikTok for journalism due to limited staff capacity:

> *We need a group that is dedicated to TikTok. However, at the moment we only have 3 photographers covering all the newspapers under the Zimpapers stable in Bulawayo.*

Newsrooms are depleted with regard to staff capacity. One of the newsrooms has four journalists. When I visited the news organisation, I was informed that one reporter was on work leave and another was dealing with bereavement. Due to the increased workload, there were concerns that journalists were at risk of experiencing "serious burnout". Another implication is that journalism trainees on industrial attachment may not get adequate mentorship:

> *Our newsrooms are depleted. No one has the time to coach the interns.*

The newsroom is changing rapidly due to cutbacks in staffing. Some beats have disappeared in the newsroom e.g. municipal desk, health desk, and court desk. Another journalist believes that the quality of journalism has been severely undermined by the limited staff capacity:

> *We have inadequate staff and this affects quality. In the past, a story would come out because of its quality and relevance. But now because we are short-staffed, you want to maximise everyone's outputs and it affects quality. As a gatekeeper, you are forced to edit even a loose story so that it finds space in the paper.*

Another reporter added:

> *If you see one journalist writing 7 to 8 stories, know that the quality is compromised. You are killing people.*

Second, there is a concern that journalists are poorly paid. Poor remuneration is affecting the quality of journalism.

> *In some newsrooms, journalists go up to 5 months without being paid. How then do you recruit if you cannot afford to pay your staff?*

Some newsrooms are struggling to keep correspondents due to poor remuneration:

> *Correspondents do not stay too long due to poor remuneration. You cannot make a living out of being a correspondent unless it's a hobby.*

Poor remuneration creates a fertile ground for journalists to engage in unethical practices:

> *What do the journalists end up doing because of the poor remuneration? Corruption, brown envelopes.*

Third, poor infrastructure in newsrooms is adversely affecting quality journalism.

> *We do not have proper chairs and journalists will experience back pains. The computers need a revamp. It is embarrassing because some of these computers can freeze during live updates.*

Some newsrooms are struggling to provide resources such as cars for journalists to cover events. A participant bemoaned how news organisations are failing to provide basic tools of the trade such as airtime, mobile phones, Internet data, and transport to attend assignments. As a result, some journalists end up accepting transport offers from politicians which undermines issues of objectivity. Of course, some newsrooms are fully equipped with resources such as computers.

Lack of access to information is another major concern for journalists from the private media. One of the journalists stated that it is difficult to access information from government officials:

> *Some government officials are rude and intimidating. Since you come up with a good story, it is difficult to get official comments from government officials. This waters down your story as it may seem that you did not conduct proper research.*

This is in contrast to a view by a Zimpapers journalist who said that they are in a better position as they can easily interact with heads of government departments. In the bifurcated media environment, the private press is perceived to be anti-government.

There is no doubt that newsrooms are being transformed in the country. At Zimpapers in Harare, a Radio Convergence Desk was created to link stories from the newspapers with Star FM radio. One of *The Herald*'s reporters is involved in the Radio Convergence Desk:

> *If there is a story that we feel has to feature on the radio station, we package it for the radio. I attend diary meetings. If there is a story that I want for the radio, I ask the reporter to send voice notes. Most of the reporters have been trained on how to write for the radio. Radio reporters also send stories to the newspapers.*

The newspapers and radio at Zimpapers have become intertwined as a result of convergence.

## Perspectives on journalism education

Journalism schools play a huge role in transforming newsroom practices and cultures. There are various journalism schools in the country which are equipping students with knowledge and skills in the practice. However, the participants raised concerns about whether journalism curricula were addressing the ever-changing journalism landscape.

There was a feeling amongst participants that the country's journalism schools are not fully equipping students with practical skills. The interns at newsrooms identified the challenges they are facing. One of the interns at a newsroom noted:

> *Journalism schools should equip students with practical skills. I faced challenges when I joined the newsroom as I did not have the practical skills.*

Another intern said that she was not trained by her journalism school in news writing. Pursuing a degree programme in film, she found herself in a newsroom and expected to write news stories. Despite the initial setbacks, the intern managed to find a 'home' in the photographic department by utilising her knowledge of videography:

> *I am now doing video editing which I was taught at my university. I am relevant because we are going digital. I am involved in video editing and uploading stories online. Videos enhance the story. I am also teaching my colleagues about video editing.*

Her other concern was the lack of financial benefits:

> *Since we are gaining experience and exposure we also need to be cushioned. Right now I am getting money from my mum's pocket.*

Due to such experiences in the newsroom, the intern was adamant that her future was in public relations, instead of the newsroom. Her view was echoed by one of the journalists who was concerned that journalism students prefer to venture into public relations work, instead of newsroom practice.

Journalists also bemoaned that journalism institutions are not equipping trainees with practical and technical skills. The participants felt that universities were focusing on theories instead of practical journalism skills. They provided names of universities whose students are struggling to write news stories. In essence, the participants argued that journalism schools were not doing enough to adequately equip trainees:

*Why don't these journalism schools have vibrant online publications to enable students to have a feel of writing news stories? What is the justification for any media school today not to run an online publication where students identify the things that they are good at?*

The participants were also concerned about the lack of partnerships and collaborative activities between journalism schools and news organisations:

*Academics are snobs. They live in a world of their own.*

Other journalists were concerned about the attitudes of interns in newsrooms. They felt that the trainees lack the drive, passion, and mental aptitude needed for journalism work. The participants believe that some of the journalism trainees are not cut out for the profession:

*When I joined the newsroom you would not come with a Slack diary and present it. You will be chased out of the newsroom. You would meet people in the corridors crying. If you try to do it with this generation you will be accused of harassment. To us, it was not harassment. These interns go to the editors asking for diaries. They get used to being spoon-fed. They no longer look for stories on their own. A journalist should think about the news, see the news, and talk about the news.*
*The interns come to the newsroom blank, without proper knowledge of what they are supposed to do. They cannot identify a story and initiate the process of writing it. They are always waiting to be told what to do.*

In some cases, interns fail to adjust to the newsroom environment and end up resigning. A participant gave an illustration of an intern who left the newsroom without submitting a resignation letter.

The journalists also stated that students should be equipped with skills in cultivating sources and interviewing people.

Journalism schools have to respond to the developments in the media industry. Specialization in print and broadcast sectors was perceived to be irrelevant in journalism education. This may entail rethinking the journalism curricula:

> *Students are struggling to adapt to the online environment. Modern journalism requires a journalist to have all the skills in one.*

## Building Media and information literacy in Newsrooms

Peripheral news actors are involved in various programmes such as equipping journalists with skills in media and information literacy. Organisations such as ZimFact and *CITE* are implementing projects that seek to combat misinformation and disinformation in the country. One of the veteran journalists explained how in the past, facts were viewed as sacrosanct:

> *Whenever as a journalist for some reason you ended up writing a story that was disputed and proven to be false, you will be called and given a dressing down in front of your workmates. As a journalist, you had to fact-check. Whenever it happened, it was always unintentional unlike now when you get the impression that people don't care anymore so long as they are pushing a certain agenda.*

The participant noted that the push to break the news and also the depleted newsrooms were major factors in the dissemination of false information.
*CITE* is embarking on a Media and Information Literacy in Matabeleland programme in partnership with Interlink Academy. This project began in 2021 and is implemented in Matabeleland North, South, and Bulawayo. In these three provinces, there are 18 community hubs which are managed by 36 community trainers.

The community trainers are individuals who are already participating in their communities. They are responsible for equipping citizens with media and information skills in the following thematic areas:

- Debunking fake news

- Digital security

- Content creation
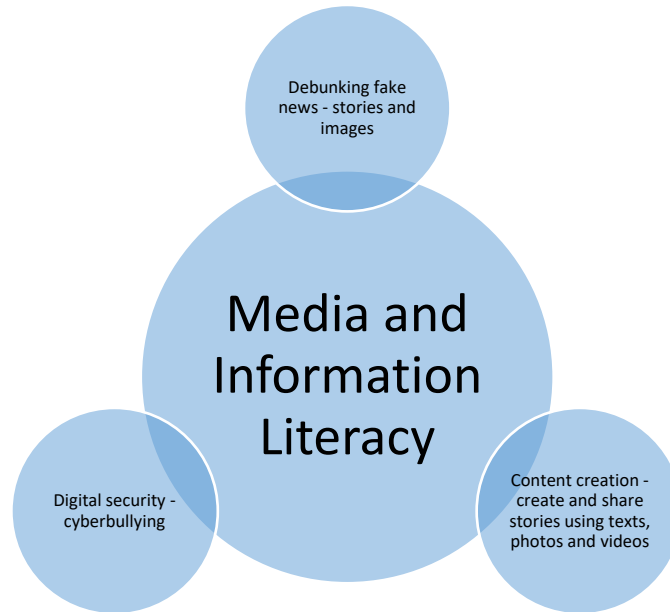
Through these trainings that are conducted at least twice per month, *CITE* seeks to equip communities with skills and knowledge on debunking fake news.

*CITE* is implementing other projects besides Media and Information Literacy. First, journalists are producing fact-check stories. In addition, *CITE* is running the Promise Tracker project whereby the newsmakers make follow-ups on claims made by public officials. These include promises made during political campaigns.

## In pursuit of community-driven radio stations

Community radios are owned and controlled by the community they serve. Community ownership and participation are at the heart of They provide a voice to groups who tend to be excluded and marginalised in mainstream media. the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) licensed 14 community radios in 2020 and 2021. *Ntepe-Manama Community Radio* was one of the three community radio stations awarded licenses in 2020. A year later, *Radio BuKalanga* received its license to broadcast.

*Ntepe-Manama* went on air on 1 September 2022. Its programming caters to various groups such as school kids, women, and farmers. The programming is meant to reflect the lived experiences of radio listeners. Bulk messages are sent to listeners to provide updates on various issues such as weather patterns and health issues. Communities are participating in various ways such as call-ins and also as guests on radio shows. The newsroom structure consists of an editor, content manager, presenters, and community reporters. Each of the 13 wards covered by Ntepe-Manama has a community reporter.

*Radio BuKalanga* is yet to go on air as they are waiting for a studio transmitter link. Although there is no live broadcast, the radio personnel have managed to set up the studio. The Radio BuKalanga management has been mobilising communities to lay a solid foundation for a community-driven station. The communities have set up ward committees that will form a General Council. These ward committees are inclusive of the youth, women, and people with disabilities (PWDs).

As *Radio BuKalanga* is preparing to broadcast live, the staff are strengthening ward communities through training on issues such as content creation, governance, fundraising, and communication and information dissemination. Community reporters have also been trained through partnerships with *Skyz Metro* and BAZ. The management of *Radio BuKalanga* seeks to build and maintain a strong sense of community ownership. Community participation and a sense of ownership contribute immensely to the sustainability of community radios.

*Radio BuKalanga* has formulated policies on human resources, governance, finance, and administration. Policies on gender and volunteerism are in the process of being developed.

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Mphathisi Ndlovu is an Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST). He holds a Ph.D. in Journalism from Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Mphathisi's research interests include digital cultures, identity politics, memory, journalism cultures, journalism futures, and Global South theories. He has 28 publications, which include a book, 11 book chapters, and 16 peer-reviewed journal articles. In 2022, he co-edited a book titled *The Idea of Matabeleland in Digital Spaces: Genealogies, Discourses, and Epistemic Struggles*. He is currently co-editing another book titled *Remembering Mass Atrocities in the Global South: Memory Struggles and Cultural Representations*. His other research works have appeared in various journals such as *African Identities*, *African Journalism Studies*, *African Studies*, *Digital Journalism*, *African Renaissance*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, *Critical Arts*, *Communication and Nations, and Nationalism.* He is also a recipient of the following awards; the Stellenbosch University research fellowship (2019-2023), the Africa No Filter (ANF) academic fellowship (2021-2022), Future Africa: Telling Stories, Building Worlds research fellowship (2022-2023), and Columbia University's Alliance for Historical Dialogue and Accountability (AHDA) fellowship (2021-2022).